

Winter 1971–2

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(Translation: H. Pursey)

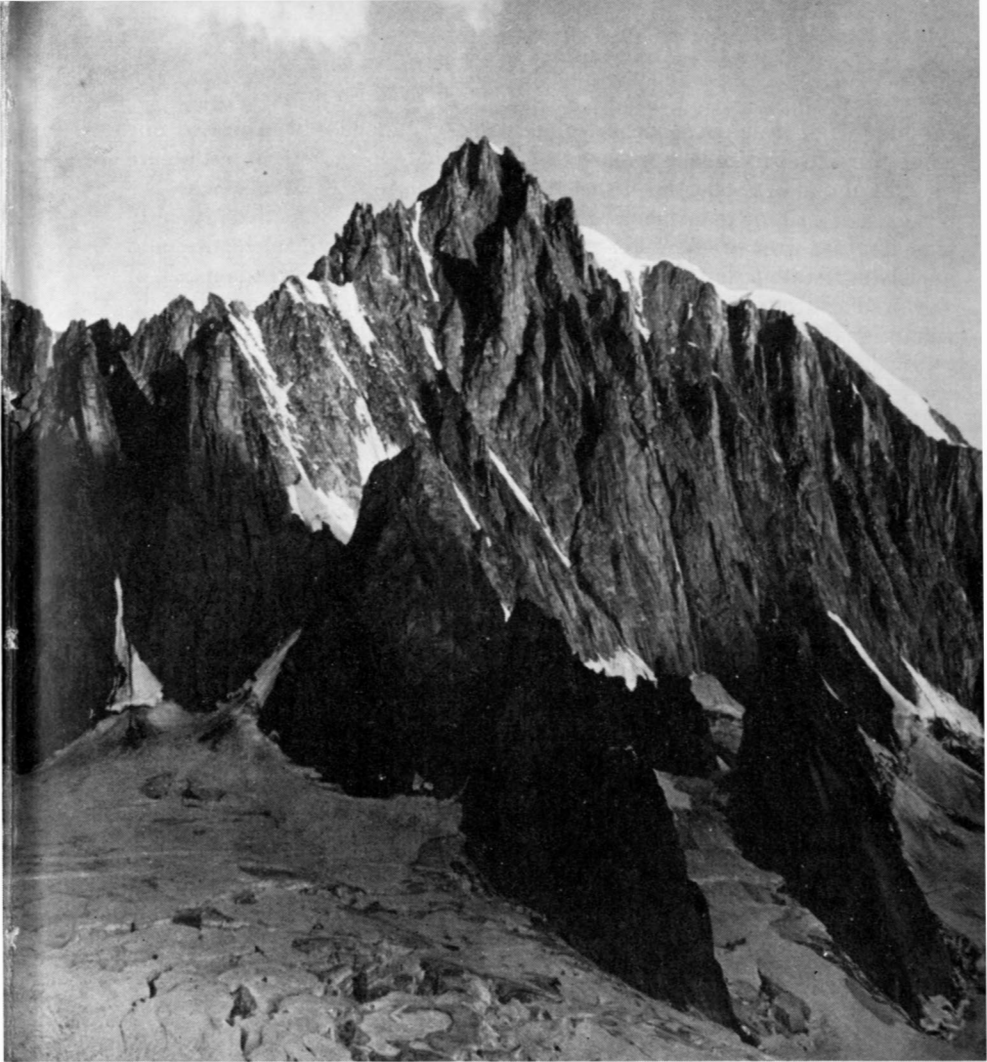
The 1971–2 winter season has once more confirmed the laws of statistics in Alpinism—almost if not quite. During the previous winter I made two major climbs on the E face of Mont Blanc—both winter ‘firsts’—and had no unsuccessful attempts. This year, on the other hand, I had ambitious plans, but had to be content with achieving much less.

In January, with my American friend Roman Laba, we attacked the N face of Les Droites by the Lagarde couloir, partly for training but also because of the intrinsic attraction this course had for us. At the end of the second day, two-thirds of the way there, a ferocious storm burst on us. It must have lasted all night and the following day, and our retreat in these conditions took as long as the ascent—two days. Hardly surprising for a 700-m descent *en rappel*, half of it oblique, and with the ropes well and truly stiff.

Towards the end of February, four of us arrived at Zermatt—Jean-Pierre Bougerol, Roman Laba, Vincent Renard and myself—this time in order to achieve our main objective of the 1972 winter season, namely the W face of the Matterhorn. The weather, which had been fine at first, quickly deteriorated, and we were condemned to stroll around the streets of Zermatt, a fashionable and expensive resort, with very little interest from the point of view of a ski enthusiast; never have I seen such flat slopes as those of the Theodulpass! At last, when we had almost given up hope, on the fifth day (not long, some will say, but we are neither professionals nor Japanese—the latter had been waiting for good conditions on the N face since the beginning of winter) the first ray of sunshine had us literally bounding towards our W face. However, the next day it snowed; we bivouacked at the foot of the face and the forecasts were not at all encouraging. The next morning it was fine, but the face itself, looking at the centre portion, was in such an appallingly snowed-up state that in the present unsettled weather we would not be able to start for ten days at least. For better or worse, we decided to attack the Penhall couloir, well to the left of centre.

After a bivouac 40 m below the Zmutt ridge, heavy clouds covered the sky, and Vincent’s altimeter started climbing madly—conclusion, more bad weather. Facing the slope, we descended 800 m down the couloir—another descent much more trying than the climb had been. In passing, I think this W face of the Matterhorn is an abomination. I shall never go back there. But the Lagarde couloir, perhaps next winter—well, we shall see.

¹ Andrzej Mroz was unfortunately killed during the past summer by a stone-fall on the Aiguille Noire. We are grateful to his widow for this account he left of some of the last of his climbs.



5 *Mont Blanc du Tacul* Photo: C. D. Milner

Then, to cap everything, Laba packed up and left. He is an excellent friend, but unfortunately something of a Jonah—we have started off on innumerable climbs together, but never have we completed them. This time, with nothing achieved, he returned home, and I contemplated the ashes of my 1972 winter season.

15 March saw the beginning of a period of settled fine weather in the Alps. There was no time to lose if we were to salvage something before the season ended—and without a winter season a contemporary alpinist is not considered worth his salt!

Paris is quite a long way from the mountains. However, nowadays geographical distances lose something of their reality, and one finds among Parisian climbers those who regard a round trip of less than 1000 miles or so for a week-end's

climbing as of little consequence, quite easily combined with a worthwhile climb provided the initial approach is not too long. On 17 March, just before the official end of the season, I met the Parisian alpinist Eric Vola, who has this curious attitude to distances. He is a 'young, dynamic executive', recently attached to a firm of computer manufacturers of international repute, and quickly agreed to a 'last chance' winter expedition, with its attendant risk of a delayed return to the office. If one has only two days and a serious climb in view it is as well to be prepared for this eventuality. We had with us Ben Read, a gifted and highly intelligent young American climber; he was the only one who did not have to work and was therefore in no hurry—except in so far as the winter would soon be over.

We left Paris on Friday 17 March at five o'clock in the afternoon, and after six hours of rally-style driving we reached Chamonix. An elegant Burgundy dinner was included in this time-table, because Eric is not only a Parisian alpinist and a dynamic young executive, but also a gourmet. It was during the meal that we decided that, if conditions were good enough, we would attack the Pilier Boccalatte on Mont Blanc du Tacul. Tactical considerations were crucial: the approach was short, the Pilier is ideal for winter climbing, and the descent is straightforward. With so little time available, one could not choose better. As for me, I am no gourmet, but with this happy decision taken during the meal it seemed to have been worth the stop.

Our packs were ready by midnight. Alas, we could not take the first car for the Aiguille du Midi at 8am. It transpired that Eric had no boots, and Ben had no crampons—what is more, he had never worn them before! And there were sundry other items missing which had to be bought. This cost us two hours of our precious time, so we eventually boarded the téléphérique at eleven o'clock.

Our tracks looked rather grotesque, sinking deep into the snow—which was everywhere criss-crossed by the ski tracks of the hundreds of people who had come from many countries to the famous Vallée Blanche. The approach was indeed short, and we decided not to use skis or rackets. We managed, but how much quicker the skiers went, in their gay clothes. Ah, these skiers, these light-hearted skiers alongside us, a group of serious climbers!

Some acquaintances whom we met on the téléphérique told us that there were some climbers on the Pilier Gervasutti of the Tacul; there were two of them, and they must have set off the day before because they had been seen quite high up. As we approached the face, we saw some partly obliterated ski tracks, and then, at the foot, two pairs of skis sticking out of the snow. The sticks were lying a little way off, as if they had been thrown down from above. All this equipment looked as if it had been abandoned—if it had, this added in some degree to the pollution of the environment of the glacier.

We started climbing around 3pm. The tracks of our predecessors were visible here and there. I don't know the Pilier Gervasutti route—I have climbed the Pilier Boccalatte in summer, and since then I have had a slight disdain for the Pilier Gervasutti, which seems to me somewhat artificial in its line. Certainly

it is much more difficult technically, but what is the point of difficulties which can be avoided at any moment by a leap of 20 m to the right on to the Pilier Boccalatte, which is easier and more natural? The two Piliers pass very close to each other, the first fairly easy to climb unaided, while the second requires the use of artificial techniques, including *étriers*. This must be somewhat demoralising to anyone attacking the Gervasutti.

We soon reached the col under the first steep pitch. Just here the route crosses on to the N face of the Pilier. The going here was quite different from the earlier part, as there was a great deal of ice on the rock face, so that progress was slow. By nightfall we had regained the spur, and made our first bivouac. Was it also going to be the last? We were ominously low down compared to our objective, and if Eric was to return on time to his computer firm we must reach the summit by the end of the following morning at latest. I had my doubts as to whether we could manage it—it was, after all, still winter.

After the bivouac we climbed quickly, finding conditions much better for three or four rope-lengths. Notwithstanding our speed, we had time during change-overs to watch the many groups who were attacking the S face of the Pointe Lachenal on this lovely penultimate day of the '72 winter—it was, incidentally, a Sunday. We could hear the voices of the other climbers, and watch new groups arriving one after another at the foot. No doubt the number of people broke all records this winter!

On this part of our route, which had had quite long exposure to the sun, the rock was nearly dry—indeed, it was dry, as is possible here in winter. But, I must repeat, that is not everything. Above were some rope lengths in a shady couloir, which slowed us markedly. Snow and ice abounded. And still there was a part of the route which crossed to the N side—similar to yesterday afternoon. All the fissures were filled with ice. Again the going was easier when we reached the other side, and we made as much speed as possible. But in a patch of ice which was too hard to cut I dug in so fiercely with my excellent ice-hammer 'Made in USA by Yvon Chouinard' that the end broke off as I pulled it out. So—maybe Chouinard's equipment is not, as he claims, the best in the world? In any case, it resulted in a further waste of time as far as we were concerned—clearly we should have to bivouac again. But we wanted to gain as much ground as possible. It is a golden rule of climbing—get as high as you can. The weather was magnificent, but who knows, it could change. We found a sheltered place for our bivouac. It was so cold that Eric completely forgot his computers. Ben was very quiet. He certainly must have been contemplating his winter baptism. Suddenly I remembered my own computers, and I thought ironically that I should not see them tomorrow either.

We were now not far from the summit. Somewhere below us we had seen the remains of the bivouac of the team who were supposedly climbing the Pilier Gervasutti. Several times, we had crossed their tracks. How far had they got?

The final stage was the pleasantest. With a sunny start to the morning we knew we should make it easily, all that remained being a high-level scramble along

a sharp ridge. It seemed almost an anticlimax when we reached the summit towards eleven o'clock. From there, we retraced our steps without difficulty. All the better; our descent would be even less complicated.

The last obstacle before the téléphérique of the Aiguille du Midi—and it is hard to conceive of a more convenient approach or descent route—was a great bergschrund which cut across the entire ice-slope of Mont Blanc du Tacul. It hardly surprised me—I knew it already. In fact, I had already wondered how we should cross it. Normally, in summer, some public spirited climbers put a long ladder in place so that one can descend as from a loft. But now? In fact, provision had been made. Some previous climbers had cut out a mushroom from the ice. All that was necessary was to anchor the rope to it and make a 20-m abseil, 15 m of which were free. Ben was very impressed with the mushroom—this was a completely new idea to him. Being an American climber, he would be familiar with the Yosemite, where there would certainly never be sufficient ice for a mushroom.

In the téléphérique, another problem arising from Ben's participation occurred to me. Apart from the *direttissima* of John Harlin on the N face of the Eiger, Ben had probably achieved one of the stiffest winter climbs in Europe for any American, at any rate during recent years. Ben would probably have liked to know how many times we had climbed the Pilier Boccalatte in winter—but he has returned to America, leaving unresolved this and other problems of American Alpinism.