CORDÉE MARIÉE

By N. A. J. ROGERS

"I never want to come to the snow Alps again." Thus, my wife, with considerable feeling, greeted the summit of the Laquinhorn, her first 'Viertausender'. Drowsily I acknowledged that it had been a trying day. The South ridge is easy but long, and at a high level for a first climb, and after two nights without sleep I had dozed off every time I stopped climbing. The season, I thought happily, could only improve.

Several days later, after a most enjoyable ascent of the Rothorngrat, and a day of bad weather on the Rotgrat, taken as consolation for the Täschhorn-Dom traverse, we walked up to the Bétemps hut with Colin Taylor. From here we hoped to climb the Klein Triftjigrat, better known as the Younggrat, on the Breithorn. This ridge is normally climbed from the Gandegg hut, from where a traverse leads to the start of the difficulties. Taking a sternly purist view, we had decided to include the easy lower part of the ridge, and had therefore chosen the Bétemps as a starting point. Here we found Hamish Nicol and Robin Prager waiting to do the same climb, and, since they were likely to be faster than our rope of three, we gave them an hour's start in the morning.

Shortly after dawn, we arrived at the junction with the route from the Gandegg. From here the ridge suddenly steepens, rising in a series of knife-edge sweeps to a short, rocky section, above which it loses itself in the North face of the mountain. The most difficult part of the route is very near the top and speed on the lower sections is essential.

The early part of the season had been very dry and, as a result, climbs where good snow may be expected were presenting a great deal of ice. The Younggrat was no exception, and it transpired that our parties were probably the first of the season. Under such conditions, long bouts of step-cutting are called for and we spared a grateful thought for Hamish, far ahead and stoutly wielding his axe. For us the next few hours were continuously delightful. Steep and exposed, the ridge engaged our full attention, without presenting any extreme difficulties. The rocky gendarme was passed in crampons, and, close behind Hamish now, we started up the last few hundred feet of the climb.

The crux comes at a point where the ice-ridge ends in the steep rock of the North face. From here a traverse must be made across the very steep couloir to the right. The conditions vary enormously of course,

from season to season, but the crossing can be both difficult and dangerous. At least one fatal accident has occurred at this point. For us the mountain had arranged a slope of black, glistening ice, but a large ice-peg planted firmly in the rock at the start of the traverse removed much of the terror from this place and we moved across easily enough with the aid of generous bucket steps, enlarged enthusiastically by each member of the party. Some minutes later, and fourteen hours after leaving the hut, we were on the summit ridge. The summit was not even mentioned, and as one man we turned to the long and, under the conditions, unpleasantly difficult descent to the ski-slopes above the Théodule Pass. Night had already fallen as we stumbled among the moraine below the Gandegg hut. Robin had been left at the Théodule with a sprained ankle and Hamish, still depressingly fresh, was somewhere ahead, speeding towards the lights and comforts of Zermatt. Suddenly the track was gone. We cast about in desultory fashion for some time and then gave up and unpacked our duvets and bivouac sack. We spent a very comfortable night and in the morning were mildly surprised to find what was unmistakably the track coming in through the head of the sack, and out through the foot!

The weather in Chamonix has never been very kind to us, and most of our routes there have been on the low peaks which clear quickly after bad weather. We have now done most of the climbs on the Brioche-M-Albert group, and another bad season will force us to repeat routes.

The Aiguille du Peigne has provided us with two fine days: the Papillons arête followed by the Chamonix face (a good day for collectors of T.D. routes) and the North ridge. The latter is a magnificent although short rock climb with many fine bridging and hand-jamming pitches. The hardest pitch by far is graded IV Sup.; a vicious sting in a long tail of V and V Sup. The men of the party found it quite desperate, but Janet, using, as she explained, technique, came up it beautifully and apparently without effort. On the tiny summit, we met Colin Taylor and his wife, who had done the Chamonix face. They had waited, he told us, in order to show us the way down which he had learnt from a guide after doing the North ridge the previous season. The safe way off this mountain is notoriously complex and two other parties gratefully joined us as we followed our experienced leader. Hours later, and for the seventh or eighth time, Colin paused in a particularly revolting and inescapable-seeming place. Gazing thoughtfully around, he observed that the general situation was familiar but that the details, for the moment, escaped him. His followers were silent, each no doubt recalling with pleasure the difficulties and achievements of the day. Suddenly, stiffening like a gun-dog, he leapt over a tiny notch in the rock and was discovered on the other side triumphantly pointing to a mass of rotten hemp that marked the start of the crucial abseil. We all

reached the téléférique station on the Plan des Aiguilles before the storm broke, and a comparatively pleasant night was spent in the company of several other benighted parties. Coffee seemed important and I remember a long debate on the subject of converting 'eau non-potable' into 'eau potable'. I forget the details but the miracle was achieved, and immediately afterwards the concrete seemed suddenly very comfortable.

Our last three seasons have begun in the Dolomites, under the mistaken impression that we could get fit there for the bigger things further west. This fallacy was cruelly exposed last season when we climbed steadily from the Civetta to Chamonix and on to Courmayeur and found ourselves having to acclimatise to increased altitude in each area. We have, however, had many enjoyable days on the steep walls of these limestone peaks. The Sella group was our introduction to the area. The fashion of climbing here is very similar to that adopted in North Wales. From a camp in Canazei, an exhilarating drive up the Sella Pass brings one to within a gentle ten minutes' stroll of the 'crag'. Only the scenery is alpine here. The Sella Towers and the nearby Vajolet Towers provided us with several spectacular routes of about Severe standard. On one of these, however, the Delago route, Janet, whose route-finding does not always match her rock-climbing, made a rather desperate Hard Very Severe variation some two or three feet away from the proper line. This route, even by the normal way, is very impressive, and a fine introduction to the group. From its summit we saw, far away to the south, a fine peak that cast a spell upon us that has yet to be exorcised. With some difficulty we identified it as Monte Agner. Mustering our minimal German, we learnt from the guide-book that the North face, which had caught our attention from the Delago Tower, was some 5,000 ft. high, and the longest rock-face in the Eastern Alps. It carried a Grade V label, which we naïvely imagined meant, on such a long route, climbing of a not very high technical standard. We placed it high on our list of priorities.

First, to remind ourselves that there were real mountains among the Dolomites, we climbed the South face of the Marmolata. Most of the routes on this side of the mountain are extremely difficult, but our climb took a line of cracks and chimneys that gave us exciting but not very testing pitches among magnificent rock scenery. To complete the day, after pickled anchovies in the summit hut, we descended the baby glacier which drapes the North face. We then headed towards Agordo, the small town to the south of the Civetta from where Monte Agner is most accessible. To our horror, we found it rising from a sub-tropical jungle, its ridges and summit shimmering in the heat. Repelled, we hastened to Venice and bathing in the Adriatic.

The following year we were again in the Dolomites, this time in the Tre Cime district. These freakishly steep towers have held a powerful

fascination for British climbers in recent years, and most of the hard routes there have had several ascents by British parties. Our ambitions were not very high, but we had two most enjoyable days. In the Preuss chimney, on the Cima Piccolissima, we passed a happy party of two, their combined ages well over a hundred. Suitably inspired, we moved on to the Cima Piccola for the Spigolo Giallo or Yellow Edge, one of the most popular Grade V climbs in the area. Looking quite impossibly steep and airy from the nearby camp site, this climb proved to be quite amiable on closer acquaintance. Three steep and enjoyable pitches lead to a long section of scrambling which brought us to a point where more than one party has gone astray. A rather indefinite traverse line to the left must be taken. To venture too low is dangerous, in one recent case fatal, and, avoiding this, we went far too high and came to grips with a pitch more difficult than any on the correct route. It was a somewhat chastened party that gathered at the foot of the overhanging groove, normally the crux of this climb. Seconding this, I attempted to dispense with étriers, using karabiners clipped into pegs as hand-holds. As I fixed a sling with palsied fingers and relaxed on it, I reflected that this was a technique for stronger men than myself. From the stance, the pitch was largely concealed, and a good deal of rope-drag developed as a result. As we brought Janet up, a great deal of very unladylike language reached us and eventually she appeared, rather pink and completely swathed in slings and étriers. It seemed she had climbed past one and then fought to retrieve it against our combined efforts to haul her to the top. The rest of the climb was less serious, and a quick descent brought us to dinner and then chianti and conversation in the hut, while the evening storm cleared the air for another fine day.

Some days later we drove south to Listolade, a tiny village at the south end of the Civetta. The Vazzoler hut, a friendly and informal place, is easily reached from here, and from it we climbed two routes on the Torre Venezia. One, the Andrich-Fae, is comparable with the Yellow Edge, but much finer in my opinion. While there is no pitch so hard as the crux of the latter climb, the route is not marred by any scrambling section and the difficulties, nowhere extreme, are very well maintained.

At this point, we again turned to Monte Agner. The approach march through the trees turned out to be every bit as bad as we had imagined. Future parties are recommended to add a machete to their normal equipment. Gigantic snails and other fauna added to Janet's trials and morale was at a low ebb as we sheltered under an overhang while a sudden storm drenched the huge mountain wall ahead. The route follows a great gully that starts at the lowest part of the face. Some little way up this we found a comparatively level amphitheatre and settled down to an uncomfortable bivouac, first arranging a large polythene sheet to collect any water that might fall during the night, for dehy-

dration seemed a serious risk on such a long climb. In the morning we found that we had accumulated some five or six gallons, discounting the large quantity that had flowed uselessly down our necks and soaked into our clothing. Encouraged by this easy solution to one of our problems we breakfasted and started to climb.

It should be stated at once that the description of this climb, taken from the German guide, and now accurately translated in the A.C./A.C.G. guide, is imprecise. The main feature of the face, the great couloir, is never in doubt. It is however, unclimbable for much of its length, recalling in places the inside of St. Paul's, and the necessary excursions to right and left are difficult to find and rather unpleasant to follow. Much of the rock is rotten, and we came across only one ancient peg in the 1,500 ft. or so that we climbed. Impasse was finally reached when it was decided that sack-hauling would be necessary before the rest of the party could follow me up the first clean and enjoyable pitch we had encountered. At this point the summit, over half a mile above us, seemed infinitely remote. A few pregnant moments of silence ensued before I reversed the pitch and our rather sad little trio began the long series of abseils back to the jungle.

So far as I am aware, the climb remains without a British ascent, but at least two other British parties have grappled with the mountain and retreated much the worse for wear. Shortly after our attempt, another rope of three reached much the same point, and then spent a ghastly night attempting to keep their chins above the torrent which swept down through their bivouac site. A friend who met them some days later reported that even then they were the most demoralised party he had ever seen in the Alps. The following season, a strong party of four reached a point some 500 ft. from the summit in two days. A bad storm rendered the rest of the climb impossible, and a further two days were spent in retreat.

After our rout on the Agner, our main desire was for warm, firm rock, and we headed west for the Bregaglia. Two years before, Janet and I had climbed the North ridge of the Piz Badile and from it had admired the great sweeping slabs of the North-east face. We had watched fascinated as two climbers, almost lost amidst the acres of rock, had picked their way up the Cassin route. A masterpiece of route-finding, the first ascent had occupied three days and had ended in tragedy. Several years had passed before Bernard Pierre and Gaston Rébuffat made the second ascent, again taking three days and weathering a bad storm. The route had lost some of its ferocious reputation when Terray and Lachenal completed the climb in one day on the sixth ascent. Since then it has become increasingly popular, several parties on the mountain on one day being common under good conditions.

As we walked up the pleasant track to the Sciora hut, cloud concealed

much of the face, and we feared for another defeat. Our hopes were raised, however, by the news that the weather, while cloudy, had been stable for several days, and that the face was in good condition. We hurried to the hut where we ate a large meal and then pressed on to the foot of the face. On the way we met two British climbers who had taken a day on the face, and then a further day descending the North ridge. We confessed that we had the same plan and they wished us luck, while looking a trifle askance at Janet and our rope of three.

The climb begins with scrambling up easy ledges, where comparatively comfortable bivouac sites may be found. We awoke just before dawn and had a rather leisurely breakfast, being unwilling to begin rock-climbing until we had warmed up. At the famous first dièdre we found a Swiss–German party in action. In spite of early rather horrific accounts, this part of the mountain gives enjoyable, straightforward climbing of about Severe standard. Speed was very important to us as a rope of three, and on all but the most difficult pitches we adopted the practice of having one man to lead in the normal way, and then the second and third to climb together with a few feet of rope between them. We found this a little trying on the cold rock of the first pitches, but soon we were climbing rather faster than the pair in front. Rope-length after rope-length raced by, and soon we were at the tiny snow-patch in the middle of the face. The Swiss were busy on the crux pitch, a vertical dièdre-crack closed by overhangs, as we arrived, and we were able to spend some time looking across the central couloir through the mists that swirled thinly about the face, towards the Longhi-Corti route on the North-east face. Much steeper than the Cassin route, and largely artificial, the climb had not been repeated since the first several-day ascent which had ended in disaster.

It was my turn to lead now, and I approached this steep crack with some misgivings. I need not have worried. In eighty feet or so of delightful V.S. climbing I was able to use five or six pegs for protection, and to ignore another dozen. The pitch is reminiscent of the upper part of Curving Crack, although somewhat harder, and the quite excessive protection removes any strain from the climbing. Steeper now, the route was more continuously testing and we found it necessary to move singly more often. A long series of cracks culminated in a square overhang, the famous passage in étriers. In reality this turned out to be a short traverse on small but adequate footholds, using pegs as handholds. Beyond the edge of the overhang, a steep crack, climbed by a rather leisurely layback method, gave a position of marvellous exposure.

Just about at this point the Swiss party ahead dropped some ironmongery. Its clangour seemed to fill the whole Sciora basin as we cowered close to the rock, suddenly aware of the tremendous vulnerability to stone-fall of a climber on this slab-like face. The route will

always remain a very serious one for this reason, and indeed during the following season several people were to be killed in two terrible rock-falls.

Meanwhile the mountain was in kindly mood and we rapidly drew close to the final pitches. Here, emerging from a steep and difficult chimney, the climber has a choice of finishes. The original Cassin route traverses left and descends by abseil into the central couloir, and so unpleasantly to the summit. A series of cracks, in the line of the steep chimney can be followed to the North ridge or, more in keeping with the rest of the route, a line up the face between the two previous alternatives can be taken. We were unanimously against the original route, but Janet and I wanted to take the face route, while our third favoured the cracks. After much bullying he led the first section of the face route, exclaiming the while on its extreme difficulty. Once on the stance he insisted that any further progress was impossible, as he was entirely surrounded by vertical and unclimbable walls. Knowing him of old, we realised that this simply implied a preference for the alternative route, and while Janet was being plied with sweets and hot coffee by two Germans who had followed us and were clearly appalled to see her there, I quickly followed our reluctant leader. I found him on a large ledge, with gently sloping walls all around, where surely beautifully delicate climbing could be enjoyed. Ignoring dire warnings of loose rock and irreversibility, I set off and soon we were all on the summit ridge, in splendid sunshine now, just ten and a half hours after embarking on the first dièdre.

We hurried down the North ridge, abseiling and scrambling where we could. The last abseil, taken in almost total darkness landed us on a perfect bivouac platform, about half an hour from the glacier. In the morning, after a last look at what we all regarded as our best Alpine route, we hurried back to the hut and down to the Pensione Sciora in Promontogno for a huge meal and mutual congratulations.