

THE EAST FACE OF THE GRAND CAPUCIN¹

By A. G. SMYTHE

THE usual depressing accounts of unrelieved bad weather and rocks completely snowed up greeted Alan Cowburn and myself when we arrived at Chamonix after thirty-six hours' jolting journey on a motor-bike. The evening of our arrival we went gloomily down with Peter Crew and John Woodhead to drink cheap wine at the Biollay, and it was Peter who suggested the East face of the Grand Capucin—'something steep that the snow can't collect on.' Next morning even the weather seemed to favour this plan, you could see more than four lines of pine trees, and the Dôme du Goûter shone white, high in a patch of blue. At 2 p.m., heavily provisioned, the four of us left for the Requin hut, but two storms of mixed rain and thunder before we reached it showed that conditions were still far from settled.

I had seen the 'Cap' the year before. It was an enormous monolith of granite overlooking Combe Maudite, some four miles north-east of Mont Blanc. It had four sides, like the faces of a clock-tower, three of them, the North, East and South faces, smooth and nearly sheer, and the fourth, the West face, shorter, with a high crest of snow connecting it with the slopes of Mont Maudit. Of the three long faces, the East was the central, and there was no escaping to one side.

We were up at 3.30 a.m. next morning, and sat brewing until long after other parties had left the hut and we could no longer put off making a start. It was a clear morning. In the dawn the peaks stood ashen-pale against a turquoise sky, and a raw wind urged us to get moving. Soon we were involved in the Géant ice-fall. The route through the séracs was easy; we did not bother with crampons, and in an hour had gained the upper slopes. Here, however, some of the snow bridges we had to cross spanned the biggest, gloomiest crevasses I had ever seen. The sun came up, transforming the dull grey snow into a brilliant, glaring expanse, and the delicate dawn colours were replaced by harsh yellows and rich blues. We tramped on without stopping, anxious to reach the climb before the glacier surfaces became too soft to bear our weight, and in less than three hours we had accomplished the last steep little grind into Combe Maudite, and crossed to the foot of the East face of the Capucin. I took off my sunglasses, wiped my eyes and stared upwards with the others.

¹ The first British ascent of this face was made by T. D. Bourdillon and H. G. Nicol on July 31–August 1, 1955. It is described in *Climbers' Club Journal*, 1956, pp. 203–15.

It was impressive; one wondered where the bivouac ledges were, let alone the stances. We watched another party about 500 ft. up, which Peter seemed to think was Gunn Clark and Peter Bell. Then we unloaded most of the ice-axes and crampons and made for the couloir to the left of the face. Peter Crew, in the lead, plunged steadily upwards, until it was evident that we must traverse right to gain the system of ledges that leads into the face. Alan went ahead across some snowy slabs, then I passed him and fought with a horrible icy chimney before reaching easier ground. When the others arrived it was suggested that we should sort out artificial gear, but for this it was necessary to re-rope, and everybody stood around uncomfortably on tiny ledges, delving into rucksacks.

Peter and John were ready first, and they disappeared down a chimney. Muffled comments, none too encouraging, floated up from below. A sudden fluttering noise caused us to look sharply upwards. We ducked as several big chunks of ice whizzed past; then Alan and I moved off after the others.

After the descent of the chimney, which left us with increased pulse rates, we joined Peter and John on a small ledge beyond which there was near-vertical nothingness. We saw a couple of pegs, re-read the description, and agreed that this must be the grade VI slab. Peter, at the prospect of a decent rock pitch at last, happily girdled his neck with slings, kicked his boots clean and tip-toed away. He clipped into the pegs, ran out about thirty ft. diagonally to the right, and stopped on a small pinnacle, from which he said he could descend by rappel to the next ledge. 'About medium V.S.,' he reported.

In turn, we crossed the slab and slid down the rope from the pinnacle. When I joined the others it was beginning to snow, a million tiny flakes floating slowly down the vast wall. The sun had gone, and a leaden gloom enveloped us. A roll of thunder echoed faintly round the hidden peaks. A few feet away, at the back of the ledge, Peter and John were exploring a cave, mentioned by the guidebook as providing excellent bivouac accommodation. It was already midday, and after a short conference we decided to use the cave, and hope that the weather would declare itself in our favour the following morning. The snow was falling thicker now, and while John and Alan busily excavated about a hundredweight of snow and rocks from the cave, I safeguarded Peter while he climbed to recover the abseil rope, which had jammed at the peg on the pinnacle. The cave was very commodious, but had a low rough roof which was constantly to threaten our duvets. The ledge outside however, where two of us were obliged to wait until the clearing was finished, was about as big as a Cloggy West Buttress stance, and, below this, the snow blocks and stones that were shovelled away scarcely bounced before disappearing silently into the void. We were

glad to huddle inside the cave at last, out of the rising storm and wondered how Gunn and Peter were getting on, on the face higher up.

Bivouac accounts seem to follow a pattern, and I have no new themes to relate. Our diet, which I listed in my diary, was incredibly varied: corned beef, oranges, bread, butter, jam, raisins, dates, lemons, sugar, milk, a flask of black-currant juice, cheese and chocolate. Throughout the afternoon and evening we ate steadily, more to reduce the weight of our sacks than because we were hungry, and brewed on a solid-fuel cooker, which slowly became like one of those machines used in resurfacing roads, and caused panic when gusts of wind redirected the flames round the cave.

We had seventeen hours to wait, but apart from the occasional necessary excursions outside, there was no activity. The most useful way of passing the time was to sleep, but I soon woke up to find that it was still only six o'clock in the evening. We gossiped about climbs and climbers until the daylight faded, and then it seemed that the bivouac was at last properly taking place. But in between brews, the night was endless: the rattle of snow on my polythene sack, the constant squirming to find comfort for tender hips and elbows on the rocky floor, and the damp draughts at the back of the neck.

Dawn came at last, a wan light, a pink glow, bright warming sunshine, and we peered out to a perfect morning. We packed up as quickly as possible, but before we were ready, two Frenchmen appeared, passed us, and started the first dièdre at the far end of the ledge. As I tackled the dièdre after them, clipping into the pegs and planting my feet in the swinging étriers, I reflected that, if I knew little about artificial climbing now, I was going to have to pick it up pretty quickly. Few other routes west of the Dolomites can have so little free climbing, and for the next two days we were 'dangle and knit' almost without a break.

When Alan joined me I traversed left across a bulge, thankfully seizing a short mare's tail attached to a peg, but above this some easy blocks invited quick progress. On the following pitch, a line of pegs followed a holdless corner to a small roof. Under the roof was a tiny ledge, which broadened to form a stance at its left-hand end, and on my first attempt to reach this ledge, I was at odds with an enormous block that moved outwards with a grating noise. I pushed it back into its socket, found a way round, then brought Alan up, asking him to avoid the block by a slab underneath. This needed a tight rope, and much caution on Alan's part. Had he swung off the traverse, it would have been very difficult for him to reach the ledge.

The exposure was now frightening, and I have a photograph taken with my camera pointed straight down. It shows the toes of my boots, the edge of the ledge, Alan's head and the glacier. The sun beat down mercilessly, and the waves of heat off the rock and the exertion of the

climbing caused precious sweat to trickle liberally. I was in shirt-sleeves and sun-glasses, a heavy collection of 'swag' dangled from me, and I had already suffered twinges of cramp in my arms, probably due to the cutting effect of rucksack straps on the circulation, and a lack of salt. Above us, the dazzling granite spun into the sky.

Peter and John had joined us before I felt ready to start the next pitch, an exhausting, holdless chimney leading to a flat-topped pinnacle. In the chimney I found my bulky rucksack a nasty disadvantage—I struggled free of the straps and viciously pushed it ahead. Standing on the flat-topped pinnacle, I found it necessary to plant one peg; it went in too easily, and hit the back of the crack with a dull thud. However, I used it; and two minutes later, and 10 ft. higher, I was grimly amused to see it tweaked out by the rope. It was the only peg I put in on the climb and, significantly, the only peg that came out.

The pitch was 90 ft., and on this, and on some of the long upper pitches, it was necessary to be mean with karabiners. I clipped into every third or fourth peg, but the drag on the ropes soon became grueling. Another problem which I never solved was how to prevent fifi cords becoming tangled with the climbing ropes, but I was not alone with this difficulty, and it seems that on a snaking artificial pitch one must accept a certain amount of knitting.

At the top of the 90 ft. dièdre, an awkward traverse right, into a niche, avoided a higher slab under an immense roof, with a stance in étriers, and when Alan was settled in the niche, I launched on a hair-raising pendule across to a lower ledge by means of a fixed length of threadbare hemp. The ledge led to a 40 ft. corner in which there was a nasty collection of splitting wedges, rusty wire loops and pieces of pyjama cord. Higher up, I was glad to clip into a couple of good pegs, then made a strenuous move round a bulge by means of a spike driven into a bed of congealed grit. Here was a good ledge, the first Bonatti bivouac, and I lit a cigarette and relaxed after the anxieties of the last twenty minutes.

The ledge was uniquely placed, sandwiched between the vast roof on its left, and the sheer unseamed walls to the right. It is the key to the middle section of the face, where a crack, a traverse and a chimney lead to the 'forty metre wall'—according to the guide book, the crux of the climb. Above this was the second Bonatti bivouac, the biggest ledge on the face, at about two-thirds height, and we hoped to get there that night.

While Alan climbed, I watched the second of the Frenchmen on the pitch above. He was a heavy man, and struggled and cursed, turning to shout warnings to me about loose pegs and unsound rock. When my turn came, I found the pitch harder than anything before it, with steep grooves, an overhang and a traverse across a wall on pegs poorly planted in a blind crack. Each bent like a leaf spring as my weight came on it,

and I was keyed up for trouble. The pegs were widely spaced, and the wall below them overhung. Had one come out, it would have meant prusiking back up the rope, and I felt that a traverse on insecure pegs was more hazardous than a direct ascent. Then a deep chimney led easily upwards, the slow drip of water down one wall reminding me how thirsty I was. I came to a long ledge, below the famous 'forty metre wall' (actually about 150 ft.) and for a few moments watched one of the party above manipulating his ropes from a stance in *étriers*.

The sun had gone from the face, it was five o'clock, and suddenly I felt very tired and chilled. It was a comfort to don a pullover, anorak and gloves before pulling in the ropes for Alan. Sitting on the chilly ledge, I looked at the Tour Ronde opposite, which throughout the day, had dwindled in height as we climbed. The glacier was now far below, but the exposure no longer worried me. So long as I was clipped into a few pegs, I felt happy. Our world was a vertical theatre of vertical granite. Our eyes planned in the vertical; our bodies moved, up or across, in the vertical. The horizon or the glacier were as remote as the moon.

Alan arrived with his precious cargo of karabiners, and I started the wall. Some stones flew past; Alan huddled out of the way as best he could, and I felt a relief at climbing overhanging rock. My stance in *étriers* at 70 ft. was strangely more comfortable than many of the previous rock ledges, and after Alan had stitched himself securely a few feet below me, I went on over a bulge, and up the last exhilarating 60 ft., to a huge terrace with piles of scree and a big snow slope, the second Bonatti bivouac. Alan when, he arrived, joined me in carving a ledge in the snow, but it was dusk before Peter appeared. Tired as we were, we paused to marvel at the crimson light on the peaks, and decided that, for once, the shepherd's delight was also a mountaineer's delight.

It was a relief to have the weather in our favour. We suspected that the most difficult climbing was yet to come, but retreat down the face would be harrowing. The only other possible escape was the North face, involving endless abseils from peg to peg.

John joined us in the dark, with a strained tale of snapping wire loops and blind groping for the pegs; then we prepared for another night on the face. It was a very confined ledge for four, our legs hung in space, and brewing drink and dividing food was awkward. But it was warm and windless, and as I lay looking at the stars, I remembered that it was my birthday. The amenities for a celebration, however, were strictly limited.

I slept well, and awoke in the sunshine. But I felt weak and lethargic, happy to lie there until somebody else made a move. Eventually someone did. Breakfast was a piece of cheese and half a cup of black-currant juice, then Peter and John set off, climbing from the left end of

the ledge, the well-known 'sinuous dièdre', a strenuous 70 ft. of A2. 'That's the hardest so far,' Peter called.

I followed, hauling from peg to peg, and joined John on a tiny stance to watch Peter on a big overhang. It looked very hard, and Peter and John in turn confirmed that it was. When I went up to the overhang, I found two wedges. I had clipped into the second, was hanging on tension, my feet swinging inwards, groping for the peg over the bulge, when Alan warned me that the rope had jammed below his ledge.

'Well, ruddy well free it!' I shouted, very unwilling to retreat. Alan tugged, flicked and jerked to no avail, and I came back furious. The sun was hot, my mouth dry, my nerves and temper frayed, and it was difficult to keep a sense of proportion. When I saw how inaccessible the snag was, my impulse was to cut free as much rope as we could gather—about 60 ft.—and carry on, to join John and Peter, and perhaps borrow their spare. But Alan fortunately balked at this idea. He climbed down the sinuous dièdre, and by a series of acrobatics on joined *étriers*, and an airy tension traverse, managed to reach and free the rope. But we had wasted two hours. Again I tackled the overhang, but when I reached a higher ledge, Alan called that he had been overtaken by a Swiss party, and gave me a lurid and bitter commentary on the state of knitting of ropes and karabiners. The Swiss leader, when he reached me, was apologetic, and insisted on sharing his flask of cold tea. Then he and his partner disappeared upwards, and we later learnt that they had completed the route in one day.

The upper pitches were the longest and most difficult on the climb. I remember one of 120 ft., where I ran out of karabiners, and was obliged to climb the last 20 ft. unprotected. I remember another frightening traverse, and a tiny ledge where Bonatti had bivouacked for the third night on his first ascent of the face. I remember an overhang, graded A3, where I leaned across at the extreme limit of my reach, and made a committing swing on to a poor peg. I remember another traverse under the enormous summital overhang, a multi-coloured granite roof that projected, perhaps 30 ft. into the blue sky. I remember having to untie from one of the ropes that jammed, and watching Alan arrive like a ball of wool.

Then an easy scramble brought us to a platform overlooking the North face, and we knew that the difficulties were over.

It was six o'clock, and there was no time to climb the actual summit of the Capucin, some 50 ft. above, if we were to get down that night. We threaded our way across easy ledges, then abseiled 200 ft. to the Brèche du Capucin, and down a couloir until it gave out into an easy slope.

Seven o'clock, and we joined John and Peter in the soft evening light

on the glacier. Even the prospect of the Géant ice-fall in the dark could not dim the sense of relief and achievement. We picked up the crampons and axes, and took a last look at the face. I remembered all the anxious hours while we were prisoners on that grim wall: the fear, the fatigue and depression, the scorching sun and the cold shadow.

But these things count for nothing in the armchair afterwards.