LINDSAY GRIFFIN

# Above the Val de Bagnes

(*Plate 75*)

The idea was simple: to start at Mont Gelé above Verbier – more or less the most northerly of the 3000m peaks in the Western Valais – and follow the crest south. This high-level ridge traverse, viewed from the vicinity of the Aiguilles Rouges d'Arolla, had captured my imagination on a previous visit to the region. Phil Bartlett had no such prior knowledge but was quickly persuaded by the prospect of travelling for days on end through this somewhat unfamiliar region.

Multi-day traverses along the crests of many-summited Alpine ridges have been in evidence for years. We need look no further than the Chamonix Aiguilles, first traversed from the Grands Charmoz to the Aiguille du Plan (the true direction to attempt this superb outing) in three days during August 1939 by the great Italian guide Arturo Ottoz, accompanied by Mme d'Albertas. This was only part of the story, however, and it was left to the Swiss pair, Peter Arigoni and Erich Friedli, to complete the whole Chamonix skyline from the Aiguille de l'M to Mont Blanc. They achieved this feat of endurance between 29 July and 1 August 1964, climbing no less than fifteen summits.

In the intervening years standards have inevitably progressed. In just a few days during August 1992 the well-known French activist François Damilano made the first solo crossing of the Mont Blanc range, keeping almost entirely on the main crest, from the Grands Montets to the Aiguille de Béranger. Significantly, he found a number of sections more difficult than expected owing to today's very dry conditions. Martin Moran and Simon Jenkins had attempted an even more ambitious project in both 1988 and 1989, when they tried to follow the Mer de Glace skyline from the Petit Dru to the Grands Charmoz. On their best effort, the traverse had to be abandoned at the Aiguille de l'Eboulement owing to illness after the pair had been on the hill for five days. In 1993 they completed some extensive high-level ridge crossings during their continuous ascent of all the Alpine 4000m peaks.

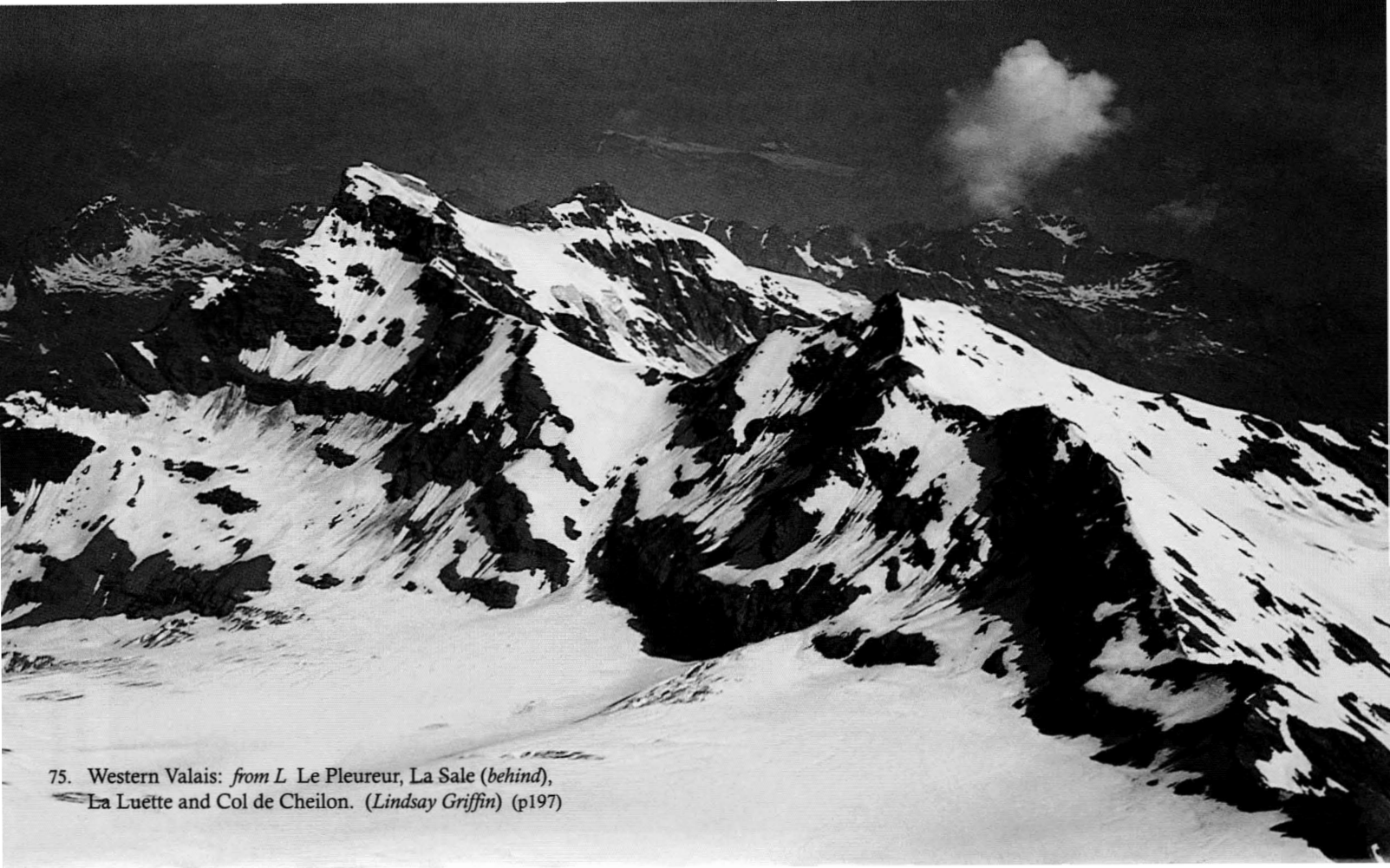
In modern times perhaps the main exponent of this little practised aspect of Alpine climbing has been the Catholic priest Louis Audoubert. Having completed the highly coveted first winter ascent of the Peuterey Integral in 1972, he set out the following summer with Jean-Jacques Lainez and Francis Thomas to make a traverse from the Petit Dru over the Verte, Droites and

Courtes, finishing six days later on the Col de Cristaux. Greater achievements were to follow: in September 1979, as part of a four-man team, Audoubert made a fourteen-day crossing of the Mont Blanc range from the Aiguille du Chardonnet to the Dômes de Miage, keeping on the crests for most of the distance. In all, 25 summits were traversed, including the Aiguille Verte, Grandes Jorasses and Mont Blanc. The following year Audoubert was in the Écrins with a six-man team when, over twelve days during the month of September, he traversed the range from the Pic de la Grave, via La Meije, Grande Ruine, Roche Faurio, Barre des Écrins, Ailefroide and Les Bans, to finish on Les Rouies. This expedition gave a prodigious 120km of travel, plus 26,000m of ascent, and would have continued further had one or two of the pre-placed food dumps not been stolen. Later, Audoubert traversed his home ground, the Pyrenees, following the crests as much as possible and making a total of 43 bivouacs.

Moving fast on a self-supported expedition is essential in order to keep the weight of the sacks down to manageable proportions and to complete the course in 'climbable' weather. Long, committing sections of sharp ridge are certainly not the place to be if there is a hint of an electrical storm. The French alpinist Nicolas Jaeger, a doctor by profession, and the Swiss guide André Georges both followed this philosophy and generally opted to tackle great traverses alone. Incidentally, it was the former who was responsible for the first major modern *enchaînement* in the Western Alps when, over two days in August 1975, he made the first solo ascent of the Bonatti/Gobbi on the Grand Pilier d'Angle, descended to the Upper Frêney Glacier and made the second solo ascent of the Central Pillar of Frêney to the summit of Mont Blanc.

It was André Georges who took part in probably the most impressive ridge traverse ever to be completed in the Alps, when, with fellow countryman Erhard Loretan, he followed the Zermatt skyline from Saas to Zinal in a continuous twenty-day stint during February 1986, the pair crossing a multitude of summits of which thirty were above the magic 4000m mark. They were very well organised with pre-placed food dumps and helicopter drops. They were also very lucky with the weather, both before and during their traverse. I remember being in the area a couple of weeks prior to the attempt. The weather was poor, with incredibly strong winter winds but not unreasonably low temperatures. Consequently, when the anticipated anticyclone finally arrived, the ridges were stripped bare and looked in almost summer condition. Notwithstanding these advantages, their traverse was still a brilliant achievement and has not been equalled since.

Few alpinists can hope to emulate such feats. The amount of time, organisation and fitness required, the vagaries of the weather and the sheer hard graft involved make the average Himalayan trip seem like a package holiday to the Costa del Vino. Fortunately there are many lesser journeys, which can be enjoyed by almost anyone prepared to make a little effort; but at present the timing of the project needs to be wisely chosen.



75. Western Valais: *from L* Le Pleureur, La Sale (*behind*), La Luette and Col de Cheilon. (*Lindsay Griffin*) (p197)

Our choice of route was certainly a 'lesser journey'. Low technical difficulty allowed us to reduce our climbing equipment to a minimum: an axe and crampons each, one rope and two long slings. We also took food for five to six days plus full bivouac gear and, in our wild optimism, thought we might make it as far as Mont Brulé if the weather held. We also thought it might be enjoyable and anticipated meeting few people during the initial days. We were right about the latter.

From the start things were not altogether as they should have been. Our previous foray into the mountains that July had lasted for eight days. Seriously overweight sacks, high temperatures (the hottest recorded in parts of Switzerland since the 1920s) and not enough food resulted in our returning to Mauvoisin considerably lighter in body-weight and totally knackered. Time was pressing and our allotted two days' rest was, in retrospect, utterly inadequate. In addition, the weather, which, up to now, had seen us wilting in continuous sunshine, was suddenly on the change, and as we walked up to our proposed bivouac above Verbier the clouds rolled in and it started to drizzle. To cap it all, I was up half the night with a short but violent bout of food poisoning and when we left the next morning under a surprisingly clear sky, I felt, to say the least, a bit wobbly.

Rotten rock, poor snow, but magnificent views typified our journey over the next two days, although I do recollect an enjoyable pitch of rough, sound gneiss at about Grade III to reach the summit of the Becca Courbe in the Monts de Sion. We were ten hours from leaving our comfortable bivouac in the téléphérique station, which sits incongruously on the summit of Mont Fort, and several hours from the point where my legs had started to protest about the length of the working day, when I thought it was about time to take note of the state of the weather and our somewhat exposed position should anything ugly develop.

Afternoon clouds had enveloped the massif but, as Phil pointed out, they looked no worse than on previous days when an electrical storm had not materialised. Besides, the Pantalons bivouac hut, our anticipated stopover for the night, was close at hand and we needed to be there that evening if we were to continue on schedule over the Pleureur the next day. With certain misgivings but unable to fault the logic, I carried on.

I was perhaps forty metres or so below the summit of Pt 3210m, east of Le Parrain, when an almighty crack rattled my ear drums and the air was filled with static. Phil, always faster than me, was several minutes ahead and on the far side of the peak above the Col de Crêt. In seconds he was down the couloir below the col and onto the Écoulaires glacier to the east. When the second strike occurred, his scalp tingled and the wool in his gloves stood on end.

The timing couldn't have been worse. Crossing the summit was no longer an option for me and, spurred on by terror, I scrambled as quickly as I could down and off the crest. To my right, a huge precipitous drop made an escape to the east impossible, whereas to the west an innocuous glacier rose

almost to the ridge. I scurried down to the snow, hotly pursued by a rock fall set off by the now torrential rain. Pausing for a moment on the glacier, I considered the possibility of reaching the col circuitously from that point, but a deafening crack and a race of static along the crest above banished all such thoughts and with the realisation that my ski sticks, stuck upright on the side of my rucksack, were acting as perfect antennae, I lay down on the glacier and quickly glissaded its right bank, finally coming to a standstill in a small hollow near the base.

Thunder rumbled well into the night which, needless to say, we spent on opposite sides of the mountain – Phil warm, dry but foodless in the bivouac hut, and me cold and wet on an icy shelf but with a roaring stove and plenty to eat. It was just the sort of cock-up you would expect to happen to two supposedly experienced mountaineers who had climbed with each other for well over twenty years! The next morning looked grim but a small break in the weather at 10am allowed us to sheepishly reunite on the Col de Crêt, Phil having made a difficult and sometimes dangerous journey back across the glacier to look after his mate.

Bad weather kept us at the hut that night but it cleared slowly the following afternoon and a bit of a freeze prompted a departure in the very early hours to continue the traverse over the five-summited Pleureur group. The delightful snow crests and mixed climbing, enthusiastically described in much of the literature on the Valais, had gone, leaving highly unpleasant and often dangerous terrain, best described as steep, insecure and partially frozen shale. Added to this, a couple of hours after dawn the condition of the remaining snow quickly became abysmal, and by the time we had crossed La Luette (our 19th summit) and descended to the Col de Cheilon, all we wanted to do was go home.

At a different time of year our mini-expedition would probably have been a delightful experience. A chance conversation with a local guide confirmed the Sale-Pleureur traverse, despite its ultra-classic status, to have dramatically declined in popularity since the late eighties owing to the current desiccation in the mountains. Ironically, our year had witnessed the fourth largest snow deposit this century and those lucky enough to have tackled the great ice faces in May or early June had found magnificent conditions. Unfortunately, there is now no longer the base layer that existed 10 to 15 years ago and, once the temperature rises or it starts to rain, anything remotely steep quickly sheds its snow cover. By mid-July or earlier many lower peaks in the Valais have begun to fall apart and the classic snow/ice faces are severely interrupted by rock barriers or on the verge of becoming pure rock walls. The effect, as we are all well aware, has been to channel many alpinists onto pure and, hopefully, objectively safe rock routes. We came away with a clear feeling that, under the current climatic regime, if visiting the Valais in the standard holiday period through July and August, one should choose one's routes wisely, be very selective or simply go elsewhere.