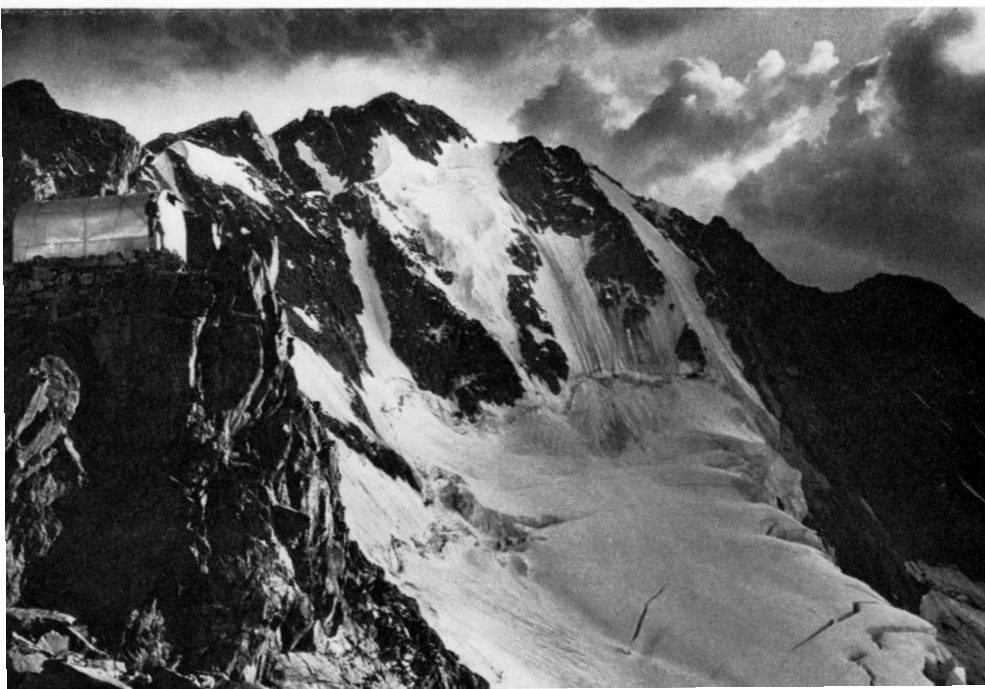




26 *Piz Palü—North face.* This and next photo: John Cleare

27 *Monte Disgrazia—North face with Oggioni bivouac*



Return to the Alps

Ian Howell

In previous years my Alpine aims had been centred around well known routes, the ones I had heard a lot about, that my friends had done. Because they had done them I had wanted to do them also, the Cima Grande, Civetta, Marmolada, the Dru, Grand Capucin, Walker Spur, the Brenva face routes, the Aiguille Noire and even the Eiger. But these are now climbed by all and sundry, or so it seems. Still fresh from my two years of climbing in East Africa, where pioneering is the order of the day, these well-known routes seemed less important to me. So when I found myself climbing with John Cleare, who felt the same way, it was something with a slight taste of the unknown that we were after. John had some ideas.

Piz Palü: West Pillar of North face

On Piz Palü, a well-known peak, the left-hand pillar is often climbed. The Central Pillar (the Bumillergrat), has been climbed several hundred times to date, with some British ascents last year. But what about the right-hand pillar? The book mentions few ascents, maybe no more than twenty. This should do for a start, we would have a look.

A bivouac on the approach rocks should have given us an early start, but still we could not get to the bergschrund before six o'clock. Already the snow was softening, it must have been a warm night, perhaps that is why I had slept so well. Kicking steps, John led several pitches, but soon the wet, sugary snow gave insufficient support and some step-cutting in the ice beneath reduced our speed. On the rocks, loose rocks sloping the wrong way with a covering of snow, I led with crampons off. Wet sugar and ice again, John in crampons led, I left mine off; the next pitch was back on rock. Then on snow, then on rock. The angle always the same, never a resting place, never desperate but never easy. We kept on going.

Higher up, the crested snow-ridge was very soft. We tried the right-hand side, at first no trouble, then a band of poised shale, with several pegs stuck in it. Somebody had been here before. It would be hysterical to try and climb it. The alternative; deep, wet sugar on steep ice, this would take some time, but safer. At last back on rocks again, but Oh, how loose! Only after reaching the summit could we relax, but even then we still could not, time was short and we had to move to get down before dark.

Disgrazia North Face Direct

Disgrazia, a majestic peak, alone and dominating the southern Bregaglia looks down on to the Italian lakes. Its height (3678 m) and detachment from the main chain give it an air of superiority over its lesser colleagues in the range.

From Sondrio drive north through the much quarried area of Chiesa to a small village at the end of the road called Chiareggio. There is an hotel and some food shops here. By foot across the river and follow a track for three-quarters of an hour to the cheerful Porro Refuge. Here reciprocal club rates may be enjoyed by identification of A.C. membership. This hut is situated on a meadow near the snout of the Ventina glacier. To climb the northern routes of Disgrazia the Oggioni bivouac is the most convenient starting place. Attain the Ventina glacier by a moraine rib on your left and ascend this for some 2 km then break right across an ice-fall to a rock wall. At the top of a ramp line on this wall is the Taveggia bivouac. Above this bivouac traverse a glacier then ascend it to a snow plateau. The Oggioni bivouac (3150 m) is seen on the far side of this plateau. It is five hours from Porro.

The Oggioni bivouac is strategically placed actually on the ridge which when followed up eventually becomes the 'Corda Molla'. This is the classic route on the north side of Disgrazia; from near the summit a sweeping ice-arête descends steeply then levels out to become the North-east ridge, a snow-ridge occasionally broken by gendarmes and rock sections. The first complete ascent of this route, bits and pieces had been climbed previously, was in August 1914 by B. De Ferrari and I. Dell'Andrino.

To the right of the Corda Molla, the North face plummets down 600 m from the summit to the Disgrazia glacier below. In the centre of the face is a hanging glacier with a great overhanging sérac which varies in size from year to year. In recent years this glacier has been climbed by Diemberger. Just to the right is a more likely line following a string of isolated rock islands to about half height. Then a long snow and ice section steepens to the final summit rocks. This route was first ascended in July 1934 by A. Lucchetti-Albertino and a village peasant with hardly any climbing experience named Schenatti. It was named the North Face Direct.

Still further right is a less satisfying looking route following an ice-arête to the crest of the North-west ridge of Disgrazia. This was first climbed by two Scots: W. N. Ling and H. Raeburn on 8 August 1910, and was consequently named 'Spigolo Inglese' by the Italians.

In 1968 John Cleare and Mark Springett were rebuffed from the Corda Molla by bad weather. But John returned in 1969 to climb the North-west ridge solo from the Forno hut. From this visit he decided that the North wall had some excellent potential and was determined to return.

Last July Peter Biven, Alison Chadwick, John and myself reached the Oggioni

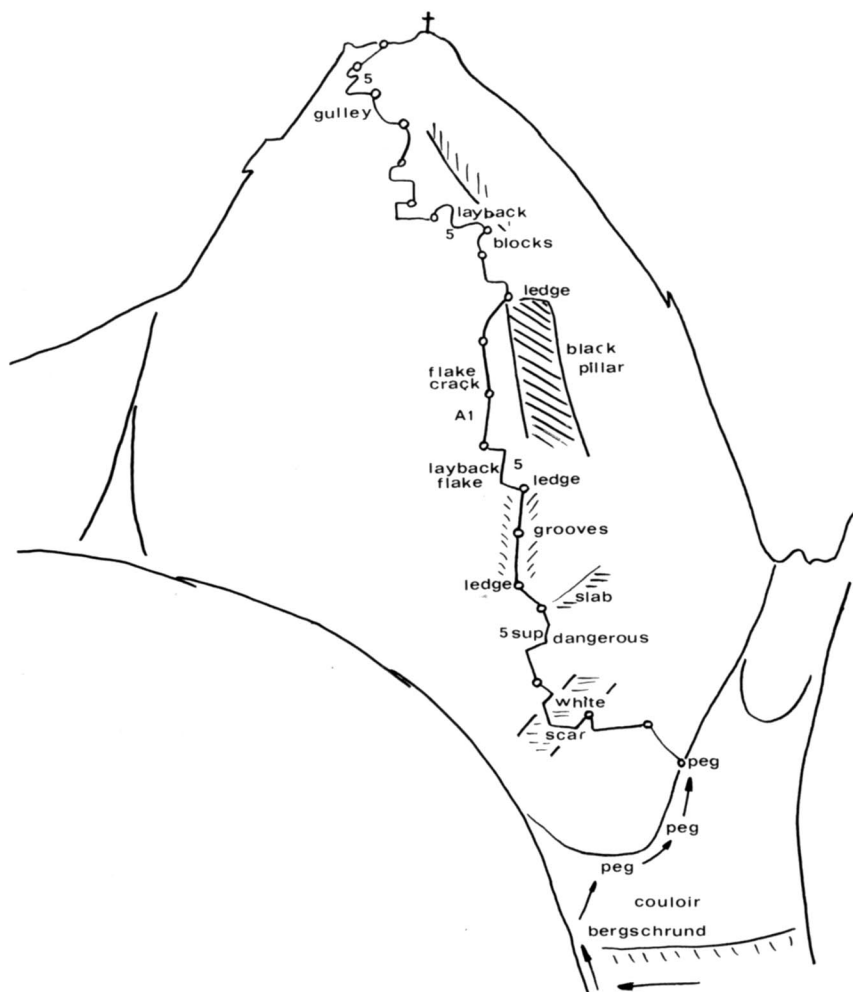
bivouac. After a late night (eating) and an early start Pete and Ali set off on the Corda Molla while John and I abseiled down on to steep ice and traversed across to the upper névé of the Disgrazia glacier. After crossing the schrund I led a steep section on asbestos rock in crampons, when without warning I was flying downwards, my newly sharpened crampons narrowly missing John who held me securely on an ice-screw and a Peck cracker. Only then did the large asbestos block which had been my handhold split in two and hit John on the back and leg simultaneously. Seconds later the stone-swept ice-slope only feet to our right received a significantly menacing volley. Suddenly we no longer wanted to be where we were. We descended quickly to the glacier. After checking John's bones and reviewing our position we decided to go back to our route, this time I led through without crampons.

Several pitches led to a small snow-section before a steep rock band. Working round on the left pegs were used to try and get some protection in the asbestos rock. Pitons required much hammering to get them into this fibrous rock but pulled out easily with the fingers. We pressed on. To our left great hovering séracs creaked and groaned above us, to the right an irregular bombardment of stones swept down from the summit rocks. Eventually we were forced to climb a couple of pitches in the line of fire before we could quickly move left on to the less steep top of the hanging glacier. Height was now quickly gained by kicking steps up good snow; a schrund, another schrund, a traverse left to bridge it. John leading confidently over the bridge stabbed snow with his straight fingers. 'Ouch, O God, my finger, it's broken!' It was ice not snow. Somehow he finished the pitch. The last joint on John's finger of his axe-hand was bent 90° the wrong way, maybe dislocated. He was in great pain and could not use the hand. I led. A long traverse right in a schrund petered out into steep hard ice. Step-cutting was essential in our condition and took a long time. Three pitches of ice led to the summit rocks. It was getting dark, a bivouac seemed unavoidable; ill-equipped we settled down to an uncomfortable night near the summit of Disgrazia.

Pizzo Ligoncio, West-north-west face

If you look south from the top of the Badile on a clear day you will see a bump on the ridge which runs away from your feet. Steep slabs on the right of this bump drop down a long way out of sight to the valley below. Pizzo Ligoncio is nearly 275 m lower than the Badile but its West-north-west face nearly compares in height and steepness to the North-east face of the Badile.

From a fork in an ice-couloir the West-north-west granite face shoots up steeply at first then leans back slightly for 600 m to the summit. To the left



28 *Piz Ligoncio—West-north-west face.* This and the next photo: Ian Howell

the Lis D'Arnasca, a lower summit but steeper and very much smoother than the main face, could offer routes only of a Yosemite nature. Just left of the Lis D'Arnasca the Passo Ligoncio is conveniently placed for the return route after a descent of the *voie normale* on the East face is made.

The upper part of the West-north-west face was climbed as early as 1903 by a tedious traverse from the right. Then in 1929 Vitale Bramani ascended the face from the foot via the left-hand fork of the couloir and after a long ascending traverse left reached the North-north-east ridge which was followed to the summit, a devious zig-zag line. The Direct route (the one we had our eyes on) was first climbed on 15 August 1937 by Arcellaschi and Riva. They used some forty pitons, several rotting and archaic specimens still remain on the route. Few ascents have been made since, maybe due to a large rock-fall which has left a whitish scar.



29 *West-north-west face of Piz Ligoncio—Biven on layback below the Black Pillar*

The approach is long but not boring. Leave the car at Mezzopiana, on the road between Lake Como and Chiavenna. Climb up steeply, following signs to the Brasca Rifugio. The track then levels out into the beautiful Codera valley which is dotted with seemingly impossible homesteads. This is followed for four hours to the Brasca Rifugio. On an approach reconnaissance with Alison we stayed at the C.A.I. hut and found the guardian friendly and welcoming to British people. He showed us a medal he had received from Winston Churchill in gratitude for guiding those who were escaping from Italy over the Trubinasca pass into Switzerland. When asked if many British visited his hut, he said 'Yes' and handed us the register, the latest British entries we could find were some Boy Scouts in the 40s. One and a half hours

above the valley a bivouac hut named 'Valli' nestles under an enormous boulder only an hour from the foot of Ligoncio. This is the recommended starting point for routes on this face, although some people consider an approach over the Passo Ligoncio to be preferable; however, the difficulty of getting from the pass to the foot of the face makes it impractical.

After my reconnaissance during poor weather I returned to Ligoncio with Peter Biven in late September. We had little information about the nature of the climb. However, we were armed with ice-axes, an assortment of pegs and a suggestion of bivouac gear—just as well, we used them all. The ice-couloir, up which we had to climb for some 200 m, required much step-cutting. From the right-hand branch of the couloir we followed a chimney/crack line leading left on to the main face above the initial steep section. Two pitches led to a clean white slab (the recent rock-fall). We crossed this to a very steep and loose section, where the second is belayed on a tiny sloping ledge while the leader climbs with difficulty directly above him over loose, broken rock—a true test of nerves. Then three pitches are followed up easier grooves to the bottom of the Black Pillar. A pleasant layback, an aid pitch, an awkward flake crack lead to easier ground again before the top of the pillar is reached. The rock above is slightly easier in angle but its solidity is sometimes suspect. We arrived on the summit after nine hours of climbing as the autumn sun sank behind a most beautiful sea of cloud.