The Alps in the 1950s

HAMISH NICOL

(*Plates 45–48*)

When I first saw the Alps in July 1949, I nearly fell off the train with excitement. We were on the little rack railway which goes from St Gervais to Chamonix on the last stage of a two-day journey from London. Suddenly the train turned a corner at Les Houches and the whole North face of Mont Blanc came into view, so close that you could almost touch it. The seracs of the Bossons glacier seemed to tumble and sparkle in the sun. I had never seen anything like it before. I jumped from coach to coach on the rattling train, shouted for joy, tried to climb on the roof to get a better look, and couldn't understand why all the other passengers were not doing the same. I was just 20 years old.

Malcolm Slesser and I had travelled slowly by train to Newhaven, by boat to Dieppe, and then overnight across France, sitting bolt upright all the way, on the hard seats of the SNCF. Dan Stewart met us in Chamonix where we spent a frenzied hour buying food and a little equipment, not forgetting that candle lanterns were required on alpine glaciers at night. It does seem incredible that little aluminium candle lanterns were still being sold to gullible alpinists in 1949, long after the invention of the electric torch. The way into the mountains, then as now, was by way of the Montenvers rack railway. This was a coal-fired steam train pushing little carriages, very like the Snowdon mountain railway.

At 4.30am the next day the three of us set off to climb the Grands Charmoz. We reached the summit at 3pm in our tricouni-nailed boots and with our hemp ropes, not returning to Montenvers till about 6pm. I was completely exhausted by my first alpine climb. For the next two weeks we rushed about all over the Chamonix Alps, climbing non-stop but attempting only the easiest routes, such as the Géant by its fixed ropes. There did not seem to be any English people about, but one American spoke to us; he was attached to a guide. Every so often we would descend to Chamonix to buy food and, perhaps, to eat a decent meal. You could eat in Chamonix for 650 (old) francs, which was about 13 shillings (65p). This was pretty expensive by our standards. As a National Service second lieutenant in the Army, I received 13 shillings a day.

My first season in the Alps had been an enormous success for me, though by present-day standards it was not impressive. We were intensely parochial and had no idea about what, if anything, other British climbers were doing. There were then no monthly climbing glossies full of advertisements. In 1949 there were in fact only two shops in the United Kingdom which specialized in mountaineering equipment: Robert Lawrie in London, and Brighams in Manchester.

At this period, continental climbers were years ahead of us. The 1950 *Climbers' Club Journal* contained a description by Bernard Pierre of his second ascent of the W face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey, with the guide Gaston Rébuffat, in 1949. The first ascent had been made in 1939 by the Italian climbers Ratti and Vitali. Bernard Pierre was a top French amateur who spoke good English and was often seen in London. His lectures to the Alpine Club in the post-war period must have been partly responsible for the surge in British activity which took place from 1950 onwards.

Tom Bourdillon would have heard these lectures, and it was he who took up the challenge. He ran the Oxford University Mountaineering Club meet at the Wayfarer's hut RLH in Langdale in December 1949, and this is where we first climbed together. As meet leader he was responsible for the food, which consisted of a very good supply of porridge and jam, purchased in the grocer's shop at Chapel Stile which, I am happy to say, is still in business. To my surprise and delight, he invited me to climb with him in the Alps in 1950. We teamed up with Dick Viney and John Saxby, who were old friends of Tom's.

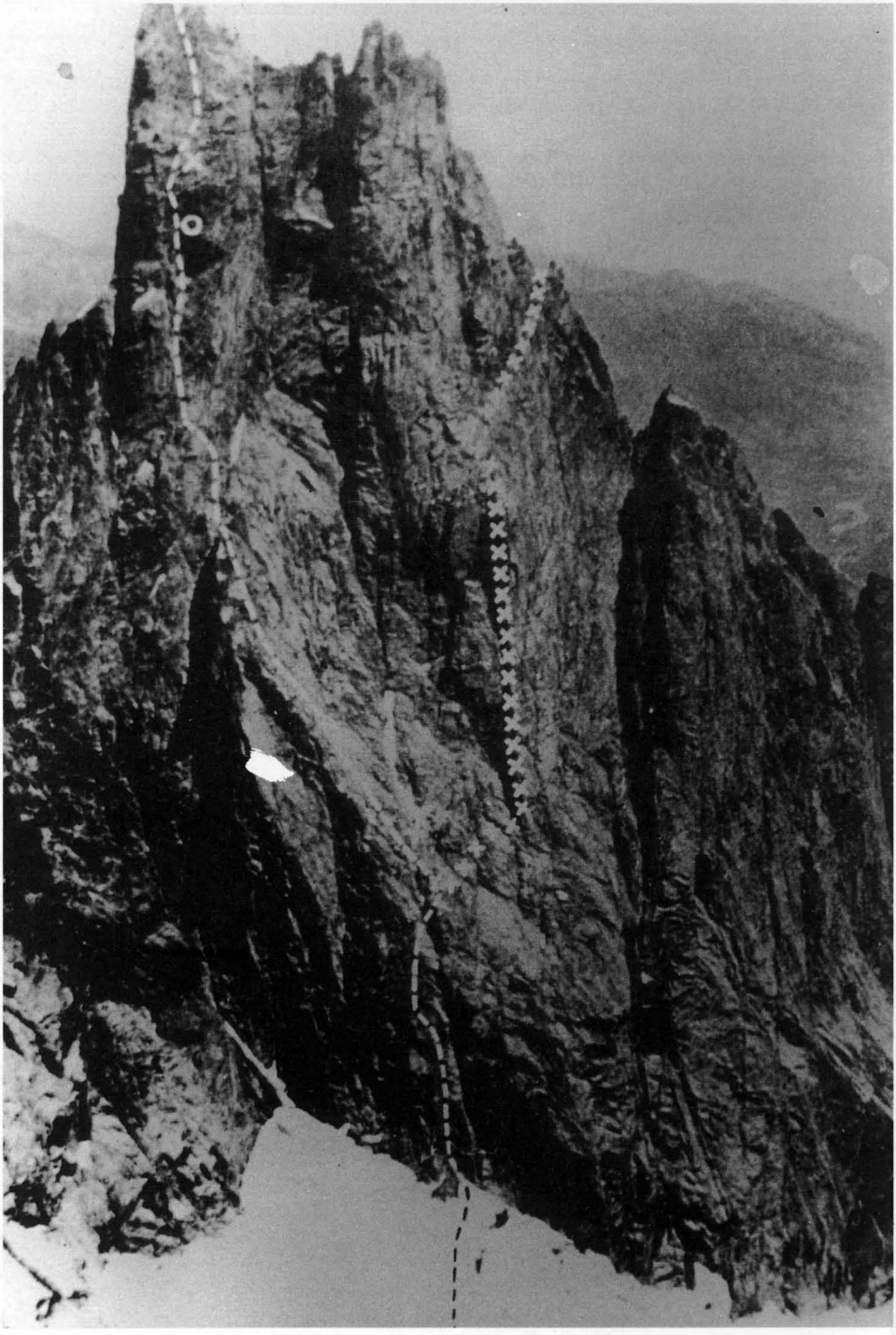
At that time nobody in England knew anything about artificial climbing using pitons and rope ladders, or, if they did, we had not met them. The official Alpine Club view was that such activities were not really sporting or 'British', and Colonel Strutt in his editorials in the *Alpine Journal* in the 1930s had roundly condemned them. High-standard rock climbing had been going on in the Dolomites for many years, and Cassin had climbed the N face of the Cima Ovest de Lavaredo in 1935. But Tom and I had to teach ourselves how to do it from square one, and we learned the techniques by practising on a tree in his garden in Quainton, Bucks. Tom had inserted wrought-iron bars at suitable intervals into the tree's trunk, and from these we suspended our rudimentary ladders, or étriers. It was rather fun.

Tom and I left Oxford on 10 July 1950, and arrived in Chamonix two days later, by train. That night we walked up to the Albert Premier hut, groaning under enormous rucksacks full of pitons and food. Tom had decided that our first climb would be the W face of the Aiguille Purtscheller, by the Rébuffat route, 200m, *Très Difficile*. This was almost certainly the first TD climb done by a British party in the Western Alps. It had two or three very hard pitches, of which two were artificial pitches for our pitons and ladders. We got up in 4½ hours, and down again by abseiling, in a hailstorm, back to the hut. Two days later Viney and Saxby arrived at Montenvers. At first the weather was poor. By 21 July it cleared, and we went up to the Envers des Aiguilles hut to climb the Ryan-Lochmatter ridge of the Plan on the next day. This amazing route had been climbed by Ryan with his guides in 1906. It was my first big alpine lead, and it was magnificent. There are many pitches of grades 3, 4 and 5, and the bergschrund at the start of the climb can be quite difficult to cross. It is interesting that the Oxford climbers John Hoyland and Paul Wand planned to climb this route in their 1934 season. These two climbers, two of the best from Oxford University in the 1930s, climbed the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon as their first alpine climb, but a few days later they were both killed on their way to the Innominata ridge of Mont Blanc. It is possible that this accident delayed the development of British alpinism for many years.

We returned to Chamonix very pleased with ourselves, spent a day shopping and on 25 July Tom and I walked from Montenvers to the foot of the N face of the Dru, and bivouacked on the rognon with our backs to the huge and frightening cliff. It was my first bivouac, and I will never forget the night we spent huddled together on the cold rock. The sky was clear and star-lit, and the town of Chamonix was a blaze of lights at our feet. Our plan was to leave the sleeping-bags there and climb over to the Charpoua hut where our friends would be waiting for us. At that time the N face of the Dru had a tremendous reputation. It was first climbed in 1935, and by 1949 there had been something like 30 or 35 ascents. Tom and I left the bivouac at 5am the next day, carrying a double nylon rope, a spare rope for hauling up the rucksacks and wearing vibram-soled boots. My ideas had had a good shaking up since 1949. We had some rope slings, some karabiners, a few pitons, a hammer each, one ice axe and one pair of crampons. Luckily the rock was dry and in perfect condition. We hardly noticed the Fissure Lambert, which is regarded as the first major difficulty. I had certainly led part of it before I realized what it was. When we got to the hard bit, the Fissure Allain, there was no argument: we climbed the Fissure Martinetti which is a lot easier, and a much more sensible way. The last 150m were steep and covered in verglas, which made them rather serious. The ascent lasted 8½ hours. Our earlier plan to traverse over the Grand Dru came to nothing. There was a thick mist and the weather looked bad. Instead we descended the Petit Dru by a long series of tedious and difficult abseils. Viney and Saxby were waiting for us in the Charpoua hut and gave us a tremendous welcome.

I was all for doing another climb, but my companions would have none of it. We must return to Chamonix and have a celebration. Viney and Saxby had to return home, leaving Tom and me on our own for the last week. Richard Myer joined us for the Aiguille de Roc-Grépon traverse. This involved a 32m abseil from the summit of the Roc, all of it overhanging and very uncomfortable using the classical trouser-friction technique. The day did not end well. Our return to the tree-line just above Chamonix coincided with pitch darkness and we got hopelessly lost in the woods, tracking to and fro without torches, till we staggered into the town at midnight and had supper in a night-club, to the amazement of the other people who were dancing.

My 1951 season started off with the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon, with Johnnie Sims. This climb had by then become very popular. Westmacott and Rawlinson had done it in 1950, as had Godfrey Francis and McNaught-Davis. 1951 was not a good year, but in 1952 Dan Stewart and I had tremendous plans. We warmed up on the Aiguille Mummery by its SW face, then walked over to the Leschaux hut which was empty apart from ourselves and a rather attractive *gardienne*. '*Que vous êtes beau!*' she cried, seeing Dan coming in through the door. I expect she was lonely, and Dan had a certain rugged Scottish charm. Much might have come of this encounter, had it not been for our plan to leave early next morning to attempt the Hirondelles ridge of the Grandes Jorasses. Unfortunately this failed to come off owing to a silly route-finding error on the Hirondelles col. Two days later we climbed the Innominata ridge of Mont Blanc and were back in Chamonix again after a



45. W face of Aiguille Noire de Peuterey 1955. Ratti-Vitali on L. Boccalatte on R. (T D Bourdillon) (p 85)

17-hour day. After a day of rest we climbed to the Envers des Aiguilles hut, aiming for the E ridge of the Crocodile. We were off before dawn and by about 5am had reached a point high on the glacier where it is quite steep. Dan was leading, and it was here that the accident took place. I saw it happening quite clearly. He was carrying too many coils of rope, and his right cramponned foot caught in one of the coils. He tripped and fell and within a second he was going like a train. There was nothing I could do to stop him. Together we fell down the entire length of the Envers des Aiguilles glacier. The bottom of this glacier is a mass of jumbled seracs and huge crevasses where it topples over and tumbles into the Mer de Glace. Both of us could easily have been killed. What happened was an amazing piece of luck. I shot into one of the larger crevasses, and Dan went over the top of it: the rope held. Dan was completely uninjured, and proceeded to pull me out. This was not easy as I was semi-conscious and had a broken jaw, and a very painful back.

Having pulled me out of the crevasse, Dan frog-marched me to the hut. There was no one else there, it was unguarded, and was still in fact under construction. Dan set off on his own down to Chamonix, and two days later he returned with a rescue party from the *Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix*. I was put in a carrying stretcher, like a parcel, and humped unceremoniously down to the Chamonix hospital. My stay in this establishment was not pleasant. I was X-rayed, and had my temperature taken twice daily *per rectum*. Apart from this, I was neither fed nor attended to. They must have felt that with a broken jaw I could eat nothing. My friends from the Chalet Biolay came to see me every day, and smuggled in tubes of condensed milk (*Lait Mont Blanc*) which I was able to force between my jaws. I think it was Dave Thomas who eventually decided that this could not go on. I was flown back from Geneva by plane, and within three hours of my arrival in London had had my jaw set and wired in the Middlesex Hospital.

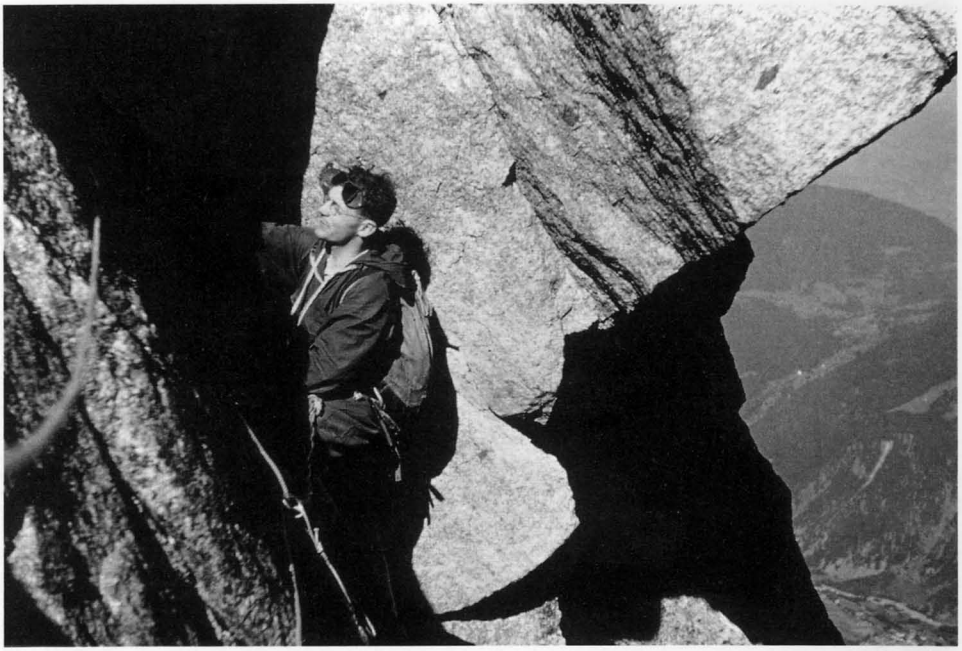
For me this episode was a disaster. A successful 1952 season would have strengthened my claims for a place on the Mount Everest expedition of 1953. As it was, I could not possibly be considered, having suffered two falls in quick succession, one on Zero Gully of Ben Nevis with Anthony Rawlinson in 1951, and now this. The fact that Dan's slip was an act of uncharacteristic though inexcusable incompetence cut no ice with the selectors. I was written off as dangerous, and given a place as a reserve.

Our ascent of the N face of the Dru in 1950 had a marked effect on British alpinism, and in the next two or three years climbers from Oxford and Cambridge Universities continued to raise the standard. Cym and Nancy Smith from Cambridge were already doing big things in 1950, but soon after Cym was killed in a motor-cycle accident. By 1952 Oxford and Cambridge were sharing the honours. In 1951 Ian McNaught-Davis appeared on the scene with Godfrey Francis, an Oxford geologist who had defected to Cambridge. Mac was from Manchester, and added his strength to the Cambridge teams. In 1951 he climbed the Ryan route on the Plan with Roger Chorley (Cambridge) and Tony Moulam. This was one of Moulam's rare appearances in the Alps at that time. Dave Fisher and George Band repeated the Roc-Grépon traverse in 1951, but the big season for Cambridge climbers was 1952. Band and Chorley began by

hacking out an ice cave on Monte Rosa. This was paid employment from which, in odd moments, they climbed the Cresta di Santa Caterina of the Nordend and did the Liskamm-Castor-Pollux traverse; then, moving over to Chamonix, they climbed the N ridge of the Peigne (with Arthur Dolphin and McNaught-Davis), and the S ridge of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey (with Francis and Wrangham). Streetly and Band climbed the N ridge of the Dent Blanche, and the Tronchey ridge of the Grandes Jorasses was climbed in 1953 by Viney, Rawlinson, Wrangham, Harris and Jones.

But it would not be true to say that it was all Oxford and Cambridge in those years. Neil Mather climbed the Peuterey ridge with McNaught-Davis in 1952, and the Ryan route with Pigott in 1953. Then, in 1954, the Oxbridge dominance came to an abrupt end, when the Rock and Ice Club appeared in Chamonix for the second time. Joe Brown and Don Whillans climbed the celebrated W face of the Dru in two days in August 1954. This was a third ascent. In the same year they made an important first ascent on the W face of the Blaitière. This contained two pitches of Grade 6, one of which was the famous 'Fissure Brown'. British climbers had at last arrived in the post-war Alps.

My 1953 season was a great success. Once again I went out by train, carrying a good supply of Viking nylon ropes which one could sell or barter in Chamonix. My first companion was Michael Cunnington, also from Balliol College, Oxford. After an easy climb on the Argentière I became progressively more ill with a raging sore throat. The doctor in Chamonix, Dr Bousquet, seemed quite concerned. '*Vous couchez sur la paille?*' he enquired anxiously. We all stayed in the French Alpine Club refuge in those days. It was called the Biolay, was extremely primitive, and had sleeping quarters on straw upstairs and a few tables and a cooking area downstairs, rather too near the villainous hole in the ground which passed as a toilet. On 17 July Michael Cunnington and I walked up to the Requin hut in poor weather, and we remained there for three days during which it got steadily worse. By the 19th there was nobody else left in the hut. At midday the weather cleared miraculously and, in a foot or two of new snow, we plodded up to the bivouac hut on the Col de la Fourche, carrying all that was left of the food – a tin of pemmican and a few biscuits. At the Fourche hut I wedged the petrol stove in a crack between the floor-boards, and propped a billy-can across it, balanced on two stones. The inevitable happened: the stove fell over, and our precious pemmican flowed into a gutter between the floor-boards, where we had to fall upon it with our spoons before it all disappeared. At 1.45am the next morning Michael and I set off for the Old Brenva route on Mont Blanc. Thanks to the recent snowfalls, there was a foot of soft avalanchy snow over ice on the entire upper half of the Old Brenva above the ice arête. It went on endlessly, and I lost all count of time. We reached the summit of Mont Blanc at 5pm and descended in a trance of fatigue, hunger and thirst to the Goûter hut. This hut is well above the snow-line, and all water has to be melted from snow by the guardian, so it was a very thirsty night. The next day at the terminus of the mountain railway called Mont Lachat, not far below the hut, a trainful of French tourists was disembarking. They each had their picnic hampers and looked well fed. We shamelessly begged food from them – peaches, pears and sandwiches – then sat down behind a stone and scoffed the lot.



46. H G Nicol on N ridge of Peigne 1955. (T D Bourdillon) (p 85)



47. T D Bourdillon on E face of Capucin 1955. (H G Nicol) (p 85)

It did not take very long to recover from all this in Chamonix and next day I was off with Alan Blackshaw to the forester's hut in the woods near Montenvers. We climbed the Pointe Albert by its W face; this was the first *extrêmement difficile* (ED) climbed by a British party in the Western Alps. It was one of the new post-war ED rock-climbs, and had been first climbed in 1945. Ours must have been one of the earlier re-ascents.

On 25 July Alan Blackshaw and I walked up to the Torino hut and heard that Arthur Dolphin had been killed. He was climbing on the Dent du Géant, and had met his death on the easy rocks below the summit-spire. He was one of the best-known English rock-climbers of the day, the author of innumerable first ascents in the Lake District, including the well-known Kipling Grooves on Gimmer. Two days later Alan and I set off to attempt the S ridge of the Aiguille Noire, but Alan fell ill on the lower rocks of the mountain and was forced to turn back. At this point Pat Vaughan arrived in the Noire hut with a very large party, including Gwen and Dennis Greenald, Dick Tomes and Geof Milwood. The S ridge of the Noire had been climbed in 1930 by K Brendel and H Schaller, and was one of the most popular rock-climbs on Mont Blanc. Normally one had to bivouac somewhere on the ascent or descent. Next day Pat and I set off so fast that the others soon dropped behind, and we did not see them again that day. We climbed the whole ridge in 10½ hours and were back in the hut by 10pm. The others got back to the Noire hut two days later, just as a search party was setting out to look for them.

For six days the weather was bad, and Alan had to go home. On 3 August I met Ted Wrangham, a noted Cambridge alpinist, at the Torino hut and we decided to join forces. I was once again living on *Lait Mont Blanc*, this time because an impacted wisdom tooth made it impossible for me to open my mouth. Ted wanted to climb the NW ridge of the Grands Charmoz which had only been climbed once, by Allain and Schatz in 1950. On the Nantillons glacier just before the rocky part of the climb we bumped into Lionel Terray, the famous French guide, who had a client in tow. He told us that the upper part of our ridge was very hard. He was right. At one point one has to pendulum across a blank wall, and this particular section cannot be reversed. Above this lies the crux. Ted, suffering from cramp in his fingers, had to prise them open with his teeth. I won't ever forget the final pitch. There we were, Ted and I, huddled on a tiny ledge, with an immense drop under our feet going down 1000m to the Nantillons glacier, and above us an overhang, a vertical wall, a thin crack and then easier ground to the summit ridge. First I had to stand on Ted's shoulders to surmount the overhang, both of us belayed from one tiny piton. The thin crack was the hard bit, and here I tried to protect myself by placing a piton. To my horror I found that my efforts were demolishing the only remaining handholds. It was now or never. 'Watch it, Ted, I might come off!' I need not have told him. He knew. I gripped a tiny hold with my right hand and climbed it desperately: we were up. It was certainly Grade 6. Ted followed on a tight rope.

Five days later Ted and I tackled the S ridge of the Pointe Gugliermina on the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey. This has since become very popular with British climbers. Ted and I had driven over to Courmayeur in Ted's Mark 7 Jaguar, and then quite a long way up the Val Veni until a rickety bridge over the

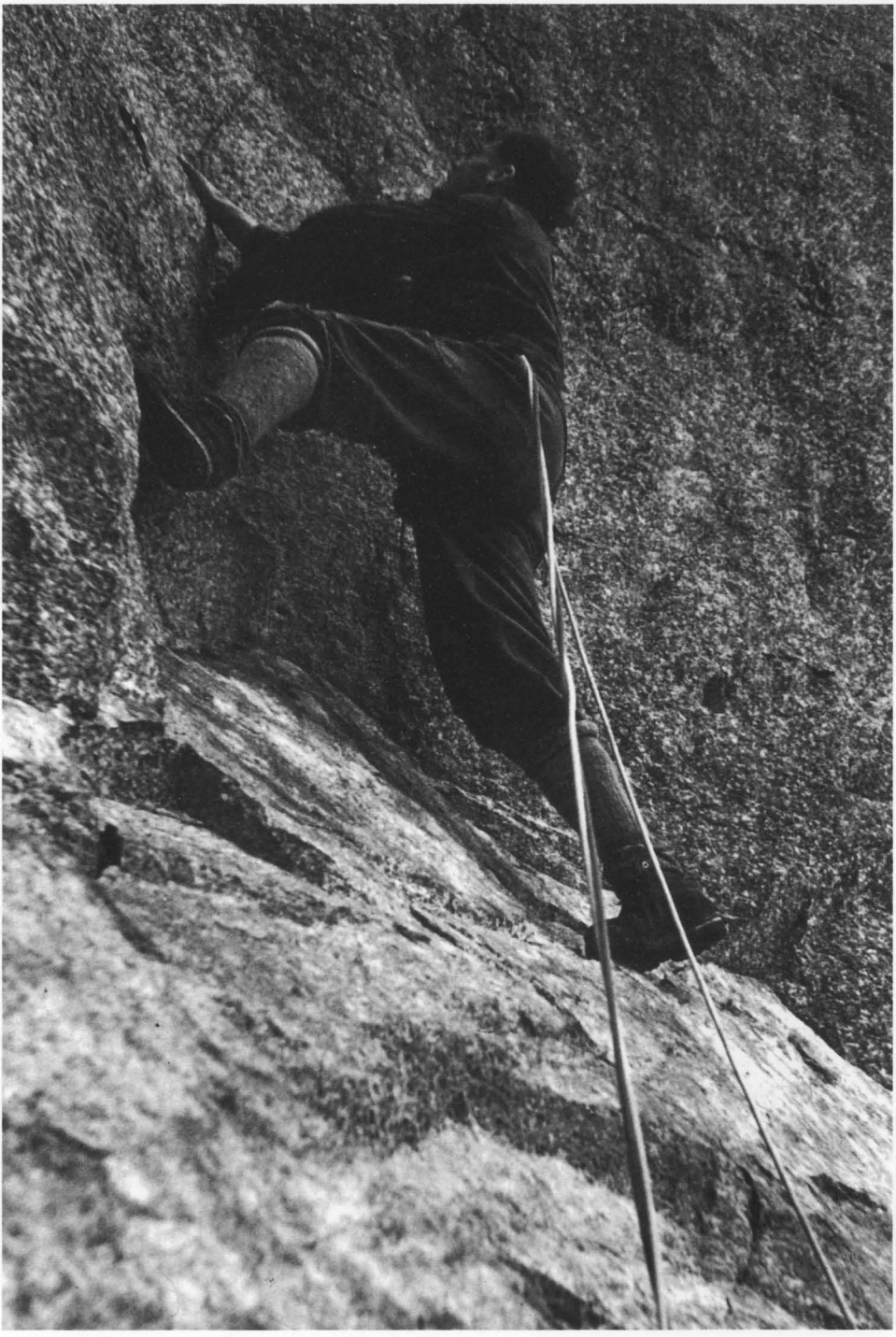
Doire prevented further progress in such a huge car. We walked straight up to the Gamba hut, had tea with the guardian, and then crossed the Frêney glacier to bivouac on a rocky ledge at the bottom of the cliff. Next day we were climbing by 6am. It was one of the most delightful free climbs that either of us had ever done. Two days later in Courmayeur we met Gaston Rébuffat and Paul Habrun, after their successful ascent of the E face of the Grand Capucin. We took them by car up to their camp-site at Purtud, and they there entertained us with vermouth and cigarettes. When I next met Rébuffat at the Alpine Club in London, he had absolutely no recollection of this encounter. By now the Italian towns were filling up for the holidays and Ted was having difficulty finding accommodation. These problems did not concern me very much, as I slept on the back seat of his car in the hotel garage.

By 17 August the weather, which had been bad, improved, and Ted and I climbed the S face of the Géant, a short, hard and mainly overhanging rock-climb. We must have been fairly fit by this time, because two days later we were half-way up the Route Major, on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc. Ted was leading at a blistering pace across the lower slopes below the Sentinelle Rouge, while I was crawling slowly after him, suffering from the trots. Toni Gobbi had advised us to take his direct route up the centre of the upper buttress on the Route Major, which was graded 5. We got up in 12 hours and were back in Chamonix by supper-time. My entire six weeks' holiday, including transport there and back, had cost £42.

In 1954 it was common knowledge that a major expedition was being planned to climb Kangchenjunga in the following year. I began to wonder what qualifications were necessary for such a trip. By this time my alpine record was equal to most, and better than some. However, no letter of invitation ever came. 1956 was the last year of my medical studies, and I simply had to pass the final examinations in December. When I was asked to take part in the triumphant expedition led by John Hartog to the Muztagh tower in 1956, I had to refuse. By the summer of 1956 my finances had reached an all-time low, and I faced the dubious prospect of surviving for six months in London on no money. I was rescued from this predicament by a generous grant of £100 from St Thomas's Hospital.

1955 was to be my last big alpine season, possibly for a number of years. In mid-July I left London with Ted Wrangham in his Jaguar car, and met Tom Bourdillon, who was to be my climbing companion, in Chamonix the next day. The N ridge of the Peigne was to be our training expedition. In those days the Plan des Aiguilles lift had not been completed, but there was a useful workman's lift which most of the climbers knew about. It was a plank suspended from a wire: you got there by 5am, sat on it, and miraculously it set off into space, high above the pine-trees, giving you a spectacular view of the Chamonix valley. The N ridge of the Peigne was a great deal less exciting.

Next morning we sat on the plank at 6am and reversed the procedure. Our next climb really *was* the E ridge of the Crocodile, and this time there were no accidents and no mistakes. We were up and down in a day, slept in the next morning, and then set off late to cross the Torino pass into Italy, in a bad storm. Our intention was to stay at the Albergo della Funivia at the bottom end of the



48. H G Nicol on Aiguille Noire de Peuterey. Starting to lead the Grade VI pitch which leads to the famous bivouac ledge. 1955. (T D Bourdillon) (p 85)

Torino lift, where we made a dramatic entry, bursting into the dining-room in the middle of a dinner party, our dripping anoraks and voluminous coils of rope making a slow puddle in the middle of the dining-room floor. Next day we set off at 2am for the Gamba hut. There were thick clouds spreading across the sky from the French side, and beyond Purtud it began to rain. When we arrived at the Gamba hut at 7am it did not look as if the W face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey was a good idea.

Next morning the guardian pinched my toes and said: '*Une heure, Monsieur, il fait beau.*' I rolled off my bunk, fumbled my way to the door, and saw outside a brilliant starry night. Thanks to an earlier recce, and some handy steps across the Frêney glacier left by a descending party, we were already starting up the W face of the Noire at 6.45am. It was steep at first, and one has to aim for a little ridge which is a feature of the middle section of the face. The ridge is quite easy, and we could move together carrying coils of rope. The end of this section was marked by a snow-filled gully. Tom pulled the ice-axe out of his rucksack and cut steps across it. On the other side of the gully the climbing suddenly became more serious, the rock blacker, steeper and more greasy. It was very cold. I was looking for the Grade 6 crack which was going to take me up to the Ratti bivouac ledge. The crack was wet, and here and there were patches of ice. Then I was struck clean on the forehead by a drop of water. Another followed. The water came from the lip of the great overhang, and fell a clear distance of 60m. Somewhere up there, there was a space where the bivouac ledge must be.

I turned my attention to the crack, which was about 6cm wide, and for 25m I jammed it, laybacked it, and was sometimes forced to bridge across the corner. I emerged on to the bivouac ledge. Quite a few important climbers had spent the night here, and had left their cigarette packets and sardine tins behind as mementos. It was wide and long enough to lie down full-length, but its chief merit was the huge overhang which acted like a roof; one might have been indoors. From the ledge a crack could be seen running up the overhanging wall, and in it were half a dozen pitons. By 5pm we were both up, and we could see the summit quite easily, about 300m away. At 6.45pm, exactly 12 hours from the glacier, we reached the summit of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey and bivouacked on the E ridge, a few feet below the summit. Next day the washerwomen at Entrèves turned and stared at us walking past. I had a huge tear in my trousers and wondered if anybody would be able to mend them. Ours was the 10th ascent of the Ratti route, which had first been climbed in 1939.

For five days it rained in Chamonix. Then it cleared enough to allow us to make an attempt on the E face of the Grand Capucin. This climb is so steep that it clears rapidly after bad weather. Our sacks contained food for three days, bivouac equipment, 35 pitons and wooden wedges and 110m of rope. It was a hard flog up the glacier in soft new snow, sometimes wading thigh-deep. The bivouac platform which is well placed within 15m of the first Grade 6 pitch was covered with 60cm of soft snow. It was 8.30pm, and it would soon be dark. After a bit of shovelling with piton hammers an area measuring three metres by one emerged with a gravel base, much better than one might have expected. Tom lit the petrol stove, I cut a few lumps of ice from the cornice behind me,

tipped our 20 hard-boiled eggs out of the saucepan in which they had travelled protected, and started to make soup. Our bivouac gear was quite primitive. There were two reasons for this: we were too poor to buy any, and if you carry a lot of stuff you will almost certainly have to use it, because it slows you down. We each had a cagoule and an eiderdown jacket, and nothing else. A bad storm would have caused serious problems. At 3am two little lights could be seen crossing the glacier. Competitors! So breakfast was a hurried affair, and we started climbing at 6am. Tom and I pressed on upwards quite slowly, at a rate of about 15m per hour. Each pitch needed 10 or 15 pitons or wedges, and few were *in situ*. By 4pm we had reached the 40m wall which is said to be the crux of the climb. This wall is continuously overhanging and has to be done in two sections, with a stance in the middle, standing most precariously in étriers. It took us four hours to climb the wall, and it was 8pm by the time we reached the second Bonatti bivouac. This was the largest ledge on the climb so far; it was covered in one metre of snow, but a lot of vigorous stamping and sweeping produced a sort of cave, just big enough for two people to sit down but not to stretch out. I smoked a cigarette and waited for dawn, chin on knee.

Breakfast was eggs, soup and super-milk concentrate, pretty nauseating, and it took two hours. It was still too cold to move off, but by 7am I was into the 25m sinuous crack which, in those days, had not a single piton in it. I put in 15, and it took an hour to lead. Just above this Bonatti had spent his third night. He must have been standing on one leg. At 5pm we reached the summit, abseiled down into the gap behind the Capucin, and rejoined our rucksacks by descending a snowy gully. We reached the Requin hut after midnight. This was the fifth ascent of the E face of the Grand Capucin.

By 1955 there were a lot of British climbers in the Alps. The Oxford and Cambridge contingents had been joined by the Scots and other Northerners. In 1955 Tom Patey climbed the N face of the Plan, and Rawlinson and Westmacott climbed the S ridge of the Fou and the Ryan-Lochmatter route on the Plan. The ascent by Blackshaw and Downes of the N face of the Triolet in the same year was one of the first big ice-climbs by a British party. The Couturier couloir of the Verte was climbed by Moseley, Dance, Noyce, Sutton and Brook; this was before the days of the curved pick, when it was still quite an undertaking. The Cassin route on the Piz Badile fell to Blackshaw, Sutton, Downes and Langmuir in 1956.

In 1956 I had my final examinations in medicine and had not intended to go climbing, but Tom persuaded me to come. The journey began and continued badly. Tom had suffered all summer with an acute infection of one finger, which had made his right hand very much weaker than the left. On our way along the shores of the Lake of Geneva he lost his glasses while having a swim. On a Friday evening the party arrived at the village of Baltschied and camped on the extreme edge of a hay-field. Although nothing was said, the villagers did seem to be very unfriendly. Later in the evening the farmer diverted the irrigation stream to flood our camp-site, and he did this quite deliberately. We woke up at 1am in 10cm of water. On Saturday I remained in the valley to see Mary, my future wife, off on her journey to Venice by train. Tom and Dick Viney, with Roger Chorley and John Tyson, walked up the path to the Baltschiedertal hut. I

followed the next day, but without a map I got lost and spent a night in a hay-loft. It was 10am on Monday morning when I reached the hut, to find John and Roger alone. Tom and Dick had not returned from their climb. We walked up to the glacier at the foot of the E face of the Jägihorn and found them both there, on the glacier, roped together. They were dead. Their deaths ended the golden age of Oxford mountaineering in the 1950s, and certainly ended my climbing career at that time. I did not climb again for four years.

Tom and Dick were buried in a little cemetery in Visp. I acted as one of the pall-bearers, my eyes blinded with tears. Whenever I can, I visit the grave and read the inscription on it: 'They were most rightly reputed valiant, who, though they perfectly apprehend both what is dangerous and what is easy, are never the more thereby diverted from adventuring.'