

THE NORTH FACE OF THE AIGUILLE DE TRIOLET

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As we left Les Houches to drive to the village of Argentière in the valley of Chamonix, we made a definite decision to turn back if it was raining when we arrived there. Such was the state of the weather that we really expected rain and I for one felt a slight relief at not having to walk up to the Argentière Hut, for I was convinced that we should simply have to walk down again in the rain.

The rain held off until we started the uphill plod, and then as it gently fanned across the hillside to us no one dared to suggest turning back, even though the car was only five minutes' walk away. The reason was that nobody wanted to turn back, for once on the move an uphill plod in the rain is better than sitting in a chalet gloomily listening to the patter of the raindrops. Nonetheless, the walk to the Argentière Hut with a full rucksack seemed very long, and as the icy rain swept across the flat expanse of the middle part of the glacier, I wondered if we were doing the right thing, and that was putting it mildly.

Dennis, John and Jacques rose early next morning to do the ordinary route on the Tour Noir, but I preferred to sleep on as my clothes were rather wet. When I did go outside I was surprised to see a cloudless sky, but by then it was too late to follow them. John and Jacques were definitely going to do the North face of Les Courtes the next day, but Dennis and I were undecided. I spent the rest of the day looking over the North face of the Triolet, wondering whether there was a way through or over the seracs which cut across the face. The first half of the face is climbed on snow and ice to the start of the smooth slabs higher up, and these are then turned on the right at the point where the ice wall starts. The ice wall turned back one party years ago, and we did not want to waste time going so far only to have to descend again. The seracs overhung very much and there did not appear to be any record of a previous ascent in 1960, although we did not ask the guardian. However, the *French Alpine Club Journal* has since recorded that two climbers from Lyons did the climb on July 3rd, three weeks previous to our ascent. In the event we decided to take a closer look, and so at 1.50 a.m. next morning Dennis and I departed for the Triolet.

Our departure was a little too early, for we had to wait for half an hour near the rimaye because in the darkness we could not see a place to cross. Better light, however, showed us a spot where we could fairly easily gain the upper slope. The Vallot Guide gives the angle as 53 degrees, so we decided to kick steps rather than crampon our way up it, as this would leave us a line of retreat if necessary. From our

position at the foot of the slope we could get no idea of our chances higher up. Fairly quickly we gained altitude, moving one at a time and leading through. This was restful, and also safer, as small though frequent powder snow avalanches flowed around us from the rocks on the upper part of the face. Every so often the snow under our feet would give a vicious crack ; whenever this happened we froze in our steps, but we judged that the slope would not avalanche with only two on it, and pressed on upwards.

At last we were level with the two rock islands which dot the great slope high up, and soon could traverse on to a snow ridge supported by the first island. However, we quickly had to leave the sanctuary of the snow ridge in order to do a diagonal traverse up towards the snow ridge above the second rock island to our right. The climbing now became more interesting, for we were on a great ice slope which swept down between the two widely spaced rock islands. It was steeper than the snow slope we had just climbed, and there was a lot of step cutting in blue ice to be done although long snow patches relieved us of continuous cutting. Ice pitons were used where necessary, and when we were comfortably attached to them we could better take stock of our position. There was no danger now of our slope avalanching, but powder snow continued to enliven the proceedings by flowing from the rocks above. Due to the steepness the summit tower seemed to overhang us by a long way ; indeed it has never been climbed direct.

Progress was now much slower, and whilst we had previously kept pace with our two friends on Les Courtes, they were now reaching their summit ridge. We could easily see them on the snow. At last we reached the second snow ridge, and for the first time could clearly see the seracs. The ice wall was just above our level, huge and overhanging ; there was no question of climbing such a thing. It could only be avoided, and fortunately a narrow couloir ran up between the unclimbable rock slabs and the seracs. Our morale went up at once, but there was a lot of work to be done before we reached the narrow couloir. The slope to it was much steeper than anything on the previous part to the route, and consisted of hard blue ice with a white coating of frost.

We should have left the snow ridge at once to make a diagonal ascent of the ice slope, but we were tempted into doing several rope lengths up the good snow of the ridge before quitting it. Cutting for thirty yard runouts in the hard ice was tiring, and as each of us completed his turn he was glad to knock in his ice piton. The pitons froze in at once and were always difficult to extract. They had to be cut out, and whilst trying to lever mine out of its last inch of ice on

one occasion it came out too quickly. Having a spare I did not risk losing my balance by grabbing for it, since Dennis was away to my right, and so I watched it slide quickly down the tremendous slope below. From then on my spare piton remained attached to my waist loop by a spare cord, and when not in use was simply slung over my shoulder.

Soon we began to pay the penalty of going too far up the snow ridge. The line of traverse was beginning to flatten out, and step cutting in steep ice always becomes more difficult the nearer the traversing line approaches the horizontal. Each step required many blows, for the angle was now steep enough to necessitate ice being cut away to make room for the calf muscles of our legs. The view downwards was superb, as the ice slope swept to the glacier; the slope was slightly concave in that it steepened towards the top. Far above was the summit tower, with the icy slabs in between; ahead and above us was an easy snow slope supported by the seracs, a sanctuary that might have been miles away. Tension caused by the avalanches was beginning to have its effect, and I wondered if we would be permitted to reach this sanctuary. However, I continued to cut away, although I now wished I had a sling to put on my axe, as I would have felt safer cutting one-handed with the axe attached to my wrist. The ice was very hard and required many blows, so that the icy gloves did not help. One could not afford to lose an axe in such a place.

At the end of one run out I hammered in my piton only to see the ice flake away to reveal the rock slab underneath. The ice was only inches thick and in fact the slab broke free of the ice only a few feet above our heads. However, I managed to get the peg to freeze into place, and after two more runouts we were in the couloir, with the serac wall well below our level. We were surprised to find fifteen inches of good snow frozen into the bed of the narrow couloir, and quickly climbed it to an ice cave above our heads. The cave was a dangerous place of powder snow and dark holes and was in fact the end of a crevasse. As the couloir became ice from this point upwards, we worked our way up the lower lip of the crevasse out of the cave, and landed easily on the upper snow slope. It seemed quite flat after the ice. The time was now 1.30 p.m., so we had spent nearly nine hours on the face below.

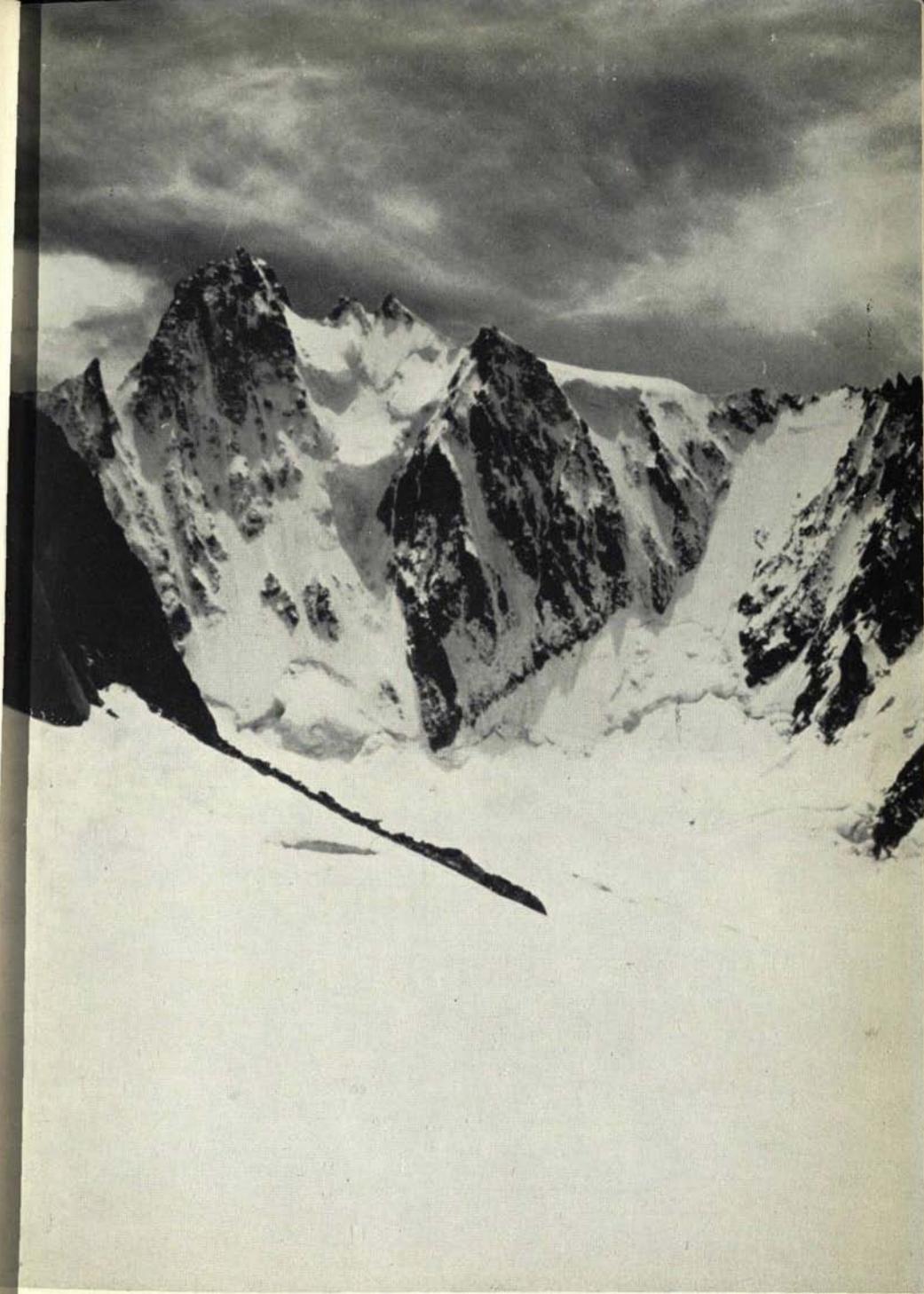
A snow plod took us to another crevasse, where we sat on the level lower lip to eat for the first time since leaving the glacier. The route now lay up the steeper snow and ice slopes above towards the rocks of the Petites Aiguilles de Triolet to avoid another great ice wall. A traverse left to the Col Supérieur de Triolet would follow and then we could climb the easy summit rocks by the ordinary route. However,

we were too concerned with eating to give much thought to this as yet, so when we looked up to find no more blue sky, but a thick mist, all in the space of fifteen minutes, we were somewhat put out.

There was only one choice—to go upward and see what happened. We climbed increasingly steep snow on most interesting ground ; first a long couloir between ice bulges, then a tricky move round an overhang of ice followed by a step across what seemed to be a vertical crevasse to look for better snow. Nil visibility added to the mystery and interest of route finding and played tricks with our eyes. Now a long slope led upwards, and in the mist Dennis seemed vertically above me. The snow was soft and not very deep, so we moved one at a time for safety. Rocks loomed up but we had no idea of our whereabouts ; we now seemed to be in a couloir with a rock retaining wall on our left. Were we doomed to go on for ever, eternally kicking steps in unpleasantly soft steep snow ? Surely everything comes to an end, we thought—if only we could see ahead.

I knocked in an ice peg, for the snow was now only six inches thick on the ice. As Dennis came up I noticed a dark line across to the right. It seemed to be another crazy vertical crevasse, but was it possible it might be a cornice running down the ridge above ? Surely not at that queer angle, we thought, but Dennis agreed to inspect it. His rope ran out and he belayed in snow. I passed through and realised the mist had played tricks with us ; it was an ordinary cornice on a descending ridge, and yet, I supposed, if we surmount it we shall still have to go on kicking steps towards an imaginary destination in the sky. Nevertheless, I punched holes in the bulge with some excitement. With an effort I got my axe into the upper slope and pulled myself after it to face a bitterly cold wind. The snow surface was frozen hard and to my utter amazement was marked with crampon tracks. People had climbed the Triolet by the ordinary route and now we knew that tracks lower down would guide us through the labyrinth of crevasses on the descent route. Life had suddenly become easier.

Dennis joined me and we consulted our watches. It was 4.10 p.m. The mist was as thick as ever but with a fierce wind to hasten us on our way we raced to the comparative shelter of the Col de Triolet where we stopped to eat. The crampon tracks now disappeared, but by keeping to the right direction we soon picked up tracks in the snow which we followed all the way. This enabled us to move faster than we might have done, and we finally reached the Couvercle Hut at 6.10 p.m., in worsening weather.



North Face of the Triolet (the two rock islands can be clearly seen)

Dennis Davis