THE RIGHT HAND PILLAR OF BROUILLARD

By R. BAILLIE

(Three illustrations: nos. 21–23)

The Pillar[1], it seemed, was in danger of becoming a 'last great problem', what with Englishmen besieging it for years, the Poles prowling around the base, and no one even getting onto the solid rock. Perhaps this was because it was so inaccessible; folded away into the upper Brouillard cirque, needing an expedition to reach it and another to return over the summit of Mont Blanc; no convenient *téléférique* to land you at the bottom, and no *bistro* on top. It meant a return to the golden age, with walking and real mountaineering.

After Bonington's first sortie had failed, to our reluctant satisfaction, we arrived in Chamonix, fresh from the arc-light glare of the Matterhorn's T.V. cameras and eager for the solitude of high places. It was wet, as was usual that season, and we sorted out our newly acquired chrome-molybdenum gear in the rain. John Harlin, all set for the Dru, strolled across and ran a critical eye over what we considered to be an impressive array of ironmongery. 'Travelling light, I see,' was his only comment.

A quick rush, new style, through the tunnel and up the Val Veni; a sigh of satisfaction as we watched our sacks gliding up the workmen's cableway to the new hut. We did not want to start getting traditional until it was strictly necessary.

After a pleasant brew of tea at the five-star Monzino hut, I was ready for an early night; but I had reckoned without the fiery enthusiasm of Bonington. 'We should make the Eccles hut to-night,' he said. 'The weather might well break clear . . .' (I looked at the swirling mists and wondered just what would break.) '. . . for an early start to-morrow,' he went on. 'If we ever stop to-night,' I thought. But reluctance would have been tantamount to cowardice so, dutifully enthusiastic, we trudged off; up interminable screes and over interminable snow-slopes, eventually grinding to a halt, long after dark, on a crumbly snow-slope just about to avalanche. We were only a short distance below the bivouac hut, but there were crevasses to be swept into, and I did not fancy being buried in them in shorts. So we bivouacked on a sharp ridge above the Col du Frêney, and the stars came out to make it frosty

[1] The first ascent, here described, was made on August 21, 1965; cf. *A. J.* 70. 315–16.—Editor.

Photo: C. J. S. Bonington]

THE THREE PILLARS OF BROUILLARD FROM JUST BELOW THE COL DU FRÊNEY.

and good for climbing; and next day was fine and clear, except that we had lost the burner from our Gaz stove.

A short crampon-plod up crisp snow, and we were at the Eccles hut. Just around the corner, we hoped, ran a cunning traverse line. Previous parties had crossed, or tried to cross, the heavily-crevassed Brouillard glacier to get to the Pillars, but we planned to traverse across to the Pillar above the bergschrund. It went quite easily: front points on good, steep snow, and one mild 'moment' crossing the polished ice of the couloir's rubbish-chute.

The face of the Pillar was vertical, clean and dry, but the slabby flanks were dotted with unseasonable snow and running with melt-water. Cutting into the left hand side of the face was a great dièdre. It slanted out left, and ended in huge roofs, a short way below the top of the Pillar. To the left of the Great Dièdre was a Y-crack, which seemed to give access to the slabs and broken rocks of the upper left flank. Our first attempt would be via this Y-crack.

The weather seemed set and the steepest bits of rock were dry. Our traverse line had led us in above the scrappy rocks of the Pillar's base; and two pitches of typical and pleasant crack climbing up the right edge of the main face led up onto the side of the great couloir—a wicked place, full of rumbling and of falling, splattering ice. It was the time and place to cut out left and find our Y-crack. So Chris found a little traverse, which tricked its way through the difficulties and went out left onto the fine ledges below the Great Dièdre—but with no Y-crack in sight. It had to be somewhere, a great crack like that, so we moved out away left again onto the side of the Pillar and up a bit, onto over-steep, slabby rock, all running with water and leading only astray.

Now, route-finding seems to be a question of whether to search around carefully to left and right, looking for a nice, easy break, or to go straight up, jingling with iron and repeating to yourself the maxim that no rock is impossible and that the direct way is the shortest and most glorious. I get a lot of excitement from this route-finding, but sometimes there is not much scope for diversion. In the case of this Great Dièdre, it had the cracks, so would obviously take us somewhere, but it would need a lot of pegs and we were 'travelling light' . . . With the horrible, icy Y-crack, however, we had not seen far up it, therefore a chance remained that it might be easy; this seemed logical.

But next morning, after a brew of cold lemon tea, the sun came out and warmed the rocks, and the sky was blue. You can feel dangerously bold in conditions like this, and of course we headed up the Great Dièdre—anyway, it was nearer than the Y-crack. At first it went all right; but up in the hard part the cracks were all rounded and we did not have enough long pegs to get into the depths. So we retreated, and abseiled all the way down the Pillar, finishing with an alarming jump over the waiting

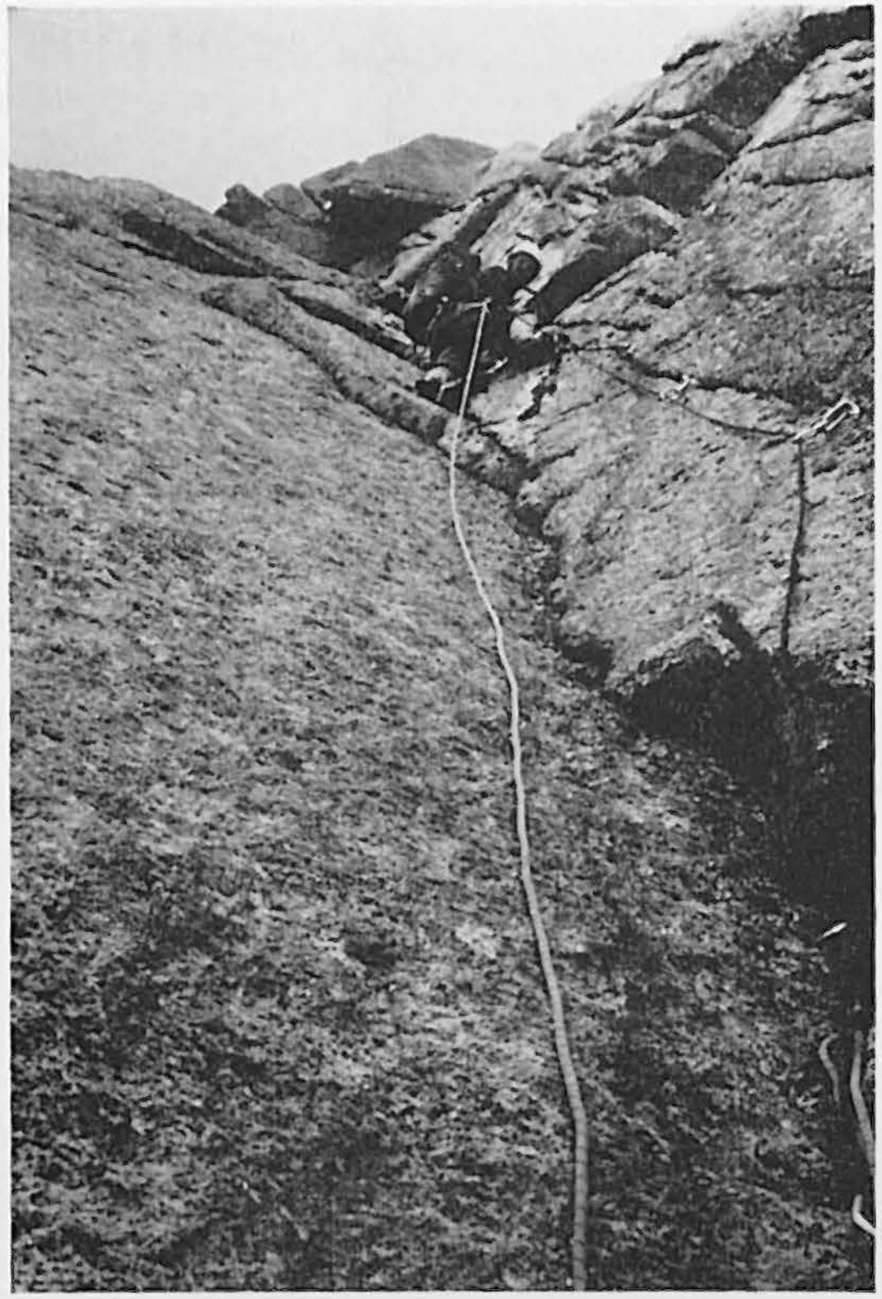

Photo: R. Baillie]

RIGHT-HAND PILLAR OF BROUILLARD. BONINGTON ON THE A1 PITCH IN THE 'GREAT DIÈDRE'.

(No. 22)

Photo: R. Baillie]

RIGHT-HAND PILLAR OF BROUILLARD. BONINGTON ON THE PENDULUM FROM THE TOP OF 'THE BEANSTALK' INTO THE GROOVE LEADING TO THE SECOND BIVOUAC LEDGE. HARLIN IN FOREGROUND.

(No. 23)

bergschrund. Back at the Eccles, the snow was too bad to descend. Instead, we poked around and found some paraffin which we poured into an old tin, then twisted a sort of wick, and soon like backwoodsmen had a hot brew.

Next day we went down the crisp slopes and into Gobbi's shop in Courmayeur, where we purchased the longest Charlet 'Universals' they had, and Toni Gobbi lent us his stove-top and told us the latest gossip. Then we laid in piles of scientific food, and put everything onto the cableway, and wandered up to the Monzino. Here Madame cooked our food and, like good alpinists, we woke up early to catch the snow firm, and stumbled up to the glacier . . .

To find that, except for nuts and tea, we had left all our food behind at the Monzino. This was especially sad, as it had all been carefully and dutifully calculated from impressive charts which John Harlin had spent some time in deciphering for us. However, Bonington's cursing stopped when he saw that I was not sufficiently impressed to return, so we pressed on, feeling in some ways much less confused.

It was easy getting onto the Pillar now, and without much ado we reached the foot of the Great Dièdre. The initial crack seemed less desperate, and needed no étriers on the steep bit. Then Bonington came through, and was soon happily performing some of his favourite delicate bridging movements. Not very often, he buried a peg in the rounded crack, and had soon climbed it. I pulled out the pegs, thus managing to avoid much of the grade VI climbing involved, and came to a little hanging stance, rigged with a place ready for me to belay and Bonington ready to move on upwards. I relaxed into my slings and admired the approaching clouds; above, sounds of hammering died away into free climbing noises, then into belaying ones.

Chris was belayed on a fine ledge up under the roofs, so we wanted to break out, either left onto slabs or right onto something invisible. I pendulumed out left, but did not like it there: running water, visions of wet bivouacs and difficult, diagonal retreats. I returned and, leaving Bonington murmuring about the classical, hard free climbing I was leaving behind, I swung convulsively round the corner to the right and onto the invisible face. The move took me into mist, and to a new vista on a new route; what had we drawn this time?

You could not really tell. All you could do was sense a great, smooth wall leaning over into the clouds—and up it a black streak. As the mists swirled and eddied, so this black streak became first a chimney for back and foot, then a hand-jam crack, then something too thin for anything, then lost altogether.

I stood there peering, and thinking how well Winthrop Young would have described the situation; but, in this case, 'little Joseph' around the corner was eager for some action and some knowledge of what lay ahead.

I could not tell him very exactly, but I felt curious to find out, so I committed us and called Chris across.

Up we clambered to the root of our uncertainty, and there it was—a fine peg line, cutting through a great expanse of sensual granite, winging upwards and disappearing beckoningly into thin air. It was as easy as climbing a beanstalk; perhaps safer. The weather even cleared slightly, and I could see the overhanging bulge in which we were getting involved. So I pulled through the rope and swung about, going back across into the Dièdre and far out right onto the face. I had the feeling that there might just be some sort of let-up round the corner; perhaps, if one could get in a really high peg, one could pendulum, into what might be a groove, which might lead onto a ledge, with perhaps . . .

But Bonington was growing cold and also a bit apprehensive about what was obviously an impressive storm brewing, and shouted up to me to come down so that we could abseil off before we got caught. Not altogether truthfully, I said it was all dead simple ahead, so Bonington came rapidly up and, having fallen for the bait, became quite keen; he managed the pendulum very neatly, and there we were on a good, sloping ledge.

Chris then tried up to the right, but it was too complicated; besides, it had started snowing. I coiled the ropes for a quick abseil out of this place before all hell broke loose, but Chris had been thinking of those 30 ft. to the top—we had to bivouac somewhere, and why below? So I uncoiled the ropes and we tied on again. More banging of pegs followed—but it was no good in a blizzard, so he lowered himself and we pulled out the bivouac gear.

Storms are traditional fare in this quarter. Bonatti had great storms on the Red Pillar just across the way, and even greater ones around the corner on the Frêney face. This one was good enough.

Ridiculously pathetic.
A red nylon smear on the flanks of
a remote mountain.
With snow and wind boring in
and lightning bombarding the ridges around.
Nothing to do with living or the world
of people.
But
the wind cannot pull out pitons
and snow hisses harmlessly off a tent-sack.
Inside
is human life,
scheming against the mighty but unthinking elements
with lukewarm tea

and spare underclothes.

Who, in this game, is the Cat and
who the Mouse . . . ?

We climb to find out.

Next morning we were so comparatively warm that we were reluctant to move, while the storm continued unabated. Would we be cowards to retreat? Should we wait out the storm, as they tried to do on the Pillar of Frêney? But the season was bad, the mountain was big and too much new snow down below (or above) would turn the easy, scampering snow-slopes into poised avalanche traps. So we decided on retreat; a tricky business.

First, we ourselves and our gear must be excavated from several feet of snow which makes our sloping ledge seem deceptively spacious, then the iron chipped out of its icy shell and finally the rope mattress prised up and sent, stiffly frozen, down the first abseil. When, as often, the strong flurries blow into the face, we have to shut our eyes and pause; it is like slow motion. In spite of the stage effects, everything is eventually ready, with bivouac gear carefully repacked in polythene bags against the possibility of more bivouacs, and a karabiner on the first key abseil loop just in case.

Now everything is just a methodical application of technique, with the margin for error somewhere down near zero. And so it goes on: search for good abseil points (not too difficult in granite), untwist ropes, check them, pull them down. Wait and freeze, move and thaw. We watch in fascination as small powder avalanches slowly bury us to the waist.

We go back down a frozen Pillar, with more acrobatics at the berg-schrund and deep snow on the glacier—the latter fortunately with a route through the crevasses surveyed from above, so that we can plod back to the Eccles and have our last remaining brew.

We reckoned there had not been enough sun to loosen the underlying granular snow into wet avalanches, and we continued on down, hungry and afraid of getting snowed in if we tarried. Soon it began to clear up a bit, and a watery sun came through, with the new snow wanting to slide on the hard old. But one could use the small avalanches like toboggans, jumping off when they got too big. The danger was from above, so we kept high, eventually cutting down in a safe snow groove.

We carried on down snowed up screes; had soup-wine with a relieved Madame, who had heard rumours of cries from the Pillar; went down to an enormous *antipasta* in Entrèves, and back to anxious wives waiting in the cold.

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Great plans were hatching round John Harlin's warm hearth, but first

there was the Pillar. A spell of hopeful weather came, and Brian Robertson, Harlin, Bonington and myself set off to settle matters. We managed to avoid the quicksands of Chamonix and sped through the tunnel and up the well known path to the Monzino, where the ever kind Madame cooked our thick American steaks.

Next morning we rose late, and the air was full of cloud and foreboding. The rules say you have always got to start off 'in case it clears up' . . . but this time we wondered. Not for long, however; Harlin, finding an altimeter somewhere, pronounced the glass to be high and, now full of confidence, we clambered up into the clammy mist. Sure enough this cleared up, providing sun-warmed lower sections and flying debris to be dodged in the avalanche chute.

Above the big ledges we had a new plan. On our retreat we had descended via a system of small platforms and, now that we knew that the top section would go, Chris was anxious to battle with the devil we did not know. So, instead of entering the Great Dièdre, we cut out to the right, onto the edge and a nasty, wet, overhanging crack which Chris was finally forced to peg. Following, we sportingly refused a fixed rope and I regretted this when the second peg popped out, depositing me, bleeding, below. Eventually, we re-grouped at the foot of the 'Beanstalk', which John had just scaled. He hauled up and fixed our second rope which, unsportingly but unpainfully, I prusiked up, enjoying the spectacle of Bonington menially de-pegging.

While I hung below John, Chris moved up to fix the pendulum rope; we outdid each other offering him advice, since he was in danger of putting another peg into the expanding flake to which John and I were nailed. As Americans demonstrate their comradeship by always clipping into the prusik rope, so we all relied on that last peg.

Soon Chris was across the pendulum, then John; and, using their rope, I quickly joined them. When Brian got to the top of the Beanstalk, all he found was the rope ending in two pitons surrounded by silent granite and unsympathetic mists. For we were away doing the last bit around the corner, the bit we had failed on in the black blizzard. Chris went up to his previous highest point and found—a IV sup. traverse leading to the top of the Pillar. We tossed down a rope to Brian, waiting stoically on his slab, and the first two hurried on.

It was now a race. To descend over Mont Blanc, we would have to hustle up the 800 ft. of iced scrambling to the Brouillard ridge, follow this to the summit of Mont Blanc and then navigate down to Chamonix. So we rushed headlong along, hardly noticing the occasional hard section, and were only about 300 ft. from the Brouillard ridge when the worsening weather forced us to think again.

If bad weather clamped down, the traverse over Mont Blanc would be tricky, and the alternative—descent of the steep, diagonal scrambling to

the top of the Pillar—problematical. So we retraced our steps in the gathering gloom, as the first snowflakes whirled about, and by the time the wind had risen we were safe in our sacks. That night just enough snow fell to pad out the irregularities of our bivouac ledge and insulate us snugly from the creeping cold.

There was a bit of drama next morning on the last diagonal section down to the Pillar . . . and then the familiar routine: 'Off abseil! Checking ropes! On abseil!'—and so, once again, back to the Eccles.

The following day we rose late and paid for this luxury with a soft snow descent of dangerous slopes.

Back at Chamonix, we drew our route in with a ruler on a photograph which conveniently foreshortened the embarrassing top sections.

But did we actually climb it? Does the Right Hand Pillar of Brouillard end on the summit of Mont Blanc; or on the Brouillard ridge; or at the top of the Right Hand Pillar of Brouillard?

Or anywhere!