

## A TRAVERSE OF THE DIABLE RIDGE

R. L. B. COLLEDGE

July 25th dawned cloudily and with no promise of better things. No mountains had yet been climbed whilst we were waiting in the valley, and so we eventually caught one of the afternoon cable cars to the Aiguille du Midi, with the intention of walking across the snowfields from the Midi to the Torino Hut on the Col du Géant, from where we hoped to make the traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable.

Despite swirling mists there were many tourists on the observation platform of the Midi, hoping for a break in the weather. Others blocked the exit leading to the snow ridge which starts the Midi-Plan traverse, and as we excused ourselves to move past them and along the well trodden track outside, which leads down to the Vallée Blanche, we soon had to step round or over two near naked sunbathers who were taking advantage of stray sunbeams. Someone regretted we were not wearing crampons.

In the softness of the afternoon snow progress was tedious as we crossed the Vallée Blanche and the upper snowfields of the Glacier du Geant and the final treadmill of the slope up to the Col du Géant. Occasionally the track approached the cable which stretches from the Midi to the Gross Rognon and the Col du Géant. The cable cars would then stop, to allow the passengers to stare at us as though we were creatures of another world. Indeed we were ; creatures from a world of effort they could never imagine. One weaker willed member of our party was keen to join the aerial passengers, but was discouraged ; we felt there was a limit to the mechanisation of mountaineering. If I had travelled by the ropeway, I would have felt cheated ; cheated, because I love the solitude of the vast snowfield of the Vallée Blanche, and this solitude can only be enjoyed to the full when walking slowly over its surface. One then becomes part of the mountain scene, fully at home amongst the savage grandeur, and this is something that cannot be in a cable car when one is an alien looking at a strange outside world. Indeed I felt cheated because we had gone via the Midi Téléphérique, instead of walking up the Mer de Glace to the Requin Hut and beyond, through some of the most inspiring scenery in the Alps. With a short holiday and the possibility of bad weather robbing him of his climb the climber is tempted to use the aerial media more and more. This is inevitable, whether we call it human weakness, or progress.

The weather on the Col du Géant was unpleasantly cold and windy. In the Italian Alpine Club Hut we wore down jackets or sweaters to keep warm. Seeing the tourists step out of the cable cars, one tends to forget that the hut is over 11,000 feet in altitude. The

young woman on early call duty in the morning was appalled by our desire to get up at 1.30 a.m. Actually we had no desire, but duty demanded an attempt. It was without enthusiasm that we mounted the steps to the upper hotel terrace, from where we surveyed the lightning flashes over Italy whilst shivering in a very wintry wind. The sky overhead was starlit, but the Diable was covered with cloud. It was the piercing wind which drove us back to bed.

The day was spent scrambling on nearby peaks, with the weather remaining overcast but not snowing. In the evening the other young woman was equally appalled at our desire to rise early once more, this time on her early morning turn. This time however, we were to have company at the breakfast table, including four Swiss who were also tackling our route. Here I must say that we found the Italian guardian and his two women assistants most helpful and friendly all the time we stayed at their hut.

Leaving the hut again at 2.30 a.m., in not such a cold wind and in clear conditions, we made good progress towards the upper snowfield of the Glacier du Géant. Ahead we could dimly see the mass of the Capuchin and the Diable, and we knew we had to keep to the left to arrive on the south-west side of the ridge. The other members of the party were Ray Handley, Derek Burgess and Don Chapman, all from Derby. We climbed in two pairs.

Once below the rocks on the south-west side of the ridge we started to look for an easy crossing of the rimaye. This was difficult in the darkness as we had arrived half an hour too soon. We eventually selected what appeared to be the only possible place, and having crossed the yawning gap it was necessary to cut steps up steep hard ice to where the slope reared up to the vertical. I think I was just below the vertical section, fully aware that the other three were fifty feet of rope away and on the safe side of the rimaye, when Derek noticed that the Swiss had gone further along, to find an easier place in what was now daylight. As quickly as decency allowed we transferred our interest to the scene of the Swiss attempt, and as we approached we saw the Swiss leader drive two ice axes into the upper snow slope. He was supported from below, and with a push and a pull he arrived on top. Once they were all up, they kindly hung a double rope from an ice axe, and we swarmed up hand over hand.

Once off the snow we chose the most convenient line up loose slabby rock, often iced, until we arrived on the ridge. A few more yards, and we could look down on the beautiful curve of the snow ridge of the Col du Diable. Beyond were the red tinted rocks of the Diable, with the first tower, the Corne du Diable, rising magnificently

into the rays of the early morning sun. How warm and rough the rock looked, and what promise it gave of delights to come ! Below the Corne sat the Swiss, eating their second breakfast, no doubt. We had let them get ahead above the rimaye, and they in their turn had doubtless climbed fast to get well ahead in order to be first on the difficult sections.

We descended with care down the snow ridge to the Col du Diable, for the snow was rather loose on the ice, and then worked up to the first rocks. Picking our way up easy rocks, we stopped to eat where the Swiss had stopped. One member of the party, who shall remain nameless, had slipped his axe loosely through his rucksack straps, and as he removed his sack there was the clatter of a falling axe. There can be few more dreadful sounds on a mountain, for the loss of an axe can be troublesome. However, since our route was largely over rock no one worried, except perhaps the owner. Derek, who was still some way below, saw the axe neatly bury itself point first in the snow of the couloir below the Col du Diable. Despite cries of "Leave it there as a warning to others" the owner insisted on descending to retrieve it. When eventually he regained us, much out of breath and having been covered by Derek on a top rope, we picked up our sacks and said : "Right, let's go," but our friend exercised a superb control of his feelings and no heads were broken.

Turning the Corne du Diable on the south-west side, we climbed to a gap between it and the next tower, the Pointe Chaubert. By this time we were a bit late, and the Swiss were well ahead of us and out of sight. The Pointe Chaubert provided delightful climbing right to the top, from where three rappels took us down to the Brèche Médiante. We could now see the Swiss party making the ascent of the Pointe Médiante. This was the next obstacle and again we enjoyed rock climbing with our backs to the sun. The main pitch was a long and steepening groove to a piton, from where a delicate traverse led to a rib. There followed good airy climbing on solid blocks to a fine platform close to the summit. The descent on the far side was made in one rappel of one hundred feet, almost vertical except where it overhung for the last quarter.

The Brèche Carmen was a tiny gap with only a small snow hole to wait in. Those who were first down became rather cold in this draughty sunless hole, but they enjoyed a spectacular view of the rappel directly above their heads. The climb up the Pointe Carmen was difficult right from the start as the slabby rock was heavily iced and any ledges covered with powdery snow. Three pitons were in place, and in the conditions we met proved useful to cold fingers. On arriving at a magnificent platform, we could look back at the spectacular verticality of the Pointe Médiante.

The two rappels from the Carmen to the Brèche du Diable were made in conditions very different to those on our previous descents on the traverse. First came a steep icy wall, then a series of sloping ledges separated by bulges, and with all the ledges loaded with powder snow. It was a very wintry looking place, facing north.

There now followed easy rocks across the Brèche du Diable to the foot of the Isolée. This tower stands to one side of the obvious route, a shallow couloir leading to the summit ridge of Mont Blanc du Tacul. Thus it can be ignored, but it does offer a fine first pitch, climbing straight out of the shallow couloir on very steep rock. It is Grade V with two pitons according to the guide book, though we found three pitons in place. The exit from the groove at the top of the wall is very airy and hard, but it is a chastening thought that it was first led in nails and without the use of pitons by the famous guide Armand Charlet. Ray and Derek led the pitch easily enough with the aid of some hand jamming in the exit crack. There followed some pleasant scrambling to the top followed by the inevitable rappel, this time down the hard pitch back to our rucksacks.

After a pause to eat, we scrambled along the ridge above through ever thickening mist towards the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul. We ate some more biscuits in the shelter of the east summit rocks, and then stepped into the teeth of a gale. It was 2.30 p.m. when we reached the west summit. The wind was loaded with flying snow, and though I had been on Tacul twice before we were glad to see the tracks of the Swiss party. Soon after leaving the summit their tracks were mostly obliterated by the driving wind, but route finding is not difficult on the straight Tacul ridge, even though it is rather broad, and there should be little difficulty in finding the descent route if one knows the approximate position.

Once on the slope leading to the Vallée Blanche I was amazed at the difficulties involved in avoiding crevasses and seracs, for the slope had been relatively simple before. In very thick mist, but fortunately now out of the wind, we were glad to find tracks which were easy to follow in the soft snow, as we could have lost much time peering ahead for crevasses and looking for ways round or over them. As we reached a zone of giant ice cliffs the mist began to lift, revealing the ghostly towers of ice leaning towards us from above. We quickly worked our way through them and then the mist cleared to reveal no more crevasses.

The way back to the Col du Géant was tiring. At first the snow would almost support our weight, and then as the other foot moved past the climber would sink in to the knee. This went on for some time, until we reached the Midi-Col du Géant track. The clouds

had lifted off the Glacier, but the Diable ridge retained its cloud cover. Back in the Torino Hut we celebrated with a much needed bottle of wine.

