

## THE RYAN-LOCHMATTER AND THE VIA CASSIN

R. L. B. COLLEDGE

The approach to the start of the Ryan-Lochmatter route on the East Ridge of the Aiguille du Plan was perhaps the most tiring I have experienced, with the early morning snow so soft as to be calf deep for much of the way. It also seemed surprisingly long, no doubt due to the state of the snow; certainly we experienced three hours of treadmill labour before arriving at last at the rimaye. This was formidable indeed, and finding no snowbridge of any sort we climbed the two steep Grade Four pitches which lead up a small rock buttress, the key to gaining the East Ridge when the rimaye is open.

Once above the rimaye we took to snow again, moving up and then left into a couloir, a subsidiary of the great couloir descending from the Col du Pain de Sucre. This was overcome with an easy pitch of Grade Four and some interesting scrambling until we arrived on to a large expanse of smooth slabs. Pleasant climbing, including another Grade Four pitch, took us to the side of the East Ridge, where a corner groove continued up to a very innocent looking, yet overhanging, chimney. It was Dennis Davis' turn and he seemed to have more difficulty with his rucksack than with the rock itself. In particular, he took a dislike to the ice axe he was carrying. With no axe, I still found it a hard and tiring struggle, due entirely to the encumbrance of a rucksack. Undoubtedly this chimney of Grade Four Superior is a good place for sack hauling, when it would become much easier. It is also the key to setting foot on the line of the East Ridge above the first great step.

There followed plenty of interesting rock climbing on the open ridge, with many strenuous cracks, but without doubt the most interesting in appearance was the final great chimney leading up the summit tower. We arrived at its foot in increasingly violent and misty weather, and I personally thought that this deep and overhanging chimney was surely not the way up. It looked much too difficult to be the correct way, and yet there really was no alternative, as I discovered on investigation.

With the right toes jammed in a thin crack in the right wall of the chimney, and with a hand and foot braced against the left wall, the first part went surprisingly easily, but at the halfway mark the chimney widened. Surely the smooth wall at the back could not be climbable, and yet it proved even easier, thanks to several good flakes which were invisible from below. The overhang still looked very hard, but further movement upwards revealed a smooth groove slanting up just below the bulge. There was no useful handhold to facilitate movement into this groove, but feet placed against the drooping facets of the overhang enabled the body to be pushed into it. Probably Dennis did it more elegantly, but to me this seemed

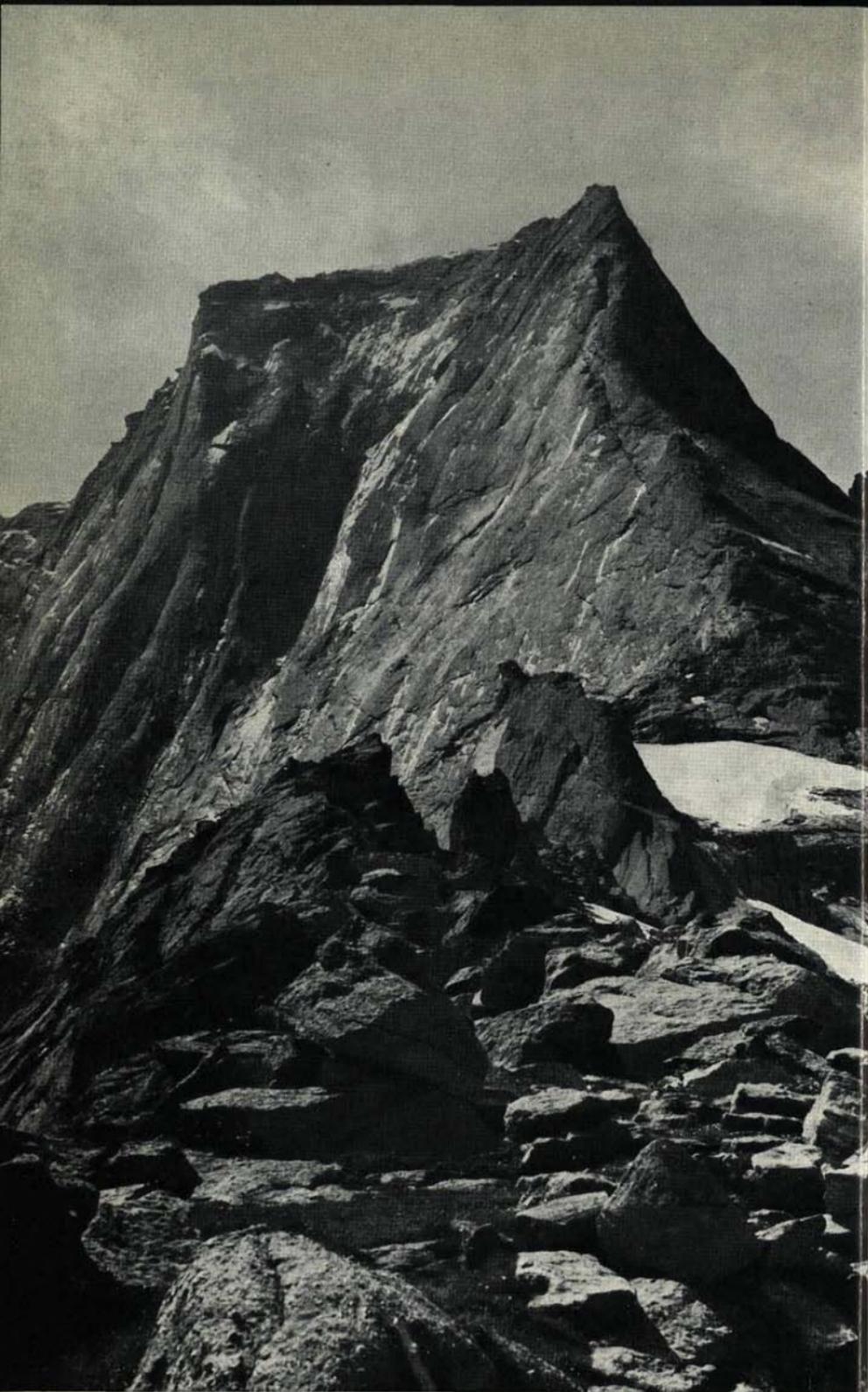


*Piz Badile, N.E. Face*

1. *Start*
2. *Snow Patch*
3. *Start of Gully*
4. *Start of long traverse*
5. *Summit*

*J. A. Hartley*

*Reproduced by courtesy of the Rucksack Club Journal*



*Piz Badile, N.E. Face*

*Peter Wild*

safer. The groove continued upward for a few feet, finally to level out on to a good ledge round a corner. Here I looped a sling and an alloy snaplink over a bollard, only to see it whipped into the air by the fierce wind and blown into the void. It is obviously not good practice to treat light weight snaplinks as one would a heavier steel one.

It did not take long to descend to the Requin Hut (we had set out from the Envers des Aiguilles Hut), and after a bowl of soup we made good time to the Montenvers hotel, where a welcome glass of beer preceded the walk down to Chamonix in the gathering darkness.

After resting for a day in Chamonix, we took to the road once more, travelling via Martigny and Brigue in the heavy rain. Fine weather greeted us as we arrived in Italy by Domodossola, and a pleasant evening was spent at Stresa on Lake Maggiore. The fine weather continued the next day as we passed by Lake Como, to culminate in a very hot late afternoon for our walk up to the Sciora Hut. We were now in the Val Bregaglia, for after passing through the small Italian town of Chiavenna we crossed quickly into Switzerland to arrive at the village of Bondo, from which the track up to the Sciora Hut starts. For those not familiar with the area, the continuation of the main road up the Val Bregaglia brings one to St. Moritz, forty nine kilometres from Chiavenna.

The walk up to the Sciora, at first through thick pinewoods and then by easy zigzags up a verdant cliff is truly delightful, with many fascinating views back down the Bregaglia. We cut the time down by driving up the first section, which is well maintained, perhaps for bringing down timber. The fairly new stone-built hut is homely and well situated on a vast open alp, with a splendid view down the valley. Directly opposite is the North East face of the Piz Badile, on which face we hoped to attempt the Via Cassin; our descent would be by the easy southern Italian side, before returning over the snows of the Passo Bondo. Through binoculars one can trace the entire 2,500 feet of the route, starting at the rimaye and passing by the small snow patch, which is not so high up as it seems, to the summit itself. Instead of the cracks of the Plan, we were to have the slabs of the Badile, and no words can exaggerate the delights of this magnificent climb on such an open face.

It rained most of the night, but at 3.00 a.m. there was an improvement in the weather. The thought of water streaming down the harder pitches deterred several others from starting, and thus we were to have the climb to ourselves. The sun was well up when we reached the rimaye and we hoped we were not too late. After scrambling up towards the right for some distance the first pitch revealed itself as a wet seventy foot corner—only Grade Four, but in the early morning stiffness, and as wet as it was, it seemed rather thin. I showed no desire to argue when Dennis moved into the lead, but

contented myself with the thought that since he owned the typed description of the route, he could start the ball rolling. There followed a series of cracks over a vast sea of slabs, tending always to the left, until a large detached block announced the start of the serious climbing.

The route now moved into a corner with an overhanging right retaining wall. Fortunately the pitons were in place, for this pitch was largely artificial climbing, and although one or two seemed loose it was only necessary to clip on to the pegs and pull up or round the bulges. Nevertheless it was strenuous, as we did not carry foot stirrups, and it was a good Five Superior pitch. One might say that with so many pegs in place the use of foot stirrups is no longer necessary on the Badile face. There followed some interesting pitches of free climbing of grades Four and Five before an easier line in a vast area of slabs led up to the snow patch.

Behind the snow was a very steep wall of uncompromising rock, and we felt we still had a long way to go, as indeed we had. To the left of the snow patch we saw a steep corner topped by a big square cut overhang. This was the key to setting foot on the huge steep wall above the snow, but by now it was running with water, with a miniature waterfall cascading over the overhang in a spectacular manner. We had met wet rock most of the way up, but this seemed far worse. Before starting we glanced across the great central couloir, since our trend leftward across the face had brought us to its edge. On the far side the morning sunshine was lighting up the shimmering streams of water flowing down a vertical buttress. Once again many pegs were in place, although some good steep free climbing was also necessary in between the pegs. A grade Five Superior, slippery by reason of the water, and a good spray from the overhang, was yet very satisfying. Well below the overhang we moved right, on to the wall into a position of delightful exposure. There followed a series of open grooves of grades Five or Four Superior on excellent rock, until a smaller square cut overhang forced us into a very steep holdless corner where pegs were the only medium. At the top of this the angle relented a little.

We now followed an obvious line towards the start of the long vee groove which widened into a great chimney higher up. The groove was entered with difficulty, but once in the groove we could only push on up, encumbered with rucksacks. As we reached up for a handhold the water ran freely down inside our sleeves to reappear, of course, via the trousers. Water also ran back down the rope to whoever was below to wet us further, since it was impossible to keep the rope out of it. This went on for three hundred feet until the groove widened into a chimney and, wet through, we entered into the most unpleasant of places. Very cold, very wet, dark and depressingly

enclosed, this chimney with its ribbon of steep frozen snow at its base was not a place to linger in. The hardest pitch above the snow ribbon was grade Five Superior, and I was glad to use the pegs in place to overcome the bulge quickly before my fingers became numbed.

For some time now the weather had been worsening, and after seeing all the fresh snow on the less steep, but loose, original Cassin finish up the top section of the central couloir we decided to finish to the right of the summit, a popular variation. So after leaving the chimney we traversed towards the Cassin finish, but just before reaching the two rappels which lead down to this finishing line we turned up some steep slabs to work our way on to the North Ridge, and so to the summit and an improvement in the weather.

That night we slept in the Italian Gianetti Hut before returning to the Sciora Hut next morning via the Passo Bondo.

