

Short of the Folding Stuff

Tom Price

I am not much given to looking back. My photographs, curled at the edges, and my diaries scribbled in pencil in weather-stained notebooks, are stowed away in shoe-boxes under beds and in attics. They come to light only when we move house. But when this summer I toiled up to a col in the Pyrenees, and scanned the new panorama, and saw the Pic du Midi d'Ossau standing there, dominating the sky-line, it set up a train of reminiscence which on and off I have been reflecting upon ever since. It is strange how a mountain, once you have been up it and, so to speak, spent yourself upon it becomes easily recognizable even when viewed from new angles. It is almost 40 years since I was last anywhere near the Pic du Midi d'Ossau yet it seemed almost uncannily familiar.

Not an enormously high mountain, the Pic du Midi. But there are more ways than one of calculating the height and remoteness of a summit. People now get to the Himalaya with less expenditure of time and effort than we put into that approach to the Pyrenees. It was not only that there were no motorways and fewer planes. It was a matter of money.

There is curiously little mention of money in mountain literature. Perhaps it is because the climber leaves the mundane world of work, money and home behind for loftier realms, which have their own realities and harsh imperatives but of a different order. And the early mountaineers seem to have been so well off that money was not a consideration. The question on arrival at a Swiss hotel was not whether there was anywhere cheaper to be had, but whether the entertainment was likely to be adequate to a gentleman's needs. Transport, guides and porters were all hired with an Olympian disregard for cost. Even Robert Louis Stevenson, a mere writer after all, scratching a living by the pen, when he spent a night sleeping out in the Cevennes, found nature's 'green caravanserai' so satisfactory that he left money on the turf, enough for his night's lodging. That has always seemed to me, anxiously meting out my cash to stay as long as possible in the hills, as something akin to blasphemy.

Mountaineers when they have climbed a mountain by the easiest route seek further challenges by imposing various handicaps upon themselves. They choose harder routes, or winter ascents, or solo ascents, or ascents without oxygen, or ascents, if one is to believe McHaffie of Borrowdale, in boxing gloves and roller-skates. Presumably these carry a richer reward in terms of achievement and personal fulfilment.

The same can be said, in a way, for penniless ascents.

Just after the war the most you could take out of the country was £25. To us, however, that was so generous a ceiling as to be beyond our reach. We took £20 each, and subsisted for five weeks in the Pyrenees upon it. This penury led us into some memorable experiences. We never once slept in hired accommodation and so we were not just in the mountains for so many hours a day; we were there day and night, like the other animals. There is nothing like living out in

the hills for bringing one into an intimacy with them. Coming down to a hut or hotel is like going home early from a good party: restful, perhaps, and prudent, but not so much fun. The fact that much of one's time and energy is expended on merely keeping alive and consequently less is available for getting up the peaks is not so great a disadvantage as all that. I think it was Sir Martin Conway who observed that climbers were on the whole too much interested in summits to the neglect of the rest of the mountains. Making brief sorties from under a roof and returning daily to the world of chairs and tables is being *in* the mountains, but not *of* them.

Not that living out is one long delight. On the contrary one often plumbs the depths. But after all, the same can be said of mountaineering generally; for all its moments of splendour, it is largely a catalogue of discomforts, dangers, tribulations and minor ill-health. But living out, one explores new levels of tolerance to the vagaries of the weather and the inconsiderateness of the natural environment. The great outdoors is a draughty place and full of insects, but there is something about it that soothes the savage breast.

On setting out for the Pyrenees, as my diary reminds me, though I had forgotten, I was visited by the usual misgivings about venturing forth from the security of home. My two companions had already set off the day before, to hitch-hike to the Channel. I was to go by train since as the son of a railwayman I could travel for a quarter of the normal fare. So I had a day of fretful waiting before I began my journey. On a clear evening, under a green and blue sky which remained bright long after the twilight had invaded the Liverpool townscape, I lifted my rucksack on my back and set off, wishing I was bound only for Ogwen, or could just go to bed at home. It was my first holiday abroad, and late evening is a sad time for departure. With no jacket, and my warm clothing stowed away in my rucksack, I felt lightly equipped for a long journey, but on the train I was put in the shade by a fellow passenger clad only in shirt, pants and shoes. 'Are you a DBS?' he asks me. 'Not yet', I reply. He is, and drunk. En route from Curaçao to Montreal his only luggage is money and cigarettes. The latter he hands round and spills on the floor with great generosity. Always keen on travelling light I saw in him a new standard to aim for.

With half of one side of the compartment at my disposal I could lie down in the foetal position and so passed a tolerable night. Time was on my side. I drifted across central London and continued quietly, sleepily and sunnily to Newhaven. It was a beautiful fresh breezy summer's day, and before long my two companions appeared. They had been there since the night before and had slept on a hill overlooking the town. On the voyage across the Channel we had lunch in the saloon and made quite an occasion of it, as it was to be our only restaurant meal for weeks.

The long trail south continued, spells of boredom punctuated by bursts of activity. Taking our places in a train was no easy task as the corridors were barely as wide as our loads. Edging along crab-wise it was hard on the spur of the moment to think of the French for 'Kindly retreat, madam, into the compartment as I cannot squeeze myself past you.' We humped our loads across Paris to the Gare d'Austerlitz and boarded the night train for Pau. We sat

up all night on the hard green seats, heads toppling forwards whenever we lapsed into sleep. While the train was hurtling and lurching across France, emitting that occasional demented long-drawn-out screaming sound that used to be such a feature of the SNCF rapides, one could drift into a state of complaisant torpor and pleasant waking dreams, soothed by a feeling of progress, but the stops were an agony of impatience and discomfort.

The night passed and at eight in the morning we alighted at Pau. Pau has a fine esplanade rather like a seaside promenade, but instead of the sea it looks out over a broad landscape backed by the Pyrenees. Prominent on the skyline we saw a splendid jagged peak, the Pic du Midi d'Ossau. It was the first we had heard of it. Our background reading for this trip had been an atlas and Hilaire Belloc's poem about the fleas that tease in the High Pyrenees and the wine that tasted of the tar. But we now recognized it as what we had come all this way for. In the town we found a mountain equipment shop and there bought a Guide Ledormeur to the Pyrenees. Its maps were sketch-maps without contours, ridges and spurs being indicated by thick black lines. We had no map and this book became our sole source of topographical information.

We had been led to believe that food rationing was in force in France, though what we did not know was that no-one took any notice of it. We went to great lengths to find the appropriate office for obtaining ration cards. The man immediately in front of us at the *guichet* was having a passionate row with the woman behind the counter. She flew into a violent temper, and when the interview came to an end and he went out giving the door a slam that brought bits of plaster down off the ceiling, she thumped the counter and hurled abuse after him. She would have scant patience with us, we thought, with our halting French. Yet she turned to us with the utmost charm and urbanity, pulse normal, blood pressure a placid 120/80. I made up my mind that I would learn how to do that.

On the way back to the station we bought several feet of French bread, two bottles of red wine and a bag of peaches so ripe that they soaked through the paper and stuck our fingers together. By the time we boarded the local train with wooden seats we were getting very tired, and hungry, and hot, but spirits revived when we tucked into the bread and peaches, and passed round one of the bottles; and they soared when the other bottle, falling over on the luggage rack, exploded like a bomb and sent down a purple rain over Ken's head and shoulders.

At Laruns the noonday sun smote us like a hammer. From the dusty station an avenue led up a hill for half a kilometre to the village square. There was a fountain in the middle of it and by the time we reached it we were ready to drink it dry. The village lay stunned and torpid in the heat but life stirred faintly behind the bar of the Hotel des Touristes, and we laid out some precious francs for a pot of tea.

The weight of our packs was now a matter of immediate and pressing concern in that, now it came to the crunch, we could not carry them any distance. It was not that they were full of climbing equipment, most of which had not yet been invented, nor were they full of camping gear, for our tent was from a cheap offer in a newspaper, suitable for a child in a back garden, and we had brought

it not to sleep in but to house our belongings while we were up in the mountains. What they were full of was food, and particularly coffee beans. We had believed post-war France to be seriously short of coffee, having naïvely accepted what was said in the newspapers, and in the hope of making a killing we had gone to Cooper's, an upmarket grocer in Liverpool, and bought a huge quantity of the cheapest coffee beans available. So our rucksacks bulged with ex-army biscuits, dried bananas, compressed dates, oatmeal, sugar and the like, but above all, coffee beans. Many of these beans had burst their paper bags and were running loose throughout our equipment.

The faint suspicion with which we were at first received in the bar of the Hotel des Touristes turned gradually to a fascinated interest as we unloaded our rucksacks on the floor and tried to gather up our stock of coffee beans. The patron kindly provided new paper bags. By some sort of telepathic communication the entrepreneurs of the village homed in on us. There was a good deal of amiable discussion but the consensus was that *roasted* beans were what everyone wanted. Green beans got the thumbs down. The auction, consequently, was a social success rather than a financial one, but we came away with fifteen hundred francs profit and a tumbler or two of the patron's red wine. There is nothing like trade between the great nations of the world for promoting international understanding and co-operation. Not only had we lightened our loads but had also been promised a lift up the valley in a lorry at some unspecified time in the late afternoon, from a nearby road junction.

Waiting for that lorry I count as one of the most delightful experiences of my mountaineering life. It was a pleasant cross-roads, with deep grass full of wild flowers and humming with insects of the more benign sort, under a generous, baking sun. We had our doubts about whether the lorry would indeed arrive, but we did not greatly care. Two girls came by and lingered with us, as though they too had all the time in the world. We had no past and no future, and the present was limitless.

When the lorry did come it was all the more pleasant a surprise for we had given it up. It was loaded with roof-tiles packed in straw, and on top of the load sat three picturesque characters whom we took to be drunken brigands but who were in fact drunken Portuguese workmen returning from a day off and singing, not altogether tunelessly. The afternoon was turning into a golden evening. The road climbed through a narrow defile, crossing from side to side of the torrent, tunnelling through crags and traversing tree-clad precipices. We passed through Eaux Chaudes, a village crammed in the narrows, and finally came out into a strath from which we caught occasional glimpses of our mountain, a formidable volcanic plug with almost vertical sides, the sort of mountain a child might draw from imagination.

Our lift brought us to Gabas. We walked straight through the village and made camp on the first bit of level ground we could find. This was at the bottom of a very steep field, hemmed in by trees and crags, and poised about 10m above a river-bed accessible only by a difficult rock climb. Everywhere there was the sound of cowbells. It was getting dark. We made a good fire, and after a frugal meal of biscuits, dried bananas and tea, we crawled thankfully into our sleeping bags close to the blaze.

'Night is a dead, monotonous period under a roof, but in the open world it passes lightly, with its stars and dews and perfumes.' So said old Stevenson, and there is some truth in it. Certainly it was an improvement on the last two nights which I had spent in railway carriages. Dreams and reality mingled together. At first it was too hot to sleep, later too cold. My weary mind was visited by romantic Stevensonian impressions of fire-light, a large moon, bright stars. Later there was mist swirling among the trees and I groaned and buried my head in my bag.

In the morning Norman made a foray into the village and returned with a green bottle full of milk. He was proving very useful on the public relations front, what with his uninhibited French and his capacity for getting a favourable response, from girls particularly, to openings which, if I had made them, would have earned me a thick ear. Ken and I, if pressed, would have had to say that Norman did not have the same commitment to climbing as we had. He was known to have expressed the view, for example, that a holiday should include a certain amount of enjoyment and indulgence. Over the porridge he argued strongly for a visit to the village inn, for diplomatic reasons as well as to further his acquaintance with the landlord's daughter. A glass of wine he said was not much to pay in exchange for all kinds of local information and goodwill.

At the inn the patron talked readily about the Pic du Midi. We made a casual mention of a good route on the N face. 'La Face Nord' he exclaimed sonorously, and held us with a glittering eye. 'Sit down, monsieur,' says Norman, and we make room for him on the new red leather settee.

'It was on October the 12th, 1923,' he says. 'a young Englishman, a fine strong type, an experienced alpinist, you understand, who called himself Monsieur Pop . . . ' and he tells a graphic tale of a confident solo climber attempting the N face and failing to re-appear; of the efforts to find him; of the arrival of his family from England; of the summoning of first class guides from Switzerland; and of what they found of him . . . 'A small piece, you understand, messieurs, as big as that,' says the inn-keeper, picking up a glass. No, we shall surely kill ourselves if we go on the N face *sans guide*.

It was only years later that I realised that Monsieur Pop was in fact that distinguished young climber and AC member Hugh Rose Pope.

Young climbers are not disposed to learn from the misfortunes of other people, and still less inclined to heed the advice of non-climbers, but one thing the innkeeper said stuck in our minds. There were some soldiers camping at Bious Artigues, and they knew the mountain well. We should go and talk to them.

After lunch — last of the army biscuits — we left our gear at the camp and walked up a steep side-valley through woods. Breasting a final slope we came out quite suddenly upon a broad high pasture ringed by wooded summits and dominated by the high rock towers of the Pic du Midi d'Ossau. Slightly right of centre of this delectable meadow stood three small marquees, with the Tricolour waving above them. It was a splendid and unforgettable sight, and it will never be seen again as the whole place now lies at the bottom of the artificial Lac de Bious Artigues.

The camp belonged to a small detachment of *Chasseurs Alpins*, most of whom

were away on a parachuting exercise. We chatted about climbing to two slim bronzed youths stripped to the waist, and made mention of the N face. They took us to a practice rock in the woods nearby and we did various boulder problems and hand traverses. The corporal, Jean, said he knew the N face climb and would go with us if the lieutenant agreed. This excursion to the boulders had been to give us the once-over. On getting back to the tents we found the lieutenant had returned, a handsome and voluble Basque who received us formally but with great warmth and charm. We reclined in the sun on a large sheet of canvas, and smoked and talked. We seemed to have found our way into a delightful upland world where friendliness and liberality held sway. It was hardly with surprise that we heard the officer suggest that we go down to Gabas, return immediately with a few necessities, spend the night in the camp, and climb the peak the next morning. 'Do not bring any blankets,' he says with a courteous sweep of the hand. 'We have enough. You are welcome to our simple soldier's fare of soup and potatoes. But bring utensils.' So we run downhill again in a state of great excitement, cram food and clothing for three into one rucksack, leave the other two at the inn, and hasten back to Bious Artigues.

It is Saturday and some week-end climbers have in the meantime joined the soldiers; two hard men, clanking with ironmongery, a middle-aged extrovert held in much respect by the others — '*très fort, très très fort*' we are assured in earnest asides by the soldiers — and a lively blonde in blue pants and scarlet anorak. We shake hands. The conversation flashes about our heads like a volley-ball which we manage only occasionally to intercept.

It is now quite late and the summer evenings are shorter in these latitudes than at home. The lieutenant explains that he has a mess table in the tent but thinks it more agreeable to have dinner round the camp fire. The fire, which has been smouldering all day, is now built up into a splendid blaze and blankets spread all round it. On these we take our places with some decorum, though the party very soon becomes informal and voluble. Darkness falls as the meal progresses, and the later 'courses' are mysterious and delicious, particularly a rich, creamy, ambrosial substance piled high on slices of iron-hard rye bread which we later learn is made from cheese 'au petit lait' mixed with a tin of Lyle's Golden Syrup which we have contributed. The whole is enriched by copious draughts of 'le bon pinard', army issue, from a huge aluminium flask; the absence of the main body of the troops has created a surplus. It is a meal fit for the gods, and the good company, the great fire, and the magnificent towering face of the Pic du Midi, lit by a moon which has not yet itself come into view, and Venus shining brightly to the right, make this an evening never to be forgotten. Norman is in great form, and the climbers and soldiers all appear to be wags. There is an abundance of conversation on several planes, climbing talk, comparisons of prices, views on religion and politics, leg-pulling and vulgarity. We have seen today for the first time a new kind of climbing boot with a rubber sole called Vibram. The French men laugh at our nails and say that they are only for old men with long grey beards. The evening goes on and on, and none of us would miss it for the world, but I do mention to the lieutenant our projected early start next day. 'Ah,' he says, 'but it is very

"sympathique" by the fire,' and he is perfectly right. We finally turn in well after midnight, in a tent whose middle is a big shallow trough full of straw. The very strong mountaineer, M. Arruyeux, who has already climbed the Pic du Midi 41 times, is not ready for bed even now, and provides a largely unintelligible cabaret show with candles for footlights and a hand-generated torch for spotlight. Impossible to believe he intends to climb anything next day. Finally we quieten down, or rather move into the snoring mode, and I spend a very short night with long dreams. In the middle of it one of the hard men asks me the time, and he and his friend move stealthily about in the clammy comfortless dark. Some-one drops what sounds like a hundredweight of old iron and the blonde wakes up and says something with a tolerant laugh.

At daylight we drink a little cold earthy coffee, eat some bread and cheese, and set off with the corporal, our soldier guide, through steep dense woods. As the sun gets up the going becomes extremely hard. We arrive at the foot of the rocks at about 9am, 'a little late,' says the corporal. Anyone who feels he cannot do the climb, he adds, should say so now, for he is not prepared to descend from half way up. We all feel unfit but hold our peace.

We rope up on a short, stout Army rope. It is more an assertion of the principle 'One for all and all for one', than a protection, for it is much too short for proper rope technique. The climbing is continuous and open and a bit like climbing on Lliwedd. As last man I spend every moment when not actually climbing looking anxiously for something to belay on. It seems logical, and to some degree takes my mind off the stones that keep spinning down from above. After a few hundred metres we reach an airy ledge at the top of our buttress, and eat some dried bananas and sugar, then make an upward traverse right, over beautiful slabs giving very enjoyable climbing, into an amphitheatre. We stop at a snow patch and suck some of it avidly. The corporal wraps a big lump in a cloth for use later on. Ken and I take turns with the rucksack and find it makes us breathless.

Easy rocks lead to a gap between a pinnacle and the main face, which beetles above us alarmingly. From here we descend into an astonishing rock cwm whose back-wall is a huge vertical cliff of yellowed rock, and over whose lip is another precipice. Opposite, a great stone shoot, very deep and narrow, leads up to another gap. From the depths we suddenly hear the strains of 'Hi yi yippie yippie yi' and make out the two hard men of the night before, dwarfed to leprechaun size by their immense surroundings. 'She'll be coming round the mountain' was the song they liked best in our repertoire at the camp fire.

Our route still trends rightwards and eventually an easy but tremendously exposed edge is crossed with a great vertical drop on the right and we attain the Fourche, the gap between the Grand Pic and the Petit Pic. It is time for more sugar, helped down by the corporal's snow. There is still a long way to go, but apart from a rather confusing section where a large rock-fall has occurred it is easy climbing. Moving all together makes for greater breathlessness, and the rocks, now in full sun, radiate a noon-day heat. We reach the summit at three.

We bask for an hour among the sardine tins, rich men, our minds still trying to encompass the splendours of the N face, our bodies screaming quietly for water. There is a tin full of scraps of paper bearing the names of climbers. We

add ours, giving the corporal his full title, Jean Miaille, *caporal 1^o classe*, and about ten letters denoting his army status. It is his sixth ascent.

On descending the *voie normale* we are received with applause by the other climbers who are sitting by a spring. The water brings about a miraculous improvement to our health, the equivalent, say, of a good night's sleep, and we continue in company with the others through a long green valley, about an hour's walk, and back to the soldiers' camp. No sooner do we get into camp than the lieutenant orders Jean to put on a beret and assist with the simple ceremony of hauling down the colours. We stand to attention, feeling like ambassadors.

We wash and drink. The climbers depart. We have a frugal Army meal off a table of branches and pine-fronds. 'Perhaps you would like to sleep' suggests the lieutenant, 'or shall we sit a little at the fire?' But we are still on a high and sleep is far from our thoughts. We liven up the fire, and all hands join in the French custom of jumping through it. Straw is fetched and a high sheet of flame produced and we leap through that too. The fire attracts some other campers and they join us sitting on the circle of blankets, a woman with two daughters and two or three lads. We sing songs, have French ones sung back to us, 'le bon pinard' circulates in the bottomless gourd, the girls tear our heart-strings with their harmonising of 'Au clair de la lune', and one wonders if the dark one, dimly seen through the blaze, can really be as pretty as she looks. The corporal's only English is 'OK boy', and the lieutenant's is confined to the phrase 'the food of a mighty race' taken from the carton of *Scott's Porage Oats*, but conversation flourishes nonetheless. Finally, after the company has dispersed with farewells and handshakes, I am left by the dying fire with the lieutenant, hopelessly waiting for tea-water to boil, and replying in worse and worse French to his political and religious views. I turn in very weary.

So that was the beginning of our vagabondage in the Pyrenees with many a night *à la belle étoile* and several undignified flights for cover in thunderstorms. We were to subsist largely on vegetable stews enriched by a substance from the butcher's called *matiere grasse*, and as we grew more expert our cooking fires were to become smaller and smaller. We were to climb the Mur de la Cascade at Gavarnie, and the Mont Perdu, and seek shelter in the wretched hovel of the Refuge de Tuqueroye. We were to have the meal of a lifetime at Pierrefitte Nestalas, its sauce the accumulated hunger of a month out of doors. Norman was to end up between the starched linen sheets of a hospital bed, minus his appendix, tended by nurses much intrigued by his surname, Wildblood, while Ken and I slept under bridges, and on a heap of sand in a builder's yard, and the verandah of a little *estaminet* in a wood, waiting for visiting time. Our life had its squalid moments, but for the most part we were lifted above it by the beauty and sublimity of the mountains. The stony uplands were washed and sunbleached to an austere cleanliness. The alpine glades and meadows were full of purple irises, harebells, gentians, speedwell, vetches, cornflowers, clovers and orchids. We found bilberries and raspberries, and liquorice roots to chew. I suppose we saw comparatively few summit cairns but we had a thorough acquaintance with lizards, flies, beetles, moths, ants, grasshoppers, butterflies and dragonflies. And clear running water was our constant delight.

Some day I think I must make a trip to the Lac de Bious Artigues, and try and recall once again the drowned meadow with the tents and the Tricolour waving over them, and Lieutenant Jaureche, dreamer and thinker cast in the rôle of man of action; and Jean Miaille, corporal first class, neat, compact, tough, efficient; and Blanc, the cook, friendly and 'sympathique' without ever smiling; and Perasseux, rough and wild with a bucolic wit; and of course the admiral's daughters who sang so well in harmony.

How many such delectable places have been drowned by reservoirs, I wonder. Perhaps, after all, it would be a better idea not to go back.

