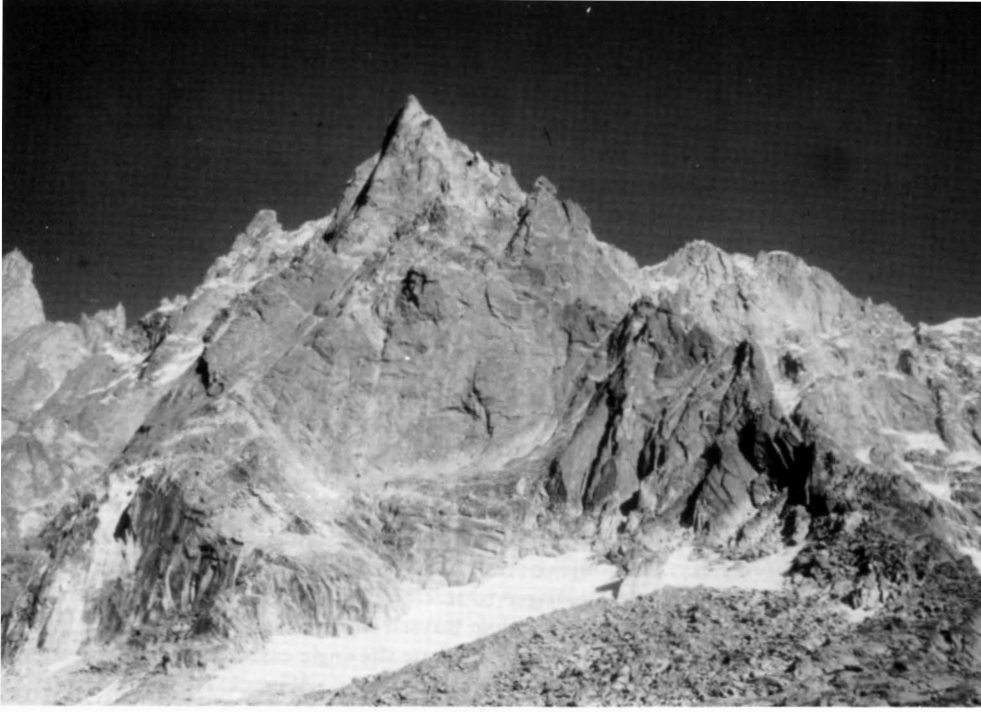

Aiguille du Peigne, N ridge falling towards the left foreground (Photo: C. V. Beechey)

A day on the north ridge of the Peigne

C. V. Beechey

'It's that mouse again', somebody muttered as we were woken punctually at 4am by the sound of the animal rattling one of our polythene food bags. The Alpine mouse had shared our bivouac cave on the Aiguille du Plan for the previous few days and it seemed as if he knew that all alpinists should be up early. He probably wanted his breakfast. Reluctantly Pete Debbage and myself went through the unpleasant ritual of breakfast, mechanically eating our bread and jam and sorting our gear. At 5am we left, taking crampons and one rucksack between us. Our third member Greg Forward stayed in bed with a raging toothache and to keep the mouse away from our food.

As we plodded up the moraine we noticed that the weather was superb, which made a welcome change as the previous 2 days had been bad, only allowing us to do the 'Couzy' route on the Aiguille de l'M and the 'Petits Charmoz traverse' in the rain. The night before, our enthusiasm for the N ridge of the Peigne had been kindled by some Scots who had told us all about it. When we asked them about technical difficulties, all they said was 'Och, it's a wee bit strenuous'. We were soon to find out that this was a typical Scottish understatement. As we got closer we could see the whole of the N ridge rearing upwards. Gaston Rebuffat's description from his book kept going through my mind. 'A remarkable climb of exceptional character . . . it is of very sustained difficulty'. He even graded it TD superior which was harder than anything we had ever done in the Alps. I wondered if it would be too hard but Pete seemed confident and I could not think of a suitable excuse.

The crucial final 200m diedre was first climbed in 1947 after many attempts by various parties but it was not until 1949 that the whole ridge was climbed as the previous parties had used the ordinary route to reach the diedre. We intended to do the complete climb.

Soon we reached the steep snow-slopes beneath the ridge, crossed the bergschrund and reached the rocks. We started climbing at exactly 5am. Many parties dismiss this lower part of the ridge as uninteresting and loose but we found it really enjoyable. It looked and felt more like a face. The route followed the edge of a huge triangular slab and some of the III and IV pitches were superb. It was a pleasure to move really fast for pitch after pitch. A French party overtook us on the left then held us up below a sensational pitch out of the huge groove we had been following. We shivered and cursed in the shadows while the French were in the sun. I found the pitch awkward with the sack on and began to notice the huge drop below.

After a quick bite to eat on the level portion of the ridge we continued across a beautiful red slab with a thin crack running across it for over 100 feet. Easy loose rock led to the terraces below the Chamonix face. At that moment we heard voices and looked up to see a small figure silhouetted against the sky in the 200m diedre. It was the most impressive rock feature we had ever seen and we both felt very small in comparison.

Passing the point of easy return we climbed to the left up loose rock to the foot of the diedre. The first pitch up a long slab looked holdless but in fact turned out to be a really pleasant grade IV pitch with a hidden crack in it. I led on up an easier chimney and our confidence increased as we gained height. We were soon brought down to earth by a grade V+ overhang which Pete led. As I followed up with our bulky sack I managed to drop a bunch of karabiners and a sling which whistled through the air and disappeared. My first thought was how much they cost and my next whether we would need them later. Farther on both of us lost various items of gear from our harnesses, probably because the climb was up steep cracks causing karabiners to open as we jammed every part of our anatomy.

The climbing remained hard and strenuous and I have vivid memories of leading a V+ pitch and jamming my helmet in the crack to keep in balance while I desperately tried to thread a sling before my arms tired. The second man had a hard job on each pitch with the sack which insisted on jamming at the wrong time. Pete led a delicate (for a change) traverse to the right into a 100-foot groove, climbed by jamming. It was a very impressive place and I had a struggle on the traverse with the sack. I solved it by lassooing a peg and forgetting my ethics.

We were both shattered after that pitch, with the familiar dry mouths and churning stomachs. A French party clad in P.A.'s climbed over us and we wished we had brought ours instead of our huge boots. They were soon held up however when a queue started to form on the next pitch. At last I left our cramped stance and started leading yet another V sup. pitch over yet another overhang. A few feet over the roof, I managed to tie myself in knots by clipping the rope into a peg runner between the karabiner on my Whillans harness and the point of attachment of the rope. Anyone who has done this will know that after a few feet upward movement becomes very difficult. As I struggled like a demented monkey that awful feeling of absolute panic came over me

and I thought 'I'm off'. By growing a few inches I managed to clip into a peg and spent a long time recovering and sorting out the ropes.

The number of pegs, wedges and slings seemed to be increasing as we gained height so we were not the only ones to have found it getting progressively harder. Eventually we reached a comfortable stance behind a huge flake and I led the last pitch of V which at least was not as steep or enclosed as the pitches below. With feelings of relief we noted that the guide-book said that 'the difficulties now ease'. I suppose they did but in our tired state the last pitch of IV, with 2 more overhangs took Pete nearly an hour to lead. He managed to get a leg and an arm stuck on the last overhang and as he was out of sight I innocently enquired 'how's it going?' His reply was unprintable.

At last the rope was taken in and I left my little hole in the rock and climbed up. On the top overhang I had to leave another sling which was firmly jammed. I found Pete almost on the summit and we finally reached it at 5.30pm. This meant we had taken $12\frac{1}{2}$ hours which was not good as the guide-book stated a maximum of 10 hours. Our main feeling was one of relief that we would have no more cracks or overhangs to climb.

After a quick bite to eat we started abseiling down the W ridge and about 4 abseils and some scrambling brought us to the col at Pt 3043. On the last abseil we actually found a karabiner which cheered us up. We then started down some loose rubbish aiming for the descent couloir. At the steepening in the gully we abseiled and what we feared most happened, the rope stuck. I volunteered to solo back and free it. This I did and re-sited the abseil leaving my best piton behind. An expensive disaster was about to happen. On the way down I kicked a few loose rocks which fell and chopped through our ropes, leaving a bit of the core and some strands to abseil on. Both ropes were cut, one 30 feet from one end and one in the centre. Cursing our luck I gingerly descended to Pete. We carried on scrambling down a couloir which I later found out was the wrong one. Other parties had obviously made the same mistake as there were abseil loops all over the place.

Suddenly half way down an abseil it was dark. Time seemed to have flown, something that always happens when one is tired. At least in the dark we could not see the frayed ropes that made us wince every time they passed through our descendeurs. We groped in our sacks for the head torches and Pete was telling me we would be able to see for miles with his super long distance model. He went to switch it on and found that it had been on all day. We had to make do with my small torch between us. Two more abseils took us down to the top of the small glacier and we discovered that we had descended the Boeuf couloir instead of the easier Papillons couloir. Our next disaster was about to happen. The ropes stuck again and this time it was impossible to retrieve them as the abseil had been 150ft free over huge chockstones and a bergschund. We had no choice but to leave the ropes and descend without them. We descended the steep glacier which we knew had a large crevasse across it. It was an eerie experience descending the steep snow in the dark as it was impossible to judge distances. Only when we reached the moraine did we relax and immediately felt a huge wave of tiredness creep over us. We staggered on down the moraines, nearly falling over 2 bivouacking Scots who were convinced we were ghosts. Once we had

reached the Plan de l'Aiguille we knew our cave was near, but where? We managed to lose it and tried to shout to Greg to wake him up. Not a sound. Then I found the lake by falling into it. I shouted hoarsely to Pete who was wandering about below me among some rocks and eventually we reached our cave at 2am, about 22 hours after leaving it. We felt absolutely exhausted and dehydrated. After many brews we fell asleep.

At 7am we had the unpleasant task of trying to retrieve our ropes, so we plodded slowly back up towards the glacier. At every corner we were hoping that we would meet a climber with our ropes neatly coiled over his shoulder, but we had no such luck. They were still hanging in the same place. Not relishing the thought of a 45 metre prusik I asked several Japanese and French parties on the 'Vaucher Route' a few metres to our right to retrieve it for us. They all said they would but my faith in other climbers disappeared as they failed to do so. Cursing them we looked at each other and Pete said 'I'm not much good at prusiking'. I started up the good old fashioned way as we had no prusiking devices. Eventually I reached the top and abseiled down from another piton. We coiled our ruined ropes and descended to Chamonix.

In retrospect I do not think either of us had ever lost or ruined so much equipment on a route before but after our second bottle of wine it was all forgotten. Soon we were telling our friends what a great route it was. 'Was it hard?', they asked. 'A wee bit strenuous', we replied with a smile.

The Grossglockner: Its climbs and pioneers

Eric Roberts

The Grossglockner (3798m) is much more than merely the highest mountain in Austria, a position in fact held by the Ortler prior to the annexation of the South Tirol at the end of World War I. Other values account for its long-term standing both in the eyes of the mountaineering fraternity and the general public. It offers the mountaineer a variety of climbs unsurpassed by any other peak in the Eastern Alps; these range from the short normal route to middle grade ridges, two outstanding snow/ice couloirs and intimidating face routes. The mountain presents a magnificent spectacle from any point above the E bank of the Pasterze, the longest and largest glacier in Austria. This famous view is now admired daily by large crowds due to the construction in the 1930s of a high Alpine road with its terminus at the Franz Josefshöhe above the glacier snout. Indeed, this road with its annual frequency figures in excess of one million people has brought the Glockner region to the notice of the general public. This present-day popularization of the Grossglockner contrasts starkly with its late discovery by geographers. An atlas published in 1580 depicts thick forest on the site of the mountain!