

SOLO

By B. M. ANNETTE

DESPERATE situations are not necessarily our proudest moments, and are difficult to describe truthfully; afterwards you wish that you had responded differently. Yet I do not analyse or try to explain why; I only write how I felt and what happened.

To be brief, when I arrived in Chamonix I was depressed, for my climbing partner had deserted me in Paris and I was now solo. His excuses had been long, explicit and, worst of all, reasonable. Sometimes a good row clears the air, but this time there was no occasion for one.

Looking for a partner in the Alps is not one of the greater joys of mountaineering. I had had it before; you are regarded with suspicion by everyone you approach, and it feels like begging. So I decided if I found no one I knew quickly, I would return home to climb in Wales.

But plans change. When alone, you are affected by atmosphere and mood more than when you are in company. And the dusty, typically lethargic continental platforms stilled my impatience. Apathy breeds apathy: what was one day, two days? After all, I would be in the mountains; perhaps I could go for a walk. When depressed I become cynical and, as I strolled the streets, I even found the guides in their white caps stupid. I did not care which way I headed; time was no object, and I mixed with the people seething round—the tourists, townspeople, climbers. I did not scorn the tourists; in fact I looked like one myself, sun glasses, tan, check-shirt. It was the town's cheap atmosphere that sickened me, the sense of one community preying on another. You almost felt that the mountains all around were unreal also. I stared endlessly at the river, rolling, boiling white with glacier particles, then settled over a bottle of wine in the Café National.

That night I camped behind the Biollay, as everybody else does. Some friends of mine had been there just previously, but they had all left, either for England or for other parts of the Alps, so that was no good. I joined a party of German climbers camped near by and, as you could detect immediately from the serious gloom over their tent, they were hard men, out to do hard climbs. When I helped myself to coffee, politely asking if they didn't mind, one just looked up and nodded. Presently someone else spoke, asked me if I had just arrived, and the ice broke. Then someone enquired if I was alone, but at my answer the old suspicious silence returned. What did I want? Would I get in their

way? After establishing that there was no likely partner among them I told them to enjoy themselves and returned to my tent.

In the night it rained and I lay awake, not tired, yet unthinking. When time lies heavily, sleep merges into consciousness, and in this semi-trance hours passed almost deliciously, and my mood changed. The drops drummed on the canvas, persistently, all through the night, and you could hear the wind in the pines. Down here it was warm, but higher it was wild and, inevitably, someone, somewhere in the mountains, was spending the night out. I imagined the summits in the storm and felt the same wind round me, penetrating my lungs. Why worry about a partner? The mountains were there waiting; just a few thousand feet to be among them. I could walk up to one of the huts or do an easy climb, the Moine or the Plan, or even traverse across to Courmayeur to look for a partner there, at the same time getting myself fit. This last idea, at first ridiculous, gradually crystallised until I knew I had to go. Then I felt like a guilty schoolboy plotting some escapade, for I already saw myself breaking all my good resolutions. Temptation always beats me. Some people have 'good sense', but on the whole I do not envy them.

Next day the peaks were plastered with ice, and the Germans were even less sociable, grouped like vultures when nothing has died recently. That night the sky cleared, and next morning the first light warmed the tent quickly; birds sang, and even inside the sleeping bag there was a sense of the life of a new day. Today I could climb—but now my mood had changed and there seemed no hurry. If I never reached Courmayeur it did not matter; tomorrow would do. So I lay there putting off the start. Presently, though, I heard voices and, later, sounds of cooking, and I looked out to see the time. Mist rose from the saturated forest, the sun was not yet over the Dru, and all but one of the tents were still quiet: about seven. Perched on a stone with a primus beside me I cooked and watched the day awaken, and almost mechanically I was ready to move. Then, pushing through the forest, I glanced back just once to see my tent steaming in the new warmth.

The path led upward steadily and soon, through the trees, I caught my first vista of the valley, the square new buildings of Chamonix, white and efficient, the scattered chalets of Les Praz. Then I turned to my long grind again, enjoying the steady effort, the pull of the rucksack straps as I got my second wind. Each turn revealed new views, but I did not stop again. Several times I crossed the Montenvers railway, which was zig-zagging a similar course to mine up the mountain side; once a train passed and the tourists stared down at me like strangers from another world. Later, the Dru appeared, a cold, grey shaft into the sky, and from then on it was a constant companion. The path wound into the sun, and splashes of light and shadow danced about the stones in front of me.

But, strangely, I viewed all this like a prisoner, the physical sensation

of the exercise being no antidote to my solitude; and, although I was free to go anywhere, do what I liked, it seemed pointless. If some guardian angel had promised to protect me up any climb I wished to do, I doubt if I would have been interested. A thin film of cirrus cloud, twisting itself into a knot, showed some disturbance in the stratosphere which might well be the forerunner of a storm. Yet I was going on, getting higher, and eventually the Montenvers appeared above me, first on my right, then on my left, then on my right again as I zig-zagged upward.

At the Montenvers camp site I met a party I had seen before somewhere. They had just started breakfast, and gave me coffee in a corned beef tin; there was no milk, but the corned beef fat gave it a taste. We talked for an hour, but they knew no one I could climb with. So I told them I was going over to Courmayeur.

‘How?’

‘By the Torino.’

‘Solo? You must be mad. Best of luck.’ I thanked them.

The sun was now high and I had to hurry if I was to get firm snow. But I did not hurry. No point: this was a holiday. Tomorrow morning would do for the ice-fall, and this afternoon I could bask at the Requin; possibly find someone to climb with there.

It was going to be hot, so I bought a lemon to suck. It prevents thirst. Then I threaded down through the tourists on to the Mer de Glace. Once on the ice I soon left them behind. It was like sailing away from a crowded beach; now there was silence. When climbers appeared from the distance, they soon disappeared like ships on a lonely sea; and the thrill that precedes all climbs returned. Peaks now surrounded me: the Verte, Jorasses, Rochefort, Charmoz, Grépon; mountains huge, bare, unrealistic, against which I was just a tiny dot. Their size made my climbing ambitions seem ridiculous.

But, steadily, I progressed, sometimes stopping to rest and sometimes to consider the weather. Now clouds were massing over the summit of Mont Blanc, and mist was boiling up against the face of the Jorasses, thin vapours appearing from nothing, writhing and twisting, knitting themselves into a thick blanket. Then the summit of the Jorasses was hidden too. A warm gust hit me: the Föhn—that was never a good sign.

Where the two glaciers meet, the Leschaux and the Géant, the ice steepens, and the route through the crevasses is chaotic. Sometimes I have been through quickly, but today I became hopelessly lost, traversing one ice-ridge after another that led nowhere, or just to a black, gaping hole in the bowels of the glacier. The extra walking seemed no trouble: walking here was no different to walking elsewhere. And what would I do with the time if I arrived sooner?

Still in this mood, I eventually surmounted the steep path up to the

Requin hut. I bought a chocolate drink and went outside to watch the helicopter dropping supplies. They came down in a net, which was left behind. The machine was overhead for several minutes, so that you became accustomed to the noise, and when it swooped away silence returned unexpectedly. Just a net full of provisions and a distant dot in the sky remained of the episode, and the mountains closed in again oppressively, so that you could be conscious of nothing else.

But, after sitting for about an hour, I was bored with inactivity; the mountains made me restless and I wondered about going on. It was not unusual for the cloud to build up in the afternoon and come to nothing; perhaps it would be all right. This was just wasting time. A party coming through the ice-fall seemed to have no difficulty with the snow, so I went down to the glacier to feel it for myself. Could the snow bridges be trusted? To a certain extent the snow was wet. No, I decided; without a rope I would have no second chances. But as I sat there, growing increasingly restless, the danger diminished in my mind and the Torino came nearer. A three-hour trek, perhaps, maybe less. I studied the map and the tracks as far as I could see them, and formed a clear picture of the route in my mind, for if the weather continued deteriorating I would soon be in mist. Then I put my crampons on and started off.

At first it was deceptively easy; the snow bridges were big, solid; and the route was well marked with the tracks of others. I passed two parties of French coming down, then a party of British. We greeted each other briefly in English, then passed. But one of them stopped. 'Hey, you British?' It had taken him a long time to realise. 'What you doing here?' Now the others had stopped too.

'Going over to Courmayeur.'

'Why don't you join somebody's rope?'

'Nobody's going up.' On the whole mountain side I was the only one. 'Everybody's coming down.'

'On your own?' You could have regarded this as a stupid question, but it was natural. I explained that I had no partner and there was no one to climb with in Chamonix. 'That's why I'm going over to Courmayeur.'

'The snow's bad higher up.'

'I thought it would be.'

'Come down with us and join a party going up tomorrow morning.'

'I'll go on.'

'Watch the weather. Where Fred fell in to a crevasse there's a hole. You'll see.'

I left them standing there; mad, I expect they thought, but how could you communicate, the way I felt?

After the ice-fall, on the upper reaches of the glacier, I grew more confident. You shouldn't fall into a crevasse in this flat place, and I had

tracks to follow. But, almost before I knew it, the mist swallowed me up. One minute I had a huge view of many peaks, and the next my world had shrunk to a few square feet. The wind sprang up, and I donned my anorak. Now, without the view, it was impossible to judge time or distance; one step was like another. But it was half way, I think, when it first began to snow.

At first it was imperceptible, light flakes floating in the mist, and it was no trouble; then it became thick, muffling everything, even the noise of the wind. I passed a hole down which was a black, bottomless gulf: Fred's hole, perhaps. I gave it a wide berth. Then I passed another—they had not been exaggerating. Underfoot it was becoming soft, and the thick flakes in the air and the gathering darkness made it difficult to watch the shadows, hollows and lines in the surface that revealed weaknesses. But I went on; that now was the only way—returning through the ice-fall alone would be suicidal in this weather. Gradually the steps I was following filled with snow until I had lost them. Frequent zig-zags to avoid crevasses made my compass useless, and my only clue to direction was the plane of the slope around me. Tacking diagonally up leftwards to avoid a section which I suspected from the twist of the glacier to be dangerously crevassed, I made regular estimates of the time, my speed and my position.

Then the slope steepened and the first effects of altitude and unfitness overcame me. Already I had climbed 6,000 ft. or more that day and ahead was a further 2,000 ft. Once, after stopping to rest, it was a struggle to force myself on again. A hundred steps before I stop again, I resolved; if I keep going like that, it will not be long. But I felt sick, and no sooner did I realise it than I wanted to vomit. I stopped again. I thought it would leave me weak and managed fifty more steps; leaned on my axe, panted and managed another fifty. Then I changed my mind; I was slowing down, getting nowhere, and vomiting could do no harm. Afterwards I took glucose and felt better temporarily.

But it was only temporary, and the storm developed rapidly. Now you had to brace against the wind. Visibility was three yards, leaving no distinction between air and glacier; every direction, up, down, in front, behind, it was the same blinding white. Every step was a battle; I panted, gasped, thrust up, kicked my foot home, moved my axe forward, then I panted again and the cycle repeated itself. When I slipped, wasting all the effort of a step, I despaired and slid down in the snow.

It was delicious to give up. And justifiable. Crevasses were now difficult, if not impossible, to detect, and I had no doubt I could outlive the storm. But, as I lay there, the wind cut through my clothes, and I unconsciously rose to my feet again. The rhythm of placing one foot in front of another carried me on. Now it was three steps between each rest. My stomach was empty, and hurt when I retched. The dark shadows of

crevasses were blurred and danced about. Frequently I crossed one without realising it, and I gritted, 'Concentrate, concentrate', only to discover on glancing behind that I had automatically taken a safe way. This instinct surprised me at first, then, as I grew weaker, I trusted it; when my foot retreated from the snow and planted itself elsewhere I no longer questioned its judgement. Darkness would come, if not sooner, later; then I could sleep, and in the morning perhaps my sickness would be gone and I would be acclimatised.

At intervals I turned further right, towards a depression which led to the frontier ridge; but I ran into dangerous ground. Was I too high or too low? In my condition I was more likely to be too low, so I returned left and tried higher up. This time I got through. Now to find the depression. I peered into the grey murk, but nothing was recognisable in the general steepening of the slope. So I imagined the shape of the mountain, judged my position, then turned directly upwards, hoping my line was correct.

The steepness almost beat me. I slipped continuously and sank in to the knees. Snow clung to my boots; it was like walking through a thick morass. Exhausted, I took more glucose, and had strength for half an hour; then I needed it again, then again. I lost track of time, and gradually lapsed into a trance. You did not think about things any more. You moved when you could; otherwise you rested.

This may have lasted an hour, two hours, or more. Then the note of the wind changed. While it had been steady, I had been unconscious of it, but now, above the general roar, was a different, higher note. Then a wavering, grey, indefinable line appeared in the universal blur above me. It became clear quickly, for it was so near—the ridge.

I should have been overjoyed, but I was too exhausted. In any case my problems were not over. Now how did I locate myself? As I approached the ridge—carefully, for fear of a cornice; I did not wish to descend yet—the blast hit me. It was not going to be easy.

I studied my compass. Strange. I shook it and stared again; then checked the line of the ridge. Something wrong. But what? That black, howling void in front was Italy; it couldn't be anything else. Yet I was facing north-west. Impossible. The compass was wrong; it had to be. I strode several yards, leaving my axe behind, and tried again. Same result. And the wind, which I had last noticed coming from the south-west, was on my left cheek. *Could* I be facing north-west? I fought with the map against the wind, stared at it, but I could see nothing; the map was tearing apart, and I was too spent to focus on the contours. The fruitless effort made me sick again. So what was the answer?

There was none. Two incompatible facts faced me. Somewhere I had gone wrong. I had traversed at the right level, otherwise I would have run into difficulties. The error must have come later. Had I

worked too far right? I knew from experience that I had that tendency. If so, the correction was to follow the ridge leftwards. Easy, if you looked at it that way and forgot every other factor. For instance, why was it a snow ridge? To the right of my route I had expected rocks. So many questions posed themselves that there was no hope of solution, and I rejected them all. My impulse was to go left and I followed that, shielding my face against the blast on the open ridge. It was a fight, a dangerous one, but it needed no psychologist to deduce that this was precisely what I had been looking for. Yet I do not remember thinking once, 'this is great'; I was too tired. Instead, I thought, 'I might make it, or I might not'. You had to take what the mountains gave you. It was strange that there was no one near; you felt the presence of someone behind, then when you turned they were not there.

By now I could not think, and instinct was my only guide. Through the blizzard and the wind, over there, was the Torino. Why over there, I did not know. If I was wrong, it meant a night out—too bad; I could only keep moving. And I thought, so this is what I've always climbed for, the ultimate freedom. Here it was howling round me, grey now, not white, and deathly. Was I glad that I had found it?

The ridge led down, so I must have climbed too high. Then I reached a row of sticks—for skiers, I thought; they must lead to the Torino; but after a short way, they turned abruptly down to Italy. I became suspicious but followed them. Then they turned back into the wind, and I was heading in the direction from which I had come. Perhaps they marked crevasses. Staring into the murk, I thought I could see dark shadows in the slope above me, but I could not be sure—not until they turned uphill again, leading back to my old footprints.

This was no joke: half an hour wasted, and I had got nowhere, just gone round in a circle. And time was getting short. You could not see it getting dark, but you could feel it. There was not much daylight left, but, as I lost height, not only did I gain confidence but also strength; and soon I reached a plateau. This was more like it. The compass was sensible now. The Torino could not be far, and I took the opportunity of a last rest.

Back into the wind I looked to where France was. That morning I had been down in the pines, striding up the path in the sun, speaking to friends, watching the helicopter. How things happened. It was strange to remember how I had stared at the crevasses. I wondered, what was fear? All there had been was pointlessness. Recalling the emotion of my first climb, a ridge walk in Skye, I wondered: why was the thrill (not perhaps the enjoyment) today not proportionately greater? Why did company, somebody at the other end of the rope, make so much difference?

The compass told me to beat against the wind, and I renewed my

effort. But presently I met rocks. They barred my way. What now? Was I lost after all? Confidence had so run away with me that now I was shocked. But, I thought, no, the hut will be on the rocks. So I walked along their foot looking for a path. Yes! Here it was. The relief! I climbed a short way, then, not fifty feet away, was a dark shadow. A building. The hut? No, the *téléférique*.

But it was all right. I was now safe; five minutes, and the hut was in view. Inside was music. Of course: Saturday night, an ordinary Saturday night dance. After the unreal, the real seemed strange; it was even strange, my boots striking a solid, level floor. Ah, well! This strangeness would not last. Tomorrow I would descend to Courmayeur. There I might meet someone. Then perhaps we might do some real climbs.