

THE NORTH-WEST RIDGE OF THE POINTE DE LA
PALLISADE
JOHN DAVIES

The summer of 1954 was one of very uncertain weather in the Alps and the first few days of the holiday Martin Allbutt and I spent in Chamonix were no exception. We had intended to start with some climbs from the Couvercle, but there was a heavy snowfall on our first night there and rather than sit it out waiting for the weather to improve we decided to move to another locality. We chose the Trélatête, but even here our original plan was foiled by the weather, but that was how we came to find the route which I write about now.

The Trélatête Hut is at the foot of the Trélatête Glacier—a large glacier at the extreme south-western tip of the Mont Blanc massif. To get there from Chamonix we went down the valley by rail to St. Gervais and from there by 'bus up the road to Les Contamines.

It was very hot and sunny when we arrived in this rather sleepy little village. We soon found the little path leading up the hillside through the pine trees towards the Trélatête, and slowly wound our way up through the quiet woods. After going some way we were surprised to see a scene more reminiscent of Derbyshire than the Alps—there in a clearing of the trees was a rock outcrop some 50 feet high with climbers on it. It turned out that this was one of the training grounds used by a French organization which undertook to train climbers rather on the lines of those who introduce new climbers to our own hills.

Two hours or so brought us within sight of the "Pavilion de Trélatête," to give it its full name. This is a privately owned hut with bedroom or bunk accommodation; food is available and cooking is not allowed inside the hut. We were determined to do most of our own cooking so we came to an arrangement whereby we used our stove on a little terrace outside and brought our food in to eat it. The hut itself is in a pleasant flower-strewn pasture below the snow line. The Trélatête Glacier which lies above the hut is about 5 miles long and flanked on both sides and capped at the end by peaks of about 10,000 to 11,000 feet high all fairly easy of access but mostly involving long and strenuous snow plodding. One of the most elegant of these peaks is Mont Tondu.

Our original intention was to traverse from here over the Domes de Miage to the Durier Hut. We attempted this on our first day but did not get far owing to continual snowfall and bad snow conditions. We considered what else we might try should the following day have better weather. Mont Tondu is the nearest of the larger peaks; it is 10,483 feet high and has two summits; one a shapely snow cone, and

the other a slightly higher rock summit connected to the snow peak by a narrow rock ridge. We had noticed that between Mont Tondu and the hut on the same side of the glacier as Mont Tondu was a subsidiary peak with a fine rock ridge with many towers ; this peak was called the Pointe de la Palissade, and is 8,951 feet high. The ridge seemed to have the charm of not being often done since even the Guide Book had it marked in the wrong place. We decided to approach Mont Tondu by way of this north-west ridge of the Pointe de la Palissade and thus get in not only a fine looking rock climb but also an elegant peak with the minimum of snow plodding. There was also the promise of a fine glissade down from Mont Tondu back to the glacier.

The next morning when we arose in the darkness the weather once again looked unpromising, but after cooking our porridge and bacon on the terrace we set off. As we plodded up the stony snout of the glacier we were in mist but to our great joy as we climbed up we gradually emerged to find that the mist only lay in the glacier snout and above the sky was clear. We were following the glacier on our left side and had eventually to cross to the other side ; however, about a mile above the snout the glacier steepens somewhat before levelling off again. This steep part has large seracs on the Mont Tondu side so we kept to our left, walking up on ice just about as steep as one can stand up on in Vibrams until we were on the upper more gentle slope, and then crossed. By now the sun was rising behind us and lit the shapely snow cone of Mont Tondu with a lovely orange light. The towers of the ridge we were making for were still in shadow but showed up against the clear morning sky. We crossed the glacier and stumbled over the ice-clad stones of the lateral moraine on the other side, making for a point about 700 feet above us to the right of the first important gendarme on the ridge. The first part of this involved a toil up a steep and loose old moraine, and here Martin, ever the fit one, soon established a good lead and I was obliged to pick a slightly different route in order to avoid the wake of debris which clattered away behind him in his meteoric progress. Above the moraine a stony slope led on to slabs of good sound rock. After the rather loose ascent it was pleasant to find that mountains were made of such stuff.

We found ourselves on a little saddle and on our left the first gendarme, a grotesque and jagged cockscomb of rocks. We were in good spirits now and eager for our climb, so we roped up and commenced, taking it in turns to lead where one at a time was advisable. From the saddle a short easy crack led up on to a broad shelf at the foot of the first tooth of the cockscomb ; this tooth overhung the shelf for a few feet all around its base, but in the

left-hand corner of the shelf the overhang was only about four feet high and above it was a chimney splitting the tooth right through the top. Getting into the chimney was a bit awkward until one had found the right hand hold but once there it was simply a question of effort to emerge breathless on top. The next two pinnacles had to be turned by a traverse on the opposite side, and here, where the sun was not shining, it was still quite cold. It was here we first noticed the lichen, which was a remarkable feature of this ridge ; near the crest it grew in large flaky lumps which stood out some way from the rock like dry seaweed.

After the cockscomb there was a drop and then another larger tower, which was much broken up and gave only easy scrambling to the top. Then followed a level airy crest to the next "brèche." As we looked across we realized this was a more serious affair ; we first had to climb down a steep drop of about 50 feet which was facilitated by diagonal cracks. We stood at the foot of the brèche and surveyed the next tower ; this looked forbidding and about 150 feet high. Where it came down to the crest of the ridge it was sheer and smooth for about half its height, and then sloped back at an easier angle. We had seen from the other side of the brèche that this upper part was fairly well broken up and should go easily, but the question was—getting there, for the lower part was smooth and greenish with lichen. One could look in vain for nail scratches—it was one of the delights of this route that there just weren't any. However, about ten feet to the left of the crest some holds gave a promise of vertical progress. It was my turn to lead so I made a start. Once up a few feet things fell into place—the route went diagonally across to the centre of the tower and then vertically upwards again to the easier angled part at the top. The pitch was a delightful one since the rock was airy and steep and the holds though small were adequate. I stopped to belay at the top of the steep part where the tower sloped back at an easier angle, and was suddenly thrilled by the sight of a "Brocken," its coloured rings shining brightly in the mist which was forming out of the wind on the leeward side of the ridge. The shadow of the tower we were on cut a slice out of the otherwise perfect circle of rainbow colours. I hastily got out my camera and exposed two frames at slightly different exposures to be sure of a result.

Martin came on up, obligingly halting some feet below me on small holds while I took a photograph looking down towards him. Photographs taken thus often fail to give the sense of exposure which the photographer feels and wishes to portray. In this instance, however, the wall we had descended on the opposite side of the brèche was behind Martin and this helped to restore the effect of perspective.

Having put up with this ordeal Martin continued up past me and disappeared over what seemed to be the top of the tower. It was some time before tugs on the rope said "come on," but when I had clambered up to the top of the tower my surprised eye followed the rope along the horizontal top of the tower we had just climbed and then over a little dip and up a vertical step of about 30 feet. This looked hard and it was pleasant to realize that Martin was on top of it. Once again the direct approach was out of the question since the lower part was vertical and holdless ; however, there was a crack higher up. To reach this crack it was necessary to traverse around the gendarme to the right and then back at a slightly higher level until the crack was reached ; the traverse was delicate and exposed and made this pitch the hardest problem of the climb. After this there were no more serious difficulties. A little more scrambling and we were on to the Pointe de la Palissade. Up to here we had taken 5 hours from the hut, but we had taken our time stopping for photographs and belaying with "Home Hills" precision.

The way ahead was now clear. A straightforward looking ridge led down to a broad snow col, the Col des Chasseurs, which was between us and Mont Tondu. The slopes beyond the col were easy angled snow for the most part with a band of rocks in the middle, and the climbing down to the col was on pleasant easy granite, now warming up in the mid-morning sun. Once more Martin obligingly filled the frame of my viewfinder to give a close up impression of the intrepid mountaineer—this one came out very well even to the shine on Martin's boots !

Beyond the col the ascent was at first rather tiresome and the rock band we had seen was shaly and loose, but we were well rewarded by the final sharp snow ridge which terminates the South Peak. Here we were in cloud. The sound of voices told us we were no longer alone and other parties appeared out of the mist on their way down. This was the popular peak and we must now share it with others, but we were glad we had come the way we had for until this point we had seen no one all day. From the snowy South Peak a rock ridge led to the higher North Peak. The ridge was sharp and airy, but easy even with a fair covering of snow. After a short stay we retraced our steps to the South Summit and down the snow ridge, and at the foot of this we turned to the right down the broad snow slopes leading to the Trélatête Glacier. The long glissade we had anticipated did not turn out as well as we had hoped since the snow was getting rather soft, but nevertheless we were soon on the glacier.

We were pleased with our day, for we had found an almost unknown climb that was well worth the doing and in addition climbed another very shapely peak.