TWO "SUPERIOR" ROCK CLIMBS

G. C. BAND

TRYING something new is always exciting. In the Alps today, unless one is an extremely good mountaineer or else a pedantic filler-in of detail, new routes are very hard to find. It is inevitable therefore that well-seasoned Alpine climbers should desert their training ground to explore remoter regions. The younger alpinist, lacking the maturity and perhaps the wealth of his elders but filled with the ardent fire and zest of youth, still treats the Alps as his proving-ground and wishes to test his nerve and skill by trying harder and harder climbs. In default of doing new routes he likes to try climbs that his friends or countrymen have not done. One such route was a fine rock-climb above Courmayeur, the South Ridge of the Aiguille Noire de Peteurey, another less well known, above Chamonix, was the North Ridge of the Aiguille du Peigne. Last summer Roger Chorley and I hoped to climb the former route and afterwards, to maintain a sensible balance with snow and ice and altitude, follow it up with the Peteurey Ridge of Mont Blanc.

We faced the rock-climb with greater trepidation. Our excellent guide-book called it très difficile supérieure. British climbers were familiar with très difficile but not with this exalted grade save for one excursion early that season by David Fisher and John Streetly on the East Ridge of the Dent du Crocodile. But Streetly was a rock climber out of our world. Moreover, our climb was longer requiring some 12 to 17 hours, excluding the long tedious descent, and with no handy escape routes should we prove incompetent or the weather incontinent. There was something pitifully laughable in the subtle addition of the adjective supérieure, conveying nothing to a less aspiring climber, but causing us so much apprehension.

In Chamonix, we decided that a shorter trial climb of the same grading would be advisable. With little ceremony, we chose the North Ridge of the Auguille du Peigne. Arthur
Dolphin and Ian MacNaught Davis, commonly called Mac, were considering it too so we joined forces. With such added strength we felt certain of success for the Peigne was only a little mountain. But we casually neglected to realise that although small it started low down and actually gave a rock-climb of 2,200 feet. This was longer, for example, than the East Ridge of the Plan or the Crocodile. The difficulties were concentrated in a steep 600-foot di dre, or chimney, cleaving the smooth walls of the summit and first climbed in 1947 by Francis Aubert. In 1949 Gabriel and Levanos, crack French climbers, were the first to link the lower ridge, which was about the same length and difficulty as the East Face of the Grépon, with the diédre which had previously been approached by a shorter route. The latter had been climbed about 10 times and the complete ridge perhaps five. Our guide-book suggested that three to four hours should be sufficient for the lower part and another four to six hours for the diédre. At six o’clock we roped up at the bottom in pairs and started off like gentlemen: standing aside and waiting while stones were dislodged by the party above or casting down a top-rope as required. Imagine our dismay, when not until 11 o’clock did the diédre come into sight. Undaunted we stopped for lunch, trying not to consider our slender chances of getting down before dark. At half-past 12 we started on the diédre itself. In general, one climbed a chimney or crack until blocked by an overhang. Surmounting the overhangs was always the trickiest part. We found only just enough pitons driven in to make the climb feasible. This was unusual for a Chamonix climb. Obviously it hadn’t been repeated a sufficient number of times. A dainty traverse after the first overhang led to the foot of a 100-foot crack inclined steeply between smooth walls like the pages of a partly-opened book. Hands were jammed into the crack and toes relying on friction were pressed against the angle between the two walls. Feelings of awe became mingled with amazement. The overhang above appeared quite impossible. I bridged up across the walls and at full stretch could just touch a piton. But if I pulled up on two fingers locked around it my feet would swing off into space and then what? While I contemplated the awful consequences Roger, inspired, reminded me of our étrier, a little two-runged nylon ladder. Never had I resorted to such aids as this before on a mere passage of grade AIGUILLE DU PEIGNE; LOOKING DOWN THE "100-FT. CRACK"

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V but without it I would have failed. I clipped it into the piton and stepped onto the dangling lower rung. A hold came into view, a pull-up and I was there.

A steep crack came next but without the customary overhang. Instead it graded imperceptibly into the vertical and there contained a tantalising loose flake which should have been avoided. From a meagre stance I brought up Roger and we surveyed the pitch above which involved artificial climbing so descriptively termed “traction directe” by the French. The second man aids the leader by pulling on the rope passed through a piton and snap-link above the latter. The party climbs on two ropes and the second pulls on either rope as the leader requires. This type of climbing is still a novelty for Englishmen and usually demands more energy than would be expected. It is exhausting work for both the leader and last man, even when the pitons are already driven in, but safer than free climbing. Hence it is popular on the continent. I put in one piton and began but soon realised that the étrier would be necessary so I descended to await the other party who would bring it up. This was a fortunate delay for Arthur’s head now appeared from below, just above the loose flake. Suddenly he stopped inexplicably. His rope had jammed behind him! He could not move up and, jammed against the loose flake, disliked climbing down. The rope we cast down fell short and jammed in a crack as it was drawn up. Roger had to untie and, pulling his end down from the complicated set-up for tension climbing, I tied a loop in the end and threw it down. Still too short! Arthur grew anxious. At the third cast our rope reached him. Mac had meanwhile freed their rope and Arthur joined us. Order was restored and all four of us now roped together.

The next pitch succumbed to the onslaught with étrier and one or two slings but not without tiring me. When Roger tried, the friction was too great for me to pull him enough. As the rope eased out he was gradually turning upside down, subsiding like a sinking ship. We would have laughed uproariously in happier circumstances. He was forced to descend. Mac eventually joined me; we pulled a rope each and were soon all together again after Arthur had carefully extracted my piton. I started the next pitch with the prudence of a tiring climber. It required an awkward out of balance move to start so I removed
my rucksack. Once resolved and jammed in the inevitable crack it was easy. From the dark recesses behind an enormous flake I was able to look up at the last pitch of V; a thin corner crack too narrow for fingers but holding three pitons. As I curled my fingers through the lowest they became locked with cramp and couldn’t be removed. Alarmed but thoroughly safe, I felt like a carcass hanging from a butcher’s hook. Mac suggested that we should reverse the order of the rope. This was wise. Arthur seemed to have been stimulated by his earlier misfortune for, with a zest that astonished us, he led the remainder of the way. I followed last removing snap-links and a sling and relaxing on the rope firmly held by Mac above. Two overhangs alone remained and at eight-fifteen we were all on the summit. For the first time for hours I could relax tense nerves and with glazed eyes watch a red sun setting in a leaden sky. Beneath us from the south the grey evening mists crept up the Vale of Chamonix to where the lights of the thronging town were beginning to twinkle. We used the last half-hour of daylight to full advantage and reached the bed of the gully which provides the easiest means of descent. In the dark we stumbled down by the light of our torches roping down where it appeared too steep. After midnight we became uncertain of the way so sharing out our last raisins and chocolate we put on all spare clothes, thrust our stockinged feet into our rucksacks, and curled up on the stones. We were lucky to have a fine cool night with the aircraft warning light on the Aiguille du Midi shining benevolently over us like a guiding star. Two Frenchmen wished us, “Bien dormir!” on the little glacier next morning and by eight were back at Montenvers drinking hot soup.

After this inadequately planned and executed trial we still had enough confidence (or was it cheek?) to consider the “Noire” justifiable. Somehow we thought that as it had been done so much more often it couldn’t be as difficult. Again, with Godfrey Francis and Ted Wrangham we were a party of four, the safest number for a big climb. We motor-cycled round to Courmayeur by the Little Saint Bernard Pass. From the windswept frontier post, through a gap in the hills, I could see the black fang of our mountain piercing troubled clouds. It was my first visit to Courmayeur and I was not disappointed. We passed a riotous evening being ushered from hotel to hotel and eventually spent
the night in a field. Next day we left the bicycles at Purtud by an inn profusely decorated with bizarre wood-carvings. Later I was fortunate enough to discover the artist himself crouched over his work: immense, dirty, and shaggy bearded with curly black locks and flaming eyes.

We strolled carefree towards our peak through scented pine-woods, over meadows and slopes with wild strawberries then climbed up by waterfalls and stunted yew trees to the "Fauteuil des Allemands," a great armchair big enough even for Germans, formed by the South and East ridges. The compact little hut lies snug beneath a vertical wall. We finished supper in time to see the sun sink behind and silhouette the seven successive towers of the South Ridge, the towers Gamba, Welzenbach, Brendel, Bich and others without name. The greatest difficulties, considered originally as of the sixth grade, occur on the ascents of the Brendel and the fifth towers and were such as to entitle the ridge to being "one of the last unsolved problems" until conquered in 1930 by Brendel and Schaller. "This Expedition will rank as one of the most terrible accomplished," commented the Alpine Journal. That night I prayed for prolonged fine weather because a bivouac either on the ascent or descent is normal upon first acquaintance. As we lay in our beds a fast party of two, descending from the Ridge by the aid of the moonlight, crawled in beside us.

At a quarter-to-five, just as it grew light enough to climb, we roped up in pairs beneath the Pointe Gamba. Our rucksacks were bulky with full waterbottles, solid fuel cookers, food and sleeping-bags besides the usual iron equipment and spare clothing. The weight never made its presence felt unduly and we rejoiced as heretics in not requiring ice-axe or crampons. Progress was uneventful but delightful, except for one move which required a shoulder, and we moved together much of the time up to the Pointe Welzenbach. Here we were puzzled by shouts but eventually spotted a party on the Pointe Brendel ahead. They had already had one bivouac! The first major difficulty called the "ressaut en demi-lune" was an anti-climax. By taking the true edge of the crest the difficulties were greatly diminished; a wonder that the first climbers had not discovered this. Higher up, above where the guides of Courmayeur have put in two pitons we made our one error in route finding on the

G.C.B. on the Ressaut en Demi-Lune, S. Ridge of Aiguille Noire de Peuterey

Hon. R. R. E. Chorley
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ascent but this was soon rectified. Near the top of the Brendel there was snow and flopping down in the hot sun we augmented our flasks with the meltwater. As usual an abseil from one tower brought us to the base of the next. Here was the fifth and crucial tower. We stood with infinite patience on sloping footholds beneath the last man of the Italian party ahead while those above answered his plaintive refrain, “Tira, Tira, Tira!” Delicate balance and pitons for handholds made the second original pitch of VI a pleasant traverse and after we were all four across it we raced on to overtake the others before reaching the Pointe Bich. We never saw them again until back at the hut next day. Feeling pleasantly tired now, I was glad of the pitons at the last pitch of V. There followed one more abseil; scrambling; a suck at someone’s discarded tin of condensed milk; more scrambling; and presently we stood on the summit. Eight o’clock. My gaze dropped down the practically vertical north face to be arrested by the little pinnacles of the Dames Anglais huddled together in silent communion like a sculptured group. From them, through the rounded hump of the Aiguille Blanche, rose the Peteurey, the greatest ridge of Mont Blanc. I wondered how Mac and Neil Mather were faring on this today. Fifty-nine years after it was first climbed these two were making the first British guideless ascent. This day was an active one for young British climbers with two parties on route Major as well.

We sauntered down from the summit seeking a commodious bivouac platform. Nothing presented itself so we chose a spot 100 feet down and excavated our own. We built a low wall around and hurled great boulders down the mountain side which disappeared into the night with a shower of sparks. Our bivouac was better than any others we had seen and would be excellent for two. We lay in our sleeping-bags preparing supper while the moon, in partial eclipse to our surprise, threw an eerie light over our squalor. Next morning, and here readers of Smythe will shudder, we awoke to a green dawn. Anvil-shaped clouds were bursting into mushroom form. The descent was long and though not difficult, tortuous and tedious in the extreme to tired and thirsty bodies. The intricate route-finding was made easier lower down by large squares of red paper left every few yards by an ascending party! It is important not to leave the
ridge too early; a worn track leads off at the proper place. We unroped and scampered down. Soon we lost the path, to our humiliation, so abseiled to the nearest stream pretending to the following party that we had really meant to go that way. At two o'clock the storm forecast by the dawn caught us on our way to Purtud. There we were revived by supper and sleep twice over in quick succession while the rain drummed incessantly outside. After this storm the Peteurey Ridge was obviously out of condition and, well content, we concluded our major climbs for the season.

A few climbers may appreciate some comparisons in retrospect. Today the South Ridge of the "Noire" is more popular in ascent than the classic East Ridge and although sadly overburdened and simplified with pitons must still surely rank as one of the great rock-climbs of the Alps. Although very long, there is at present no move of "Very Severe" difficulty in spite of the numerous passages of grade V. The climb must be within the scope of many British parties. It is surprising that none had done it before, not even with a guide. In contrast, the North Ridge of the Peigne must be near the top of its class. Each of the nine passages of V is probably "Very Severe" and the artificial pitch is strenuous. The sustained difficulty of the dièdre and the superb situation is greater than anything I have met before and the guide-book times are suited to a fast party. It is evident that we got rather more than we bargained for. Even so, if only an average rock-climber by latest English standards can lead most of it in vibrams with a rucksack on then the best British rock-climbers, equipped with Alpine experience especially of artificial technique, can obviously attempt climbs of far greater difficulty if they so desire. No doubt they will and the best of luck to them!