

## LOSING THE WAY ON A NEEDLE

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Time dims memories. My story commences a number of seasons ago when a party of three quietly made their way at dawn from a Dolomite Hut, the leader carrying a small rucksack into which he had modestly tucked such climbing equipment as a piton hammer, piton, spare rope, slings and karabiners. Later some of this equipment was to be worn on the person, giving the wearer the appearance of a Lord Mayor of the sixth degree, though privately he felt equal to about one degree.

From the col above the hut the approach to the Needle is made by traversing as airy a terrace as any climber could wish for. After crossing two steep snow couloirs, the start of the climb is reached and though we had gained height considerably the pinnacle rose sheer for a thousand feet above the ridge. The ordinary route, which is the easiest, offers a climb of the most extreme difficulty that can be overcome without the use of pitons as climbing aids, though pitons are used as belays. We were told that the Needle was not the place for careless or clumsy climbers since there is no margin of safety for such, and balance and neatness are absolutely essential.

The climb started with a ten foot chimney sloping obliquely to the right and finishing on a small terrace with a pulpit at the base of a vertical yellow wall. This wall was one of the most difficult bits of the ascent; three problems arose, how to get on, how to stay on, and how to get off at the other end. The first was solved by a definite prod with a piton from the second man, the second by tremulous clutchings at the narrow sloping minute holds and full use of the feet on well spaced discolourations in the rock.

The leader, having at last found himself attached to the wall, found upward movement impossible. He did not think he could come down even if he had wanted to, and climbing up looked even worse. By edging along a few inches he found a better finger hold and a larger toe hold and then asked his second, who like all good seconds, now that the climbing was getting harder, was carrying all the equipment, to tie the piton hammer and a piton to the climbing rope. As the second's head was immediately under the leader's feet (a very useful position in case of need) it was not long before the equipment arrived by drawing the rope up and holding it with the teeth.

The ringed piton was hammered in a crack, and karabiner and climbing rope affixed with a sigh of relief. Then the leader took his failing courage in both hands and attempted the ascent; no sooner had he moved up his right hand when unexpectedly a little piton

coily offered itself and was quickly made use of by inserting another karabiner and slipping in the climbing rope. The piton confirmed the route as the rocks were entirely unscratched.

After the fifth piton had been reached the leader was experiencing an unpleasant and perfectly justified sense of exposure. The last problem still remained—how to get off the wall on to a minute pulpit with an overhang above, which would obviously push the climber out of balance. A lovely ringed piton lay almost within grasp, and if that could be reached it would be possible to hang on to it and haul the body up so that some part was resting on the pulpit. With some frantic clutchings, this was eventually achieved and the leader squirmed his way off the pulpit to a corner where there was sufficient room to stand. The second and third members of the party were then brought up.

Our climbing had begun on the East Wall, but the route is curiously complicated and before reaching the summit half encircles the Needle. From this notch or shoulder in the practically vertical Eastern Ridge the route lies along some rock and shale ledges that closely skirt the brink of the enormous northern precipice. To identify the traverse to the tiny pulpit on return would not be easy, so the leader made a few cairns. Next a series of chimneys had to be ascended, steep but not exceptionally difficult; these gave access to a broad, easy horizontal shelf or terrace. This magnificent promenade, known as the "Country Highway," was several feet wide in parts and extended for about a thousand feet as far as the South East Ridge, which like all the ridges on the Needle is perpendicular. Here the terrace came to an end and another vertical chimney, about two hundred feet high which was rather tiring but not excessively difficult, was climbed. We had now traversed the whole of the North Wall.

At the top of this chimney was the Southern Terrace, running east and easy to follow; it is the second great terrace, and is only 150 feet or so below the summit. This attractive looking path is a terrible trap, for the correct way lies in the opposite direction. However, on this ascent the leader fell into the trap, following the broad easy terrace which was two or three feet wide. Presently we were brought up in some dismay at the sensational ending of this seductive highway, which now faded gently into the smooth, blank, perpendicular wall of the huge precipice. Nine or ten feet obliquely above was a piton, which would need a shoulder to reach, and the leader would have to lean out sideways over the drop. We learned later that one of the early pioneers, after surmounting the overhang and driving in pitons, found his strength failing, lost hold and was dashed to pieces at the foot of the Needle.

Our ruminations about the route were suddenly interrupted by a loud clap of thunder. The party had had their faces so glued to the rocks that they had failed to notice thunder clouds coming up the valley. We shed all our ironmongery, placing it under a distant overhang, and retired to crouch under another overhang to await results. There was not long to wait. The heavens opened with a deluge of rain that soon turned into snow, the thunder became incessant and reverberated from wall to wall of the precipitous peaks around. Lightning zigzagged down adjoining pinnacles with vivid blue flames. It was a most impressive sight from an impressive position, for we were in the centre of the storm ; it was well over an hour before this ceased and we were able to creep from underneath the overhang and retrieve our equipment.

Time was getting on, and the party was by this time a little white about the gills and thinking of descending. The leader, still hopeful that the summit could be reached if only the remaining 150 feet could be surmounted, half-heartedly prospected the opposite side of the terrace, which was all very exposed. To add to the difficulties, a thick fog developed, visibility shortened to a few yards and reluctantly a sling was made with a spare rope carried for that purpose and an abseil started down the chimney, the sling being conveniently looped round a suitable bollard. Later, ring pitons offered themselves and whenever they were located they were made use of. We groped our way along the Country Highway, abseiled down further chimneys and made our way towards what we hoped would be the final abseil point, but in the fog it was an hour before we found the cairns placed in the morning and were able to make our last two abseils.

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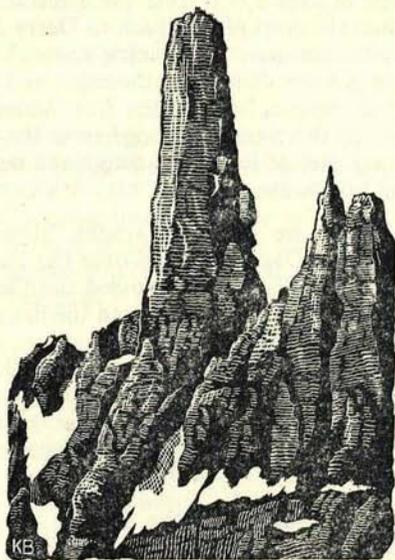
The next chapter starts a season later with the party on the Southern Terrace, studying notes for the final 150 feet. " From the overhang on the S.W. Edge a traverse is made to the North Wall. This traverse goes outwards, upwards, and across a wall to the edge of all things and a piton belay, followed by a crawl along a narrow sloping shelf over as sheer a drop as any seeker after the sensational could wish to experience. Then one lowers oneself on to some footholds and in a spread-eagle fashion edges round a corner on to the appalling North Wall, the last difficult part of the climb. The route goes up an open groove on small holds. It is extremely exposed, five pitons and a sling being used to safeguard the leader. Then the rocks become easier and the leader is soon stepping on to the spacious square top of the Needle." Thus the notes ; and thus the leader, not without a qualm or two, reached the top.

The other members of the party were soon brought up, and we lay down to bask in the sun and rest our jaded nerves. It was a

glorious day. The views were magnificent ; in the foreground, breathtaking towers and walls of the nearby Dolomites and in the distance, over green valleys and forests, ranges of snow-covered mountains.

There was still, however, one problem left—having got up, how to get down ? Peering over the sides of the Needle, everywhere there were vertical walls dropping into space a thousand feet or more. The ringed piton for the first abseil mentioned in the notes could not be found, so a sling was made and hitched around a convenient bollard, the two 120-foot ropes were joined together and threaded through the sling, and the first abseil began. About twenty feet down the ringed piton was noticed, so we were on the right route. The abseil became interesting, as for the next hundred feet it was free, and as the climber twisted slowly round he would first have a close view of the wall just out of reach of his feet, and then a moment later an uninterrupted view of the valley thousands of feet below. The landing was a nice pulpit with a piton to hang on to and a ringed piton at base level to thread the abseil rope for the next drop.

There were eleven more abseils before the lowest terrace was reached. We felt that the Needle is the type of modern rock pinnacle which is climbed out of sheer love of adventure and for the sake of experiencing the delight of overcoming great physical difficulties.



THE NEEDLE