

ARGENTINE INTERLUDE.

PETER NOCK.

It was during a bad weather spell at Chamonix that Michael Ward and I made the half-day's journey via Châtelard to Gryons and thence to the châteaux of Solalex. Although snow had fallen down to the level of the Couvercle, and even then was thick on the southern slopes of the Diablerets, the great grey wall of the Argentine was completely clear of snow. This cliff, several kilometres long and 600 metres high, was therefore obviously the answer to our prayers for some good rock climbing at a low level—below 2,400 metres.

Our choice for initiation fell on the Grand Miroir, as being both the most obvious and easiest of the climbs apart from the traverse of the summit ridge. The route is not a particularly inspiring one but served its introductory purpose, if only to establish quite firmly the fact that pitons are an essential item here. For the first few hundred feet the climb runs up a chimney which in places approaches the proportions of a small gully. As the angle eases, the chimney gradually fades out so that one continues up a great length of slab, about as steep as the Idwal Slabs. Not far below the top two short vertical walls cut right across the whole width of the slab and give variety to what is otherwise rather a monotonous route. Negotiating the second of these steps slowed us down somewhat, as the line of ascent was up a damp and rotten chimney. Apart from this rather unpleasant interlude our progress had been fairly rapid, though we spent quite a lot of time placing and recovering pitons. Our practice in this new art, however, was to stand us in good stead during the next two days, when pitons were the order of the day and a rock belay almost an unknown luxury.

That evening we supped in the kitchen-living-room of one of the châteaux and read through the whole small guidebook in search of better things. Finally we singled out the Cheval Blanc, which seemed the easiest of the harder climbs and had the added attraction of a tunnel. On retiring to bed that night we found a new and novel danger associated with mountaineering. Our place of rest was to be in the hay-loft with the famer's children, and more than half the floor was missing. However, nocturnal starts are not needed for the Argentine, which was as well considering the state of the floor, and so by nine o'clock we were again at the foot of this fine limestone wall.

Starting a little to the west of the Grand Miroir, an easy slanting rake led up well on to the cliff to a shoulder immediately below the massive overhangs of the Cheval. From this point the route at once takes on a serious aspect, depressingly so for the first few pitches, where the rock is very poor. The line of ascent is via a steep shallow crack, which is the dividing line between a great rampart of slabs on the left and the much steeper Paroi Brune on the right. The first incident to stand out in my mind was climbing over a huge loose block in the corner of the crack. Higher, a short detour on the left wall was needed, whilst the crux of this section came at the exit from the crack. Here a short column, which really belonged to the Paroi Brune, lunged into our crack, forming a small overhang.

We were now on a short terrace at the end of which was the tunnel. I don't quite know what I was expecting to find here, but it certainly wasn't a genuine full-blooded tunnel 100 feet long running diagonally across the face, at an angle of 50 degrees or more. It was a truly impressive place of the most unusual type, and one which contained ample technical interest. Surely it is seldom one can indulge in pot-holing in the middle of a long rock climb.

The floor of the tunnel is formed by a smooth and absolutely holdless slab. On this occasion it was damp and no doubt it is the continuous flow of water that has polished it to the pitch of a billiard-table slate. Fortunately there was a fine crack running up the left side. One piton was in position in this, so the first manoeuvre was to climb on to it by a combination of mantle-shelfing and tension on the rope. Then, standing on what some would call the offending ironmongery, it was possible to insert another piton some six feet higher and repeat the process. After this I put in a third and (I believe) a fourth piton higher up the crack before retiring from these painful footholds for a rest. Michael then advanced up the pegs and from the highest one was able to swing on the rope and reach a kind of chockstone. At this point we were in semi-darkness ; but manual exploration revealed another narrow crack up the next slab. Inserting pitons in the dark is not the easiest thing, but by being content with small blows I managed to avoid flattening any fingers. Michael succeeded in recovering the pitons, and it was while I was belaying and at times holding him, that I notice my left foot was jammed in a chough's nest. No wonder the birds in the tunnel seemed so perturbed! The final section back into the daylight was little more than scrambling until we arrived on a small balcony. This was above the first overhang, and after being confined to the bowels of the mountain

for some time our sudden arrival at such an exposed point was a little breath-taking.

The climb now settled down again to a series of more stereotyped pitches. First a groove and then a wall, followed by a cracked overhanging wall. Finally the route made another attempt at novelty, where a wide crack slants across the slab at 45 degrees. Without the rucksack *most* of one's body can be fitted into the fissure, and after prolonged struggling the top, or perhaps I should say far end, is reached.

According to the guide book the climb virtually finishes here, but since the book was written a large piece of the succeeding ledge has disappeared, and the remainder is in process of disappearing. Once past this ominous reminder that the mountains are in a continuous and active state of decay, a few easy pitches led us to the top of the Cheval Blanc.

For the third and final day our selection was limited by necessity. Although our appetite had been well whetted and we were keen to try another interesting route, time was a factor we could not ignore if we were to be in Bex that evening. Our choice therefore of the Petit Miroir was almost without the option.

The route follows the same rake as that used by the Cheval Blanc, but continues much further along it to the west in a series of ups and downs. After what seemed an interminable time the rake did at last peter out and we were forced into some serious climbing to the terrace below the Petit Miroir. First came a series of slabs and walls, one of which was quite difficult, and finally a strenuous chimney led to the ledge. Again on this climb we saw ample evidence of the mountain's decay. All the slabs were chipped and battered from falling stones, whilst most of the holds were still full of earth and had to be cleaned before use. It must have been a veritable landslide which had covered such a wide area so thoroughly, and one that had taken place since any heavy rain. On the terrace we were glad to make another long traverse right, to the west end of the Miroir, and so escape from the line of fire of any further falling objects. The Petit Miroir is much steeper than the Grand, and the route which takes this name actually only runs on the slab for a few feet at the top. Our way next lay up a gully full of loose stones, which though not large enough to be dangerous were numerous enough to involve us in much dodging and ducking. The head of the gully is barred by a large collection of chockstones, and the detour involved on the left wall was a slightly nerve-racking one. Pitons played their

usual part, and on this vertical rotten wall I was more than ever confirmed in my support of them. The final section of the climb lay up a crack, separating the Petit Miroir from a steeper wall on the right. This gave two or three excellent exposed pitches on good sound rock.

Before starting this climb we had been in rather a despondent mood, feeling an anti-climax would be our fare after the previous day on the Cheval Blanc. Actually, to our surprise and delight, the route proved a very worthy one, due both to its character and considerable length—a very different proposition from the Grand Miroir.

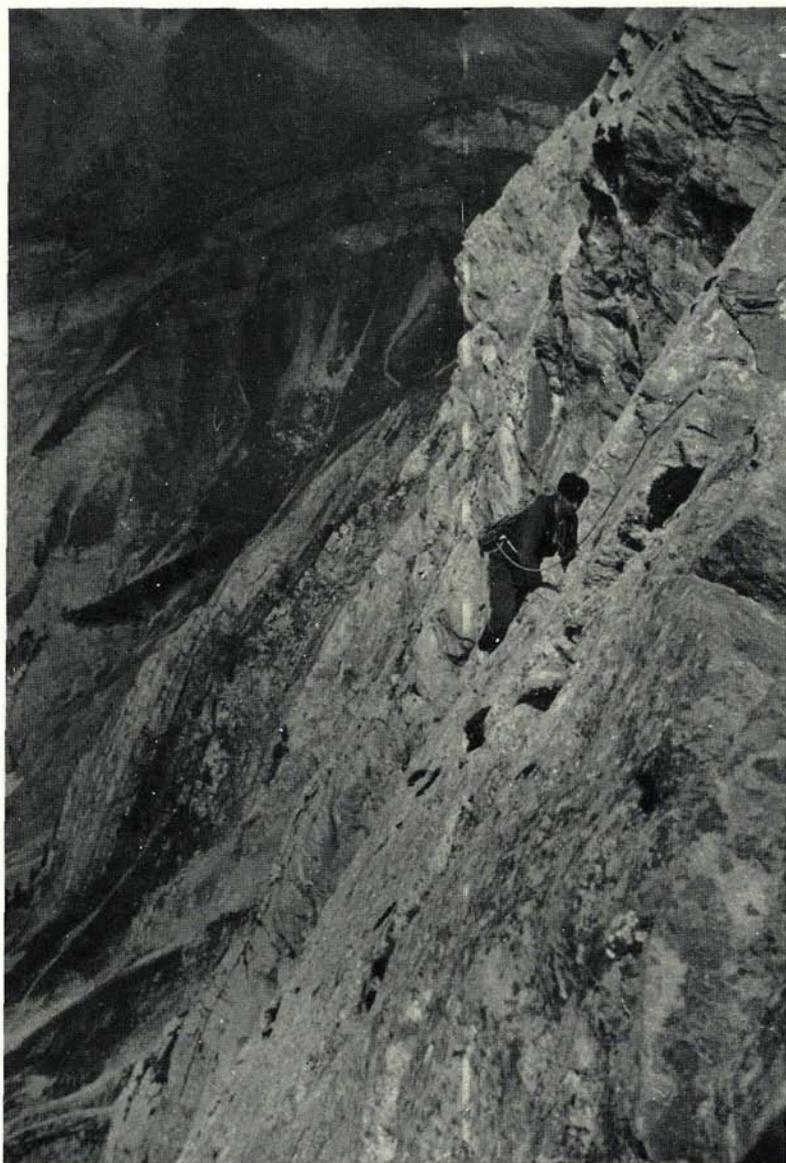
Few English people seem to be acquainted with the Argentine. This strikes me as a great pity, for whilst it is not a district in which to spend an extended holiday, it provides an excellent funk-hole in bad weather, easily accessible from such widely separated places as Chamonix or Zermatt. The climbing, of all standards, is really excellent, and can be closely compared with that in the Engelhörner. No doubt the easiest route is the five-hour traverse of the ridge, while for those of a more ambitious nature there are such things as the Diedre des Oreilles and the Voie Müller (13 hours!).

In conclusion, I would say : Don't forget the pitons and *two* hammers.



I cannot well argue with detractors from what I consider a noble sport. . . . No more argument is possible than if I were to say that I liked olives, and someone asserted that I really eat them only out of affectation. My reply would be simply to go on eating olives ; and I hope the reply of mountaineers will be to go on climbing Alps.

—Sir Leslie Stephen.



ON THE PETIT MIROIR (Argentine)

Peter Nock