

TWO CLIMBS FROM THE VIGNETTES HUT.

PETER NOCK.

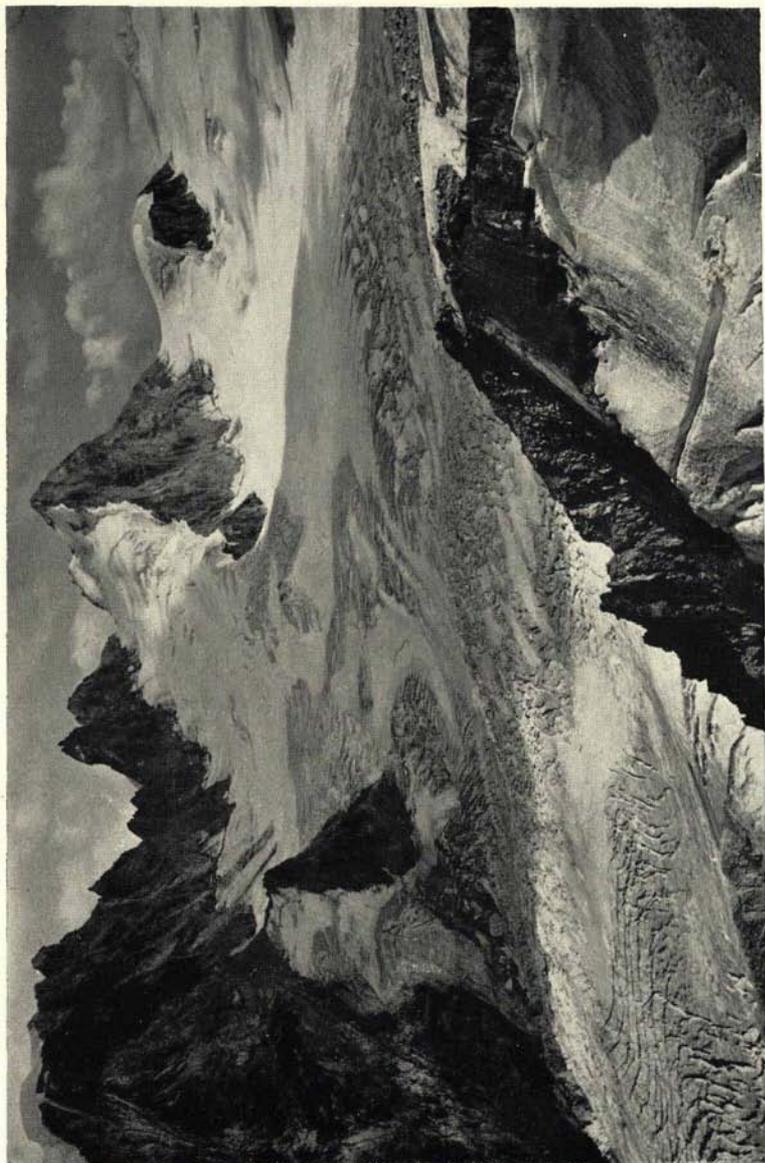
After our failure on the Arolla face of the Aiguille de la Tsa, Dorothy and I decided to spend a couple of days at the Vignettes Hut and start our climbing there with the traverse of the Evêque.

Our day of arrival at the hut was not well chosen. It seemed to be the one picked by a vast number of other climbers for reaching their base of operations too. It was therefore not surprising that despite the magnificence of the new hut our first night was one of those unpleasant times when one has to decide which side to lie on and then stick to it. To add to our discomfort a French party found they had a lot to tell one another, and their giggling kept us awake. However, we rose at 3.30 next morning—only to find that the other occupants had done likewise, with the result that breakfast was inclined to be skimped in our eagerness to be off.

Fortunately ours was the only party to start out for the S.W. ridge of the Evêque. After leaving the Col des Vignettes and putting away our lantern, which had in fact been rather superfluous, we tramped solitarily across the flat Mont Collon glacier. The Guide Book describes the climb as starting from the Col de l'Evêque, but as this involves going over a small rock hump and down again we decided to go straight up the snow slope to the foot of our ridge. For this we put on crampons and were at the base of the rocks two hours after leaving the hut.

Here we had a short halt to remove crampons, have some food, and stow our ice-axes—the remainder of the climbing obviously being confined to the rocks. However, out of the sun and in a keen wind the cold soon made itself felt, and we curtailed our halt to the minimum.

The ridge is at first very broken, but even on these easy rocks we had to stop several times for finger-warming before making a move. After about 200 feet the rocks turned to scree, and scrambling up the next 200 feet soon warmed us up again. At the end of the scree the ridge rises suddenly and steeply, with a small nose at about 120 feet. We started this by going out to the left on to the face for 30 feet, and then up an easy



L'EVEQUE FROM VIGNETTES HUT

L'Eveque is seen on the right. The S.W. Ridge is the right-hand skyline.

P. W. W. Nock

chimney which leads back to the sharp edge of the ridge. Here was food for thought, as it was obviously not practicable to keep to the edge. First search was to the left, which though not steep turned out to be completely rotten; the next, to the right, showed a fine ledge leading out on to the almost vertical south face. It appeared easy enough to go along the ledge but looked at first sight as if it was only going to lead us into deeper water. However, I decided to explore the possibility, and with Dorothy belayed, traversed along the ledge. After approximately 30 feet I found the solution in a small right-angle corner, invisible from the ridge, which led up the face and back on to the arête above the nose.

The corner was vertical, possibly slightly overhanging near the top, and in a very exposed position on the face, with an impressive drop of over 1,000 feet down to the Arolla glacier. It was the kind of place in which the longer one stands considering the matter the more one wonders if it would not perhaps be better to look for an alternative; knowing full well, of course, that this really *is* the route, every alternative having already been examined and discarded. Accordingly I called to Dorothy to join me, and saw her well belayed to a fine firm piece of the mountain—the kind of belay one dreams of but so seldom finds—before starting up the corner. The holds on both walls were good, and I went up the first 40 feet quite quickly by bridging. This brought me to the part which from below had appeared to overhang. Fortunately it was in fact only the right wall which overhung to any extent. For the next few feet I therefore transferred most of my weight on to the left wall and used the crack at the back of the corner as a hand-hold until it was possible to make a rather awkward step to the left on to a fair-sized ledge. From here a few easy steps up the open wall landed me in a notch on the ridge. Dorothy made quick work of the corner and from this point we were able to enjoy a really good stretch of climbing up steep but easy rocks to the “*signe trigonometrique*.”

On the summit of the Evêque we ate and slept in the sun and rapidly abandoned all idea of going up Mont Collon or the Mitre on that day. Some time later we made our way down the ordinary route on the N.E. side, which was much facilitated by good steps in the short ice-slope at the top cut by some parties earlier in the day. Further down we were able to enjoy a short glissade on to the glacier before facing the rather tiresome trudge back to the Vignettes Hut over the soft snow in the midday heat.

Next morning we again rose at 3.30, after a more pleasant night, and were alarmed to find the hut surrounded by cloud. We therefore returned to bed until 4.30 when we were pleased to see the purely local mist dispersing with the dawn. After a hurried breakfast we collected all our belongings and settled the bill with the guardian—not without a certain amount of argument as to the charge to S.A.C. members—and finally got away at 5.30.

Many parties were heading for the Pigne d'Arolla, so we joined this caravan somewhere about its middle and proceeded on the very monotonous $2\frac{1}{2}$ -hour plod to the top. Again we were lucky; most of the parties returned by the way they had come, whilst we went via the Col de Breney to the Col de la Serpentine at the foot of the East ridge of the Mont Blanc de Seilon.

Here we had another extensive halt and watched, or more precisely listened to, a party ascending the rocks on the left of the ice-ridge. The rocks didn't look particularly difficult but were obviously very loose; we therefore decided to climb on the ridge even though it might take longer and involve a certain amount of hard work. Accordingly we put on crampons and started up. We hadn't gone many steps before the snow gave out and we were walking up plain ice. To begin with the angle was very easy and the crampons bit in fine style; then the angle gradually steepened until it was necessary to cut steps. At first alternate steps sufficed, with a quick move on the crampons in between, but finally we were reduced to cutting steps for both feet. This, fortunately, didn't last for much over 100 feet, and as the angle eased off again I was able to revert to alternate steps until at last it was possible to dispense with the steps altogether and rely solely on crampons.

This fine 1,000 ridge landed us on the false summit which is seen from the col below, and from here we had to descend a short distance over some steep rubble before scrambling up the final rock ridge.

It was three o'clock when we reached the top of the Mont Blanc de Seilon and after a short rest (not wishing to miss our dinner at the Mont Collon Hotel) we quickly descended the easy West ridge to the Col de Seilon. Soon we were on the dry glacier, when we took off the rope, presuming we had finished climbing for the day. This, however, was not the case. Owing to gross carelessness in my map-reading we turned off

the Seilon glacier too soon and instead of going up to the Pas de Chèvre landed ourselves on a little unnamed col just to the south of it. There, instead of a nice path, we found a short drop of about 40 feet between ourselves and the grassy slopes below, on which we could clearly see the path. We were determined not to go back and looked around for a suitable spike to abseil from; but as might be expected there was no such luxury anywhere in sight. So, having no pitons, there was nothing for it but to climb down a water-worn corner, and it was not without difficulty that we finally reached the grassy slopes. Here we really had finished our climbing for the day—in fact, for the year; and a swinging pace, which at times almost amounted to running, landed us at the Mont Collon Hotel only slightly late for dinner.

La Belle Seconde Sans Merci

*O what can ail thee, leader mine,
Above and palely teetering?
From here the holds look large and fine,
And you just cling!*

*O what can ail thee, leader dear,
So laggard and so woe-begone?
The climb is only Mild Severe,
And oh, such fun!*
