CLIMBS ON LIMESTONE IN THE ALPS

By COLIN TAYLOR

(*Three illustrations: nos. 69–71*)

Last year I climbed exclusively on limestone. I started in the Dolomites and the Kaisergebirge, and finished on the roadside outcrop at Saussois. The classic routes of today are usually the grand routes of several years ago. When the big routes of before and just after the Second World War were first climbed, the use of pitons for protection and direct aid was only just becoming acceptable in all climbing circles. Discussion of climbing ethics today is largely limited to the question of when it is permissible to carry expansion bolts on new routes. The old climbs are now fully pegged up; with the advent of alloy karabiners a party need only carry a few pegs and can tackle the routes with a negligible weight of equipment. Then the artificial pitches on a climb can be just as exciting, in a slightly different way, as the free pitches. A 6 ft. horizontal roof with sound pegs has a high degree of exposure which you can savour in safety and almost at your leisure. Going from one peg to the next is frequently not straightforward, but may require cunning distribution of weight as well as judgement as to how safe a particular peg is for a pull in a given direction. In different regions local ground rules have evolved. In the Kaisergebirge, étriers, known misleadingly as 'fiffi', are only allowed on grade VI pitches, although slings may be employed for direct aid on grade V superior routes. At the Saussois the climbs have different gradings which depend on whether or not étriers are carried. In both areas, there would be a great outcry if further pegs were to be inserted in the standard routes. There seem to be rules in the Dolomites; pegs may be put into any crack, and a hooked stick will help in hanging étriers onto distant pegs. Finally, most hard free-climbing pitches involve occasional artificial moves, and careful rope arrangement is necessary. It is always important to think before you move—I have seen one unfortunate suspended from a harness, which had slipped high up his chest, clipped into a peg now out of his reach; with both feet splayed out in orthogonal directions, he oscillated gently with the wind, totally unable to help himself—four feet off the ground. This year, I managed to do sufficient climbing to get the technical problems sorted out and to appreciate some of the pleasures of artificial climbing.

Alan Heppenstall had spent the year in Bologna, so I met him in Cortina. I persuaded him to repeat the Via Comici on the North face

of the Cima Grande. It would be hard to better this route as an introduction to artificial. With the exception of the very first, all the pegs are quite good, and the angle is never beyond the vertical for more than a few feet. It is unlikely to be described again as having 'resting places no more than minute ledges on which to place the front of the foot'. Next day, the party I had photographed on the Brandler-Hasse told us about the very successful month they had just spent in the Wilde Kaiser. Buhl left graphic descriptions of his adventures on the round, white limestone, and so Alan and I decided to spend a few days in the Steinerne Rinne. Dülfer put up the first grade VI route on the steep cliffs rising out of this ravine in 1914. Many other routes bear the names of other outstanding Austrian and German climbers. From the path up to the hut at the Stripsenjoch, far below the great rift, the white cliffs towered into the blue sky—a fitting scene for epic deeds.

After my reading, there could only be one climb on which to start—the Fleischbank Süd-Ost. The route was climbed in 1925 by Rossi and Wiessner, and contains two notorious pitches in the Rope Traverse and the Overhang. These days the pitches are more classic than difficult, so the climb is graded V+. We breakfasted early on the veranda of the hut, overshadowed by the cliffs of the Totenkirchl. A path contoured the hillside to reach bare limestone below the ravine. The sky was still blue, and the sun was rising as we slowly climbed steps hewn into the white rock. When the sun was higher, there would be little shade and no water. The ravine was some 200 m. wide; on the left were the fluted buttresses of the Predigstuhl and on the right the smooth walls and overhangs of the Fleischbank Ostwand. Each was 300 m. high; imagine Clogwyn du'r Arddu set down on the other side of Mickledore from the Scafell cliffs with the heights doubled and each made of dazzling white limestone. Eventually the path in the bed of the ravine became lost in scree as the cliff on the right fell back slightly to form the Süd-Ostwand, before steepening once more to form the pinnacle called the Christaturm. We looked for the start, but two Germans abseiled off a ledge and suggested that we should follow them, as they had done the route before. We scrambled up after them to a little pedestal, where the actual climbing started, and joined two of their friends below the Rope Traverse. So far the rock was very sound, and reminiscent of the Avon gorge; here the standard was no more than mild Very Severe, with all the pegs in place.

The rock now became steeper, and it was necessary to traverse at least 15 ft. across a bulging wall to a small niche level with the little grass ledge on which we all stood. The leader of the second rope climbed up 10 ft., to pass a hemp rope through a ring peg, and began a horizontal rappel on tension from his second, pulling himself carefully across to the niche on vertical flutings. He went slowly, with consider-

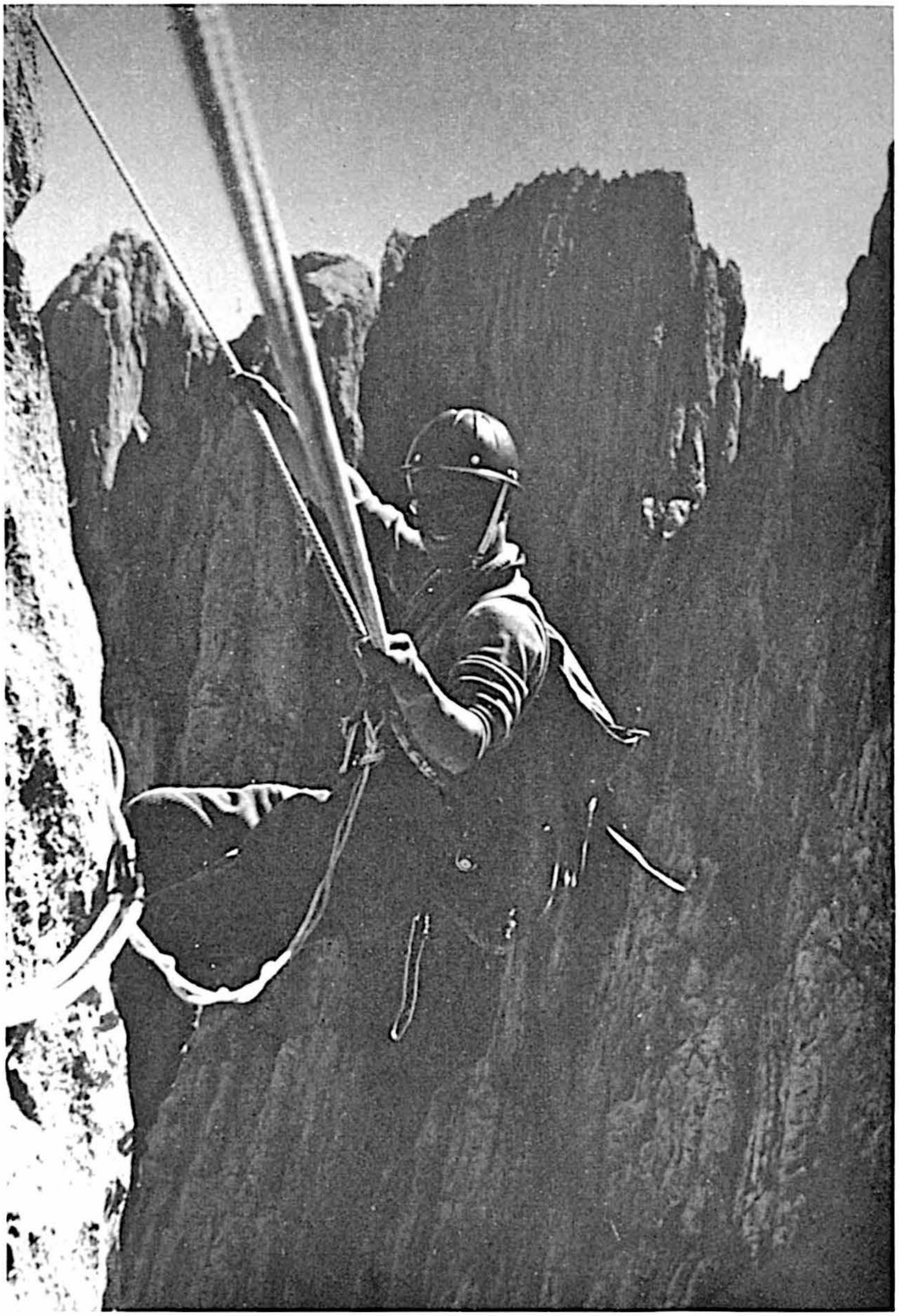


Photo: C. H. Taylor]

FLEISCHBANK SÜD-OST: ALAN HEPPENSTALL ON THE ROPE TRAVERSE (PREDIGSTUHL BEHIND).

(No. 69)

able trepidation. The exposure was tremendous, but closer inspection revealed a grass ledge 30 ft. lower, from which those on whom the pull of gravity might prove decisive could be reclaimed. When the traverse rope had been knotted at the other end, the rest of us slid across with great ease. The climbing was becoming more sustained, until presently we reached the Rossi Overhang. So far, we had managed to avoid using slings for aid, but here there is a special dispensation permitting the use of étriers. The difficulty lay in climbing the smooth slab up to the pegs in the back of the roof. Someone had excavated two footholds out of the rock, and I had some very anxious moments mantelshelfing into these sweaty pockets. After this, the roof was pure artificial, and led to the half-way point from which it is possible to escape left along a rake to a notch. We were wearing sweaters, but the sun not only made the rock so dazzling white as to be painful to look at, but seemed to have set up standing heat waves. The Germans all traversed off left, as they felt it too hot to be pleasant, but Alan went right into the steep continuation cracks. These seemed harder than anything below, and it was a great relief to reach the top, where we drained the water-bottle before staggering back to the hut. Here the shandy comes in litre glasses, and two of these began to quench my thirst.

Next morning we again rose at 5 a.m., and set off up the path to the Steinerne Rinne. I felt quite weak, and was determined at all costs to keep out of the sun. We settled upon the 'gerade Ostwand' on the Christaturm. The climb is graded VI—, and follows a thin crack which widens after 100 m. into a deep, shady gully. The difficulties lie in the three pitches up the initial crack. We abandoned sweaters. The climbing was again largely artificial, but it was necessary to be a little more subtle in going from peg to peg. There was a stance in étriers, half-way up a steep slab at the end of the first pitch. This was not frightening, as there were three pegs, all very sound, and I felt they would not come out under my weight. A little higher, Alan disappeared into a deep hole just below a final bulge. From here we had a good view of a party on the Rope Traverse over the way. The bulge was impressive, but short, and I was in the shade of the gully. The climbing was easy and classical, and led to a little col on the left arête, 50 m. below the top of the tower. We reached the top before the first of the parties on the classic grade V arête, and retired to the mountain behind to watch them. It was a superb day, and the brightly dressed figures contrasted well with the white rock, against a backcloth of blue sky and green hills fading into a distant haze. Weather permitting, we resolved to climb on the Predigstuhl next day.

During the evening, I talked with a pleasant young guide about our intention to climb on the West face of the Predigstuhl. He was very enthusiastic about the Direct, which was fully pegged in its artificial

section. I had heard mention of this route under the Tre Cime, and felt in the right mood. A quick run through the guide-book description showed that the proper name of the climb was the 'Nordgipfel, direckte Westwand' or 'Gaudeiamus führe'. It was climbed in 1952, when it was thought to be the hardest route in the Kaisergebirge; it seemed that its grading of VI+ was no longer merited. I hurried over phrases like 'äusserst schwierig' or 'luftige Schlingenstand' as so much exaggeration.

At half-past seven next morning we were scrambling diagonally across the West face of the Predigstuhl towards a little grass ledge directly below the North summit, wishing we had roped up earlier. The rush up the Steinerne Rinne to beat the sun for the third morning in succession had almost proved too much, at least for me. I tied myself to a peg in a corner behind the grass ledge, and Alan climbed a slab on the right to a little overhang which led to a stance on a small pedestal. In this pitch there were several pegs, but even using them as holds the climbing was about hard Very Severe. It was a foretaste of what was to come. From the belay, I could see the wall going vertically up for 100 m. and more, until it steepened gradually into a roof which seemed to overhang us even now. I took my étriers out of the sack before trying to climb the thin crack behind the belay. Unfortunately, there were no pegs for a long way, and I had to climb on finger-jams, hand-jams and arm-jams before I could hang the étriers onto a peg. The pitch seemed about as hard as Cemetery Gates, and confirmed my impression that the guide had not led this climb. He had not led many hard routes, and would surely have included this amongst them. I belayed in a niche 100 ft. up, and Alan went on in the crack, until he could do a short hand-traverse across a little slab on the left to another stance. Behind it was a crack in the back of a dièdre. There were several pegs, up which I climbed for 60 ft. until there were no more. In the right wall of the dièdre, several feet away, hung a rusty peg from a thin crack. The description mentioned a hard bridging move. The solution was to lay against the rope, clipped into the highest peg, with one foot in an étrier, until the other foot could be stretched across onto a small scrape. It was now just possible to reach the peg with a karabiner held in the tips of the fingers. The rock was so sound that at least I had no qualms about swinging into the étrier, and the stance was 10 ft. higher. We had originally scrambled 300 ft. off the ground to the grass patch, and the angle was close to the vertical, so I was getting the fly-on-the-wall feeling that characterises the best routes. We were both getting quite blasé about the acrobatics required to make upward progress. From my stance, I could see parties on the Dülfer and the Rebitsch-Spiegel, over on the Fleischbank East Wall, and time passed pleasantly as Alan climbed up to me.

Above me, the route continued directly upwards for another 200 ft.

until it reached the great overhang. Alan followed a line of pegs over a 3-ft. roof. He climbed slowly, but with precision, and I felt happy to be sitting on my little ledge, with sky above and air all round. I took a couple of photographs of Alan, as he swung away below the roof. He had not got much gear left now, so he belayed 10 ft. higher, half-sitting on a minute ledge, with both feet in étriers. I went up to him and crossed over to the right on a line of pegs, until I was below a small roof from which a small perlon loop hung. In the 10 ft. up to the roof there were no pegs and only sloping holds. It was supposed to be the crux, and felt hard. I hung an étrier on a peg round the corner, and belayed a little further left to two pegs above a small foothold. I sat in a sitz-sling, clipped on a chest-loop, put both feet into one étrier and felt comfortable. Alan had to find a way across 8 ft. of blank, vertical wall into an overhanging crack with pegs leading up to, and splitting, the very big roof now overhead. The clue was a loop on a peg 4 ft. above my head. Alan laid away on one rope, clipped into the sling, against two small footholds, to put the fingertips of his left hand onto a small flake. Then he dropped the rope and, as he swung down to the left, changed hands on the flake, put a finger of his free hand through a peg in the crack and got his feet into a bridging position, thus demonstrating a fair degree of acrobatic dexterity. This was all very exciting, but we were, of course, quite safe.

As Alan climbed up the line of pegs, I saw huge, black clouds appearing over the top of the overhang above. Suddenly a flash of lightning was followed, almost immediately, by resounding claps of thunder. I could hear the rain splashing heavily on the buttress 50 yds. away, and already half a dozen new streams were running down the hillside visible between the walls of the ravine. Under the overhang, I was not getting wet. I looked up at Alan, swinging 70 ft. above me under the roof; two stances in étriers, a third surely to follow, and now a mighty thunderstorm. Alan ground to a halt, with étrier cords tangled up with both ropes and one or two pegs. I tentatively suggested the possibility of retreat, to sound out Alan's feelings. His manner was determined, but his voice inaudible above the noise of the elements. He freed himself, arranged a sling around a knob, tied onto a peg and leaned out into the void, with his feet braced for support to a belay half-way up the roof. To prevent rope tangles, I had to pass between Alan and the rock. Unfortunately, I forgot I was carrying the rucksack. There was considerable confusion before I reached the pegs above. Ten pegs separated me from the lip of the overhang, and the rain was slackening as patches of blue sky appeared. Just over the lip, I found a splendid little niche. The last pitch went along a steep ramp to an invisible crack with wedges. Alan traversed along, and disappeared. I followed, and found that the crack was indeed wedged. The wedges were 9 ins.

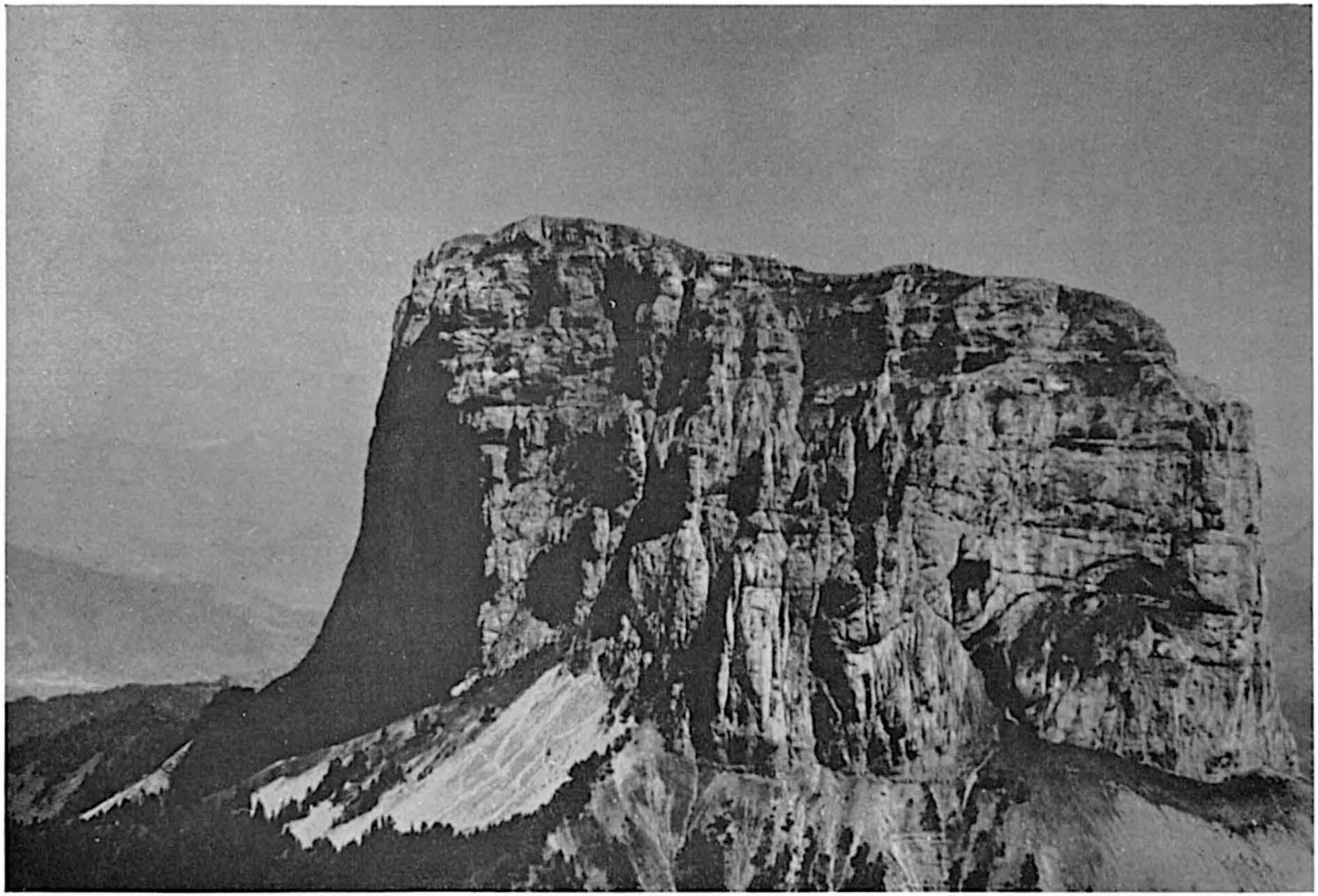


Photo: C. H. Taylor]

MONT AIGUILLE FROM THE ROCHERS DU PARQUET.

(No. 70)

wide, and made an excellent staircase of what would otherwise have been a severe chimney. Then we reached the summit, and felt in the mood to traverse the other two summits. I enjoyed this climb as much as I have enjoyed anything anywhere else; a succession of superb pitches on sound rock in a magnificent setting, separated by fine belay ledges. The only regret I have is that we took nearly ten hours on a route which Whillans and Bonington are reputed to have done in under four.

Back in Cortina, we did a few routes in the Civetta, the South face of the Pilastro di Rozes and visited the Odleralpen before it was time for me to join Hamish Nicol. After two abortive hut marches followed by heavy falls of snow, we retired from Grindelwald to Grenoble. Here the only guide-book which Hamish could find was to the Vercors—the guide published in 1963, edited by Serge Coupé. The Vercors is a range of limestone hills running south from Grenoble for 50 km. beside the road to Nice. Along the ridge are many outcrops of up to 300 m. in height, opened up only in the last ten years. However, climbing in the area started much earlier. Near the southern end of the range is Mont Aiguille (2,086 m.), separated from the main chain by the Col du Laupet, and surrounded by cliffs of considerable steepness 250 m. high. It has a flat top, several acres in extent. The only easy route is from the Col du Laupet; this is graded IV, and was first climbed in 1492 by order of Charles VIII. Clearly, this was a mountain which we should visit.

The best approach is from the village of Saint Michel-les-Portes, just off the N. 75, and here we erected tents.

Next morning, there were squalls of rain and low cloud, but eventually we drove up the narrow road over an intervening ridge to the foot of the mountain. Suddenly, the mist lifted a little, and I caught my fiirst glimpse of the North wall of the mountain. The yellowish red walls rose for 1,000 ft. out of the pine trees, and extended for at least a kilometre without a break. Then the mist swirled lower, as we plunged through dank vegetation to reach the Col du Laupet, from which the well-graded path, which we had not found, led down to the road.

From the col, the cliffs were still steep, but whiter in colour, reflecting sounder rock. A path led off, round below the South face. We had a very much foreshortened view of the way down, which was not obvious; the mist was lower now, and there was rain in the wind. My inclination was to climb the mountain by its easiest way; then we could be sure of the descent and return to the tents in time for tea. Hamish saw no reason why a little rain or the advanced hour should deter us from completing a respectable route. We compromised, and chose a route up the South-west Pillar, as being T.D. inferior and also connecting with the way down.

The climb started in a grassy corner, just above the traversing path.

The walls were not so steep, the climbing was easy, and we traversed gradually upwards under a line of overhangs, until we found a grade IV crack. I always wear a crash helmet, and that morning Hamish decided that he required some protection and borrowed a tea-cosy hat belonging to Mary, his wife. Half-way up the crack, the hat fell off, and it seemed unwise for Hamish to return without it. It had lodged 90 ft. lower down, and gave me an excuse to do a pendulum of large amplitude. Hamish was belayed in a corner below a steep slab, across which I had to traverse into a niche on pegs stuffed behind old wedges. Hamish put in a couple of pegs in the crack above my belay, and reached a wide ledge, which we followed across left to the large pine tree on the way down. The summit was then an easy scramble up loose gullies followed by a short walk through deep grass on a compass bearing across the major axis of the elliptical plateau. The clammy mist made it feel just like Scotland. The return to the pine was easy, but I had to find an abseil down behind a pinnacle. Fifty feet lower, I abseiled 150 ft. from a peg, and we walked out along the bottom of the chasm back to the col.

Next day, it was fine, and we had had the 'voie du 29 Mai' on the East face strongly recommended to us. The path from the Col du Laupet led past steep walls, to which adhered thin mist in patches. The early pitches of scrambling, with sections of IV and two chimneys of V, ended in a traverse line which by-passed the overhangs above us and led to an airy niche at the foot of a very steep dièdre. There were three pitches up this crack and its right wall, which I considered to be undergraded at IV–V. The stances were fine, and we lunched on a narrow ledge above them, below a steep slab. There was a fine view across the plains below, framed on one side by the sheer cliffs we were on, and I could see grass blowing 100 ft. higher on the edge of the summit plateau. The slab behind us was smooth, and was capped by a small overhang. I found plenty of pegs; but some were not far in their cracks, and I shall remember using one ace-of-hearts which was held only by its tip. This was the end of the difficulties, and we sat on the grass on the summit and looked at the line of white cliffs stretching north.

The last day, we climbed on the Rochers du Parquet, which face Mont Aiguille across the Col du Laupet. Of the three buttresses, the North was the nearest and, perhaps, the highest. The East face is split by a thin crack. I had to insert most of the pegs here. Above the second stance, the climbing was easier, but I lost the correct route. I had to gain the bed of a gully, leading up to the notch I could see from below, by climbing directly up to it instead of doing a diagonal abseil in from the right wall. Then a long pitch up a crack in the gully led to the notch, and there was only scrambling left. Mary met us on the top with a large bottle of cool beer.



Photo: H. G. Nicol]

A TYPICAL PITCH ON THE SAUSSOIS.

The weather broke, and we moved north to the Saussois. Here the limestone bulges with pock-marked holds, and many of the pegs are cemented in place. The main buttress rises directly from the roadside. A little brown man in bathing trunks led us up one climb without using étriers, and I felt bound to emulate him and was surprised to find what I could do without them. I then tried another overhanging route on the other side of the gully splitting the main buttress. I climbed only the first pitch before I passed out with heat stroke, but next morning we tried again with étriers. The second of the fine pitches overhung a long way, and the exposure was very high; I can see why people drive down from Paris for the weekend.

I think that in some ways the most interesting area I visited was the Vercors. Climbers already come from Geneva for the weekend, so the cliffs should provide an alternative to the aiguilles of Chamonix in bad weather.