

SUMMER 1963 WITH GASTON RÉBUFFAT

BY R. AYRTON

THE poor summer of 1963 resulted in a mediocre season. What a contrast to 1962! One had to take advantage of the occasional fine day between the long, bad periods. It really meant laying siege to the mountains. One had to be prepared to 'sit it out' which resulted in a depressing effect on one's morale. Even then, one's patience, time and purse were not unlimited!

We started training during June in the Calanques which are situated between Marseilles and Cassis. These are creeks or little inlets from which limestone cliffs rise sheer from the sea. As one climbs them so one sees the Mediterranean between one's feet. Cassis is a good starting point. Quite near is the well-known Calanque En Vau. One can go there by road but the classic approach is a twenty-minute motor boat journey from Cassis. During the week there is hardly anybody there. But the week-end sees the arrival of the Marseilles climbers. It was here that Rébuffat commenced his climbing career and he pioneered quite a number of routes. On either side of the Calanque are pinnacles and spikes bearing voluptuous names like 'Sirène' or 'Super Sirène', 'Saphir', 'Momie', 'Voie de la Calanque', 'Super Calanque', etc. The addition of the word 'super' indicates a grade 5 or grade 6 climb. Generally speaking on the 'super' climbs an étrier is needed. The routes are not long, about 2-3 hours usually, and the descent is by an easy path perfumed with thyme and lavender. After a bathe, lunch and a rest, one is ready to attack another pinnacle. Nearby are Calanques called Sormiou and Morgiou full of interesting routes, and just outside Marseilles is the Rocher de Goude with its difficult North face.

During July we were in Chamonix. We took advantage of a fine day to climb the Dent du Requin by the Mayer-Dibona which is more difficult than the Chapeau à Cornes route. I had set my heart on climbing the Aiguille du Plan by the Ryan-Lochmatter route and Rébuffat readily agreed. However, Hubert Cretton, a young Swiss guide from Martigny and his client Bob Mazard, both friends of Rébuffat were setting out for the West face of the Blaitière, and I was persuaded to go along with them. In retrospect—I should have resisted!—it was certainly the most difficult climb I have attempted. We spent the night at the Plan de l'Aiguille hut and set off the next morning at 4 a.m. By 6 a.m. we were at the foot of the face. The difficulties commenced right away. No time for a warm-up! The Fissure Brown is facing you,

curving upward to the left. Hubert, loaded with étriers, karabiners and wooden wedges clanked to the attack. He jammed one foot in an étrier while Bob held his two ropes. To do this one has to descend a slab of rock on which one is standing in order to clip on the étrier. Bob followed and soon they were both out of sight. Gaston gave me an encouraging smile and said, 'c'est à nous, maintenant!'—he reminded me not to forget to bring up all the equipment, étriers, karabiners, wooden wedges and, if possible, those pitons which Hubert, as leader, was banging in the rock. The Fissure Brown is about 25 m. but, as it curves away from you, climbing it is difficult. But the 40 m. crack following it is still more difficult. Cracks and slabs, traverses on étriers, minute stances for the feet, up and up, no place to relax till we came to the fausses vires where we paused for a while. After that came several difficult pitches till we arrived finally at the vires Fontaine. At this point most parties descend to the Nantillons glacier. As it was getting late we decided to do so too, and were back at the hut at 10.30 p.m. A long, hard day; forty-five pitons were used, of which Hubert hammered in twenty of his own.

Two days later, we went up to the Refuge de la Fourche. It is meant to hold eight but that night we were sixteen! We were bound for the Mont Maudit by the Arête de la Tour Ronde or Frontier Ridge, as it is called. And what a delightful climb it is with its superb views. After a hard, pure rock climb like the Blaitière, it was relaxing to tackle a mixed rock and snow climb. The most tiring part is the long walk back up to the Aiguille du Midi *téléférique* after a fatiguing day. We finished our Chamonix stay with the Couzy route on the Aiguille de l'M—a short, hard, free climb.

September found us at the Brentei hut above Madonna di Campiglio in the Dolomites. It was packed—we wondered why, as the weather was bad. Madame Detassis gave us a charming welcome. We started by climbing the Campanile Alta by its West ridge, and planned to climb the Campanile Basso the next day, but rain drove us away and we made our way to Cortina where it was no better. After a week of doing nothing Rébuffat, in desperation, suggested that the weather might be better in the Alpes Maritimes. I had never been there before. We wasted no more time and drove to Nice via Turin. We obtained some information from Monsieur Gurékian of the Nice section of the C.A.F. Our objective was St. Martin de Vésubie, about seventy kilometers along the Digne road north of Nice. We didn't stay there but went on to Madonna de Fenestre where there is a C.A.F. hut. The next day we climbed Mont Ponset by the West ridge, and the day after the North ridge of the Petit Caire (very difficult). After descending some distance from the summit, we traversed and joined the North ridge of the Grand Caire, which we also climbed. The region is beautiful, rugged and somewhat remote. As it was September we had the place to ourselves. We

were fortunate to meet the local French mountain guide, Jean-Marie Morisset, who lives at St. Dolmar de Val de Blore—La Colmiane (A.M.). He is about thirty-five years old and gave us a great deal of useful information. He is busily engaged on bringing out a guide book of the region which will incorporate eighty-five new routes including the adjacent Italian Alpes Maritimes which we had no time to visit. Morisset told us that, to date, September 12, he had made over fifty climbs during the summer of 1963, which indicates a lot of good weather in that area. On the Italian side there are those famous summits Corno Stella and Cougourde. In general, the Alpes Maritimes are around the 2,800 to 3,100 m. level. We were so impressed by the possibilities that we shall be there again during June, 1964, particularly to climb on the Italian side. From what we have seen and heard, this beautiful region is well worth a visit from British climbers.