

A SCRAMBLE FOR LA MEIJE

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In July, 1957, I had arranged to meet Norman Cochran at Courmayeur on the Italian side of Mont Blanc, but on my arrival at Chamonix a steady downpour of rain together with stories of more than a metre of new snow on the Col du Geant, which I would have to cross alone, made me alter my plans. When the weather cleared, snow could be seen below the Hotel Plan Praz, so that climbing would not be pleasant for some days. Evidently it was going to be another bad season for weather, and so I accepted an invitation to go south with Michael Curtis, an American, and José Quintin, a Belgian.

In a Fiat owned by José we set out for the Italian Riviera armed with ice axes and crampons. Taking the "Routes des Grandes Alpes" we saw much magnificent mountain scenery, but alas, also much flood damage from the early summer floods which devastated both sides of the Franco-Italian border, although the Maurienne area of France seemed much the worst hit. After getting involved in very narrow and hilly streets in Briançon, we spent the night on the roadside near Montgenevre on the border before pushing on for Turin, Genoa and finally Santa Margherita on the Italian coast. The Mediterranean coast was truly delightful, but after the second night we awoke to find it raining, so that we reluctantly agreed with Michael's decision to go up to an alpine hut that day.

Over a lunch of spaghetti and chianti in a Turin restaurant we decided to go to the new Refuge du Glacier Blanc above Ailefroide in the Dauphiné Alps. This would allow us a training climb on the Barre des Ecrins the next morning. Neither José nor I were keen to leave the comforts of civilisation so hurriedly, but Michael had enough enthusiasm for three men, so passing once more through Briançon we paused at Ailefroide to buy provisions before driving up the rough track to the Chalet Cezanne. The first few yards with rucksacks were not pleasant, but once we began to gain altitude our lassitude vanished and we were glad to be back in the mountains. José had stayed behind in the chalet to nurse a sore heel.

Next day we left the hut at 4.00 a.m. for the leisurely walk up the Glacier Blanc and the easy angled north face of Les Ecrins. It was one of the coldest mornings we had spent in the Alps and we found the rocks of the summit ridge very icy. As we stood on the summit I at least was grateful for the magnificent weather which allowed me to enjoy my first Dauphiné peak to the full. All around were peaks heavily seamed with snow; all, that is, except for La Meije, the

south face of which was too steep to hold snow for long. With the weather having settled down for a fine spell we all hoped to do the famous traverse of this peak. Michael was climbing strongly and well, but we had not yet seen José in action ; however, we could not leave him behind for a second time so we would have to see how he went on the first rocks when we attempted the traverse of the Meije in two days' time.

That night we camped above La Grave, and after a very leisurely breakfast on a hotel terrace which commanded a good view of the north side of the Meije, we drove round to the small village of La Béarde, to the south of the mountain and in the heart of the mountain range. This village had a very depressing atmosphere because it also had suffered flood damage, including the loss of the bridge. After a late lunch we were glad to leave for the Refuge du Promontoire, although we were heavily laden with extra supplies for the traverse. The walk up to the hut seemed very long at first, but as the weather deteriorated the cooler air invigorated us. As usual we had been disturbed by the height of the hut when we first sighted it from low down, but later clouds mercifully hid it from view until we were a few yards away. The small hut was crowded, mostly with Germans from Munich, so that after a cramped cooking session we had to sleep on the floor.

Next morning the fun started, especially as neither Michael nor José were experienced at getting away from a crowded hut quickly. In fact, everyone got up much too early, forcing us to do likewise, but since we had not seen José climb yet we preferred to wait for daylight anyway. At one time I looked out of the door ; it was too dark to see what was ahead, but three climbers were already moving up the first easy crack close to the door. At the foot of the crack a queue of six patient climbers awaited their turn ; higher up, moving lights indicated those who were well on their way. It was obvious that we were not going to enjoy the pleasures of mountain solitude that day.

After the struggling line of humanity had advanced far enough for the sound of falling stones to have died down we set foot on the rocks, leaving the hut to two or three occupants who had come back down the route late the previous day. The first two or three hundred feet consisted of loose rock, but soon we were on easy-angled ribs of rock that were delightfully solid and rough. There was no one to be seen except a German rapidly descending towards us because he had left his camera in the hut. José was feeling the strain of his first climb of the season, and in consequence our progress was slow enough for the German, now complete with camera, to overtake us

on his way back to rejoin his friends. We caught up with a large group on a flat slab where they were having a second breakfast ; this slab was the prelude to the steep wall leading up to the Glacier Carrée, a hanging glacier not far below the summit ridge, and several climbers were already starting to climb this wall. Some, indeed, were well on the way up it.

It became obvious that if we were not going to be benighted we would have to take strong action, for the Germans seemed rather slow on the steeper rock. Accordingly I crossed a small slab, carefully stepping over a rope that a girl was paying out to her leader, and arrived at a good stance and belay. As the less experienced Michael followed I screamed at him as he trod on the Germans' rope, but somebody above retaliated a few moments later by sending down a stone which bounced off Michael's rucksack as he jerked his head forward to avoid it. Things were livening up.

The German still had not reached a stance so I impatiently set off up a slightly different line up the short steep wall, to join him finally at a belay where we brought our respective companions up side by side, giving advice in different languages. Above and to the left was a steep slab and crack. It looked strenuous, and halfway up the slab another German girl had reached the limit of endeavour, despite a rope and encouragement from above. The German on our stance now climbed up to give her a push from below, but to no avail. José had now come up, climbing safely and competently, and so after apologising to the girl on our stance, who spoke English, I started working my way up the slab and crack. Climbing easily over the exhausted girl and her helper by bridging, I quickly reached a belay, conscious of the angry silence of the Germans. We felt that they should be turning back by now, but in any case we did not wish to be benighted with them. Later we were to realise the wisdom of our move.

Michael and José quickly followed before the girl halfway up had moved, and after traversing a delightfully steep slab with big holds we reached an exposed bulge. Easy climbing on clean dry rock with tiny holds led us then over the bulge to a system of terraces which led to the small Glacier Carrée. On the glacier we passed two more pairs of Germans and at the small col higher up we found another two parties have a quick snack. Seeing us they hastily repacked their rucksacks to go ahead of us up a wide area of ribs and slabs. It was quite a race as we were determined not to do any more waiting behind people. First the Germans gave up their line to follow ours, then when a smooth bulge appeared they found an easier variation. We overcame the bulge with difficulty to find two of them well ahead ;

on easy ground now, we all raced for the next bottleneck, a smooth slab with an exposed move at the top, where we arrived second in the queue. However, as we were a bit strung out I invited the leader of the other German party to overtake me up the slab although he himself had started up the slab, with his companion still climbing, about sixty feet lower down. Once up the slab and on a delightfully exposed ridge we began the familiar waiting again, but this time we enjoyed it. Not only were we on the summit ridge, but spread out below us was La Grave and the wonderful mountain valleys beyond. Not long afterwards we reached the summit, just five and a half hours after leaving the hut.

After twenty-five minutes' rest José felt fit enough to do the traverse to the eastern summit, which involved traversing many awkward towers and ridges, but the weather was by now fine and settled. Accordingly we descended the other side of the summit tower to a deep gap, making two long abseils from pitons in place. From the gap we climbed to a level snow ridge, at the far end of which was a vertical tower with a diagonal crack on its left side. By means of this and an ice-blocked slab, we reached the top of the tower. Behind us we could see the Germans slowly descending the summit tower to start the traverse also.

The traverse now continued, the only difficulties being the descents of the various towers since this always involved moving slowly down soft snow on rock or ice in exposed situations. There was no need to hurry in such conditions and we took four and a quarter hours to get to the eastern summit. We arrived shortly after a guide and his client who had also been showing respect for the soft snow by taking it cautiously. After a tricky descent in icy conditions out of the sun we arrived at a col, the north side of which we intended to descend. This involved going down about 150 feet of hard green ice, and we were grateful for our abundance of rope for a long abseil.

At the end of a unpleasant soft snow descent on the glacier we came to a small hut, the Refuge de l'Aigle, outside which were two Frenchmen who had apparently gained the lead on the Meije early in the morning. As we looked back we saw all the Germans grouping on the col above the green ice slope; they would have to sleep at the little hut although they had probably intended to sleep there anyway. The two Frenchmen, who hoped to traverse back to La Béarde by an easy route next morning, were not pleased with the prospect of another crowded night. We in our turn were very glad that we were so far ahead of, instead of behind the Germans. The final descent down increasingly steep ice, where we became tired of cramponning,

and then down the longest scree slope that we had seen for a long time to reach La Grave before dark, demanded quite an effort. So ended a memorable day.

The next morning, as we sat on the hotel terrace enjoying breakfast in warm sunshine, we again looked up at the Meije, but this time with a deep sense of satisfaction. It had been a magnificent climb.

