

# The North Face of North Twin

GEORGE H. LOWE III

*In one of the more remote valleys of that sub-arctic rain forest called the Canadian Rockies there is a mountain wall which acts like a strong drug on the mind of the observer. So dark, sheer, and gloomy is the North Face of North Twin, like a bad dream, . . .*

*AAJ 1966, H.L. Abrons.*

DESPITE my not being into the drug scene, seeing the pictures resulted in this drug becoming locked into my mind. The hazards of withdrawal—doing the climb—were too much for many years. Years of climbing in the Rockies accumulated and withdrawal seemed less overwhelming.

In 1973 Chris Jones and I planned an attempt on the way home from Devil's Thumb. His knee turned sour and it looked as if I would have to find someone else. No one capable seemed foolish enough. Then in June Chris called. His infection had cleared and he thought he could get his knee strong enough.

August 4 finds us driving the Banff-Jasper highway. Conditions seem bad—lots of snow—or maybe our minds aren't ready for withdrawal? We debate alternatives, talk with Hans Fuhrer. He states that he has seen the face and it is clear. Our hypothetical competition seems just down the road. In a moment of rashness we are committed.

The hike up to Wooley shoulder is pleasant. Once across the river we find no trace of human trail. The going is good; the forest and stream friendly under an only slightly cloudy sky. Gradually the weight of the pack begins to dominate my thoughts. We've come well equipped with fiberfill sleeping bags, 30 pitons and nuts, six days of food.

I watch Chris's eyes as he comes over Wooley shoulder and sees the face for the first time. They widen perceptibly. Haze softens the features of the face but seems to accentuate the harshness. We plod down scree slopes, through heather meadows, surveying for a route as we go. The bottom rock band seems most reasonable on the left and leads more directly to the summit of Twins Tower. In addition there is a high ice runnel which could provide an escape.

Huge springs at the base of Stutfield feed a river. We soak our boots on a belayed crossing. (Go downstream further to where the river crosses under the North Twin glacier.) Just over the steep lateral moraine we camp on the glacier.

Weather in the morning is typical of the icefields: blue sky mixed with swirling clouds. Snow seems to be falling occasionally on the icefield. The walk up the glacier to the base of the face is rather unnerving as there is no way to avoid ice avalanche debris. It's all quite old but of course one thinks with typical lack of logic that one is probably due again.

After I lead one easy pitch, Chris is forced onto aid. Perhaps a sign of things to come? Even on the free pitches we have to haul both packs, a nasty proposition since they pull off loose blocks. Both of us are hit several times.

An overhanging jam crack barely too wide for our pitons leads to a ledge ten meters higher. Rough, spikey limestone makes the commitment only thrilling. Forty-degree water-saturated shale-dirt leads onto the snow flanking the hanging glacier. Ugly! Much more uncomfortable than the overhanging jam. The névé is just hard enough for crampons. We traverse upwards and to the west for 500 meters to reach the bergschrund below the left upper lobe of the glacier. The face is quiet here. Little rock litters the snow in sharp contrast to the sordid black masses heaped below the center hollow of the face.

We dig a nice platform for our bivy tent on the edge of the bergschrund. After a hot stew for dinner, sleep comes easily on flat ground. During the night only a few pebbles dribble onto the top of the tent to remind us that we are on a mountain wall.

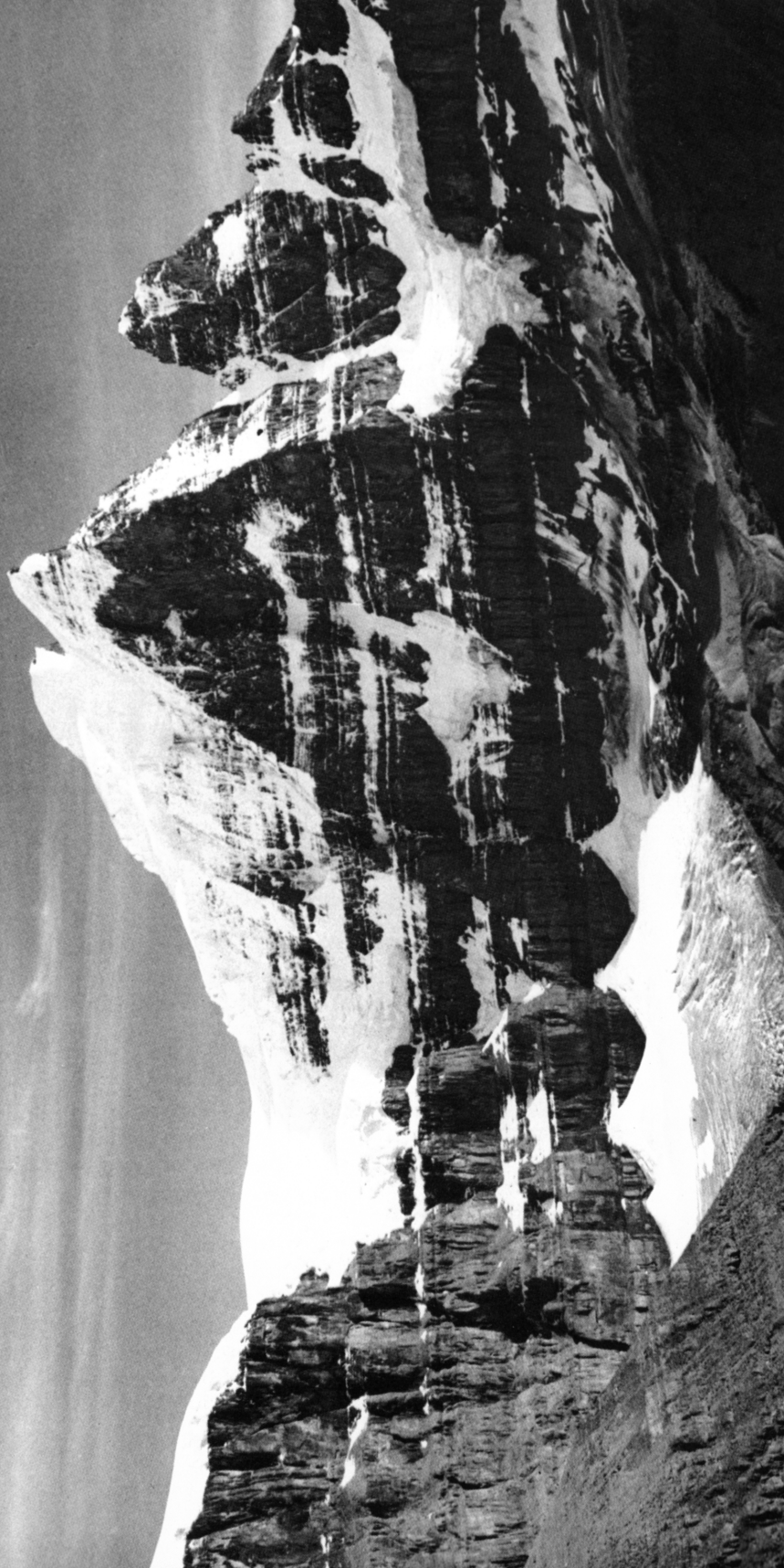
The weather in the morning seems worse—warm and cloudy. By the time we traverse the upper glacier and the low-angle, mixed ground below the second rock band, there are short periods of snowfall. Rocks begin to fall in the hollows on either side of us. Chris finds the first pitch on the second band to be traditional shattered yellow rock with bad protection. Three delightful pitches follow which weave back and forth through the overhangs on the crest of the step. Immediately to our right the wall overhangs for 300 meters down to where the main lobe of the hanging glacier enters the center of the face.

As we reach the top of the band the storm, unnoticed in our concentration on getting up the band, breaks and it begins to snow heavily. After a shale slope made very difficult by the snow and an easy névé slope of the same angle, we reach the grey rock of the upper wall and begin to search for a bivy site. Every ledge consists of down-sloping tiles covered with ice. I start hacking away at the best one, which promises great discomfort. My stupidity strikes me as I look down at the névé only 20 meters below. Quickly we rappel down and start chopping. Well after dark, we finish a platform on the crest of the 45° slope and pitch the tent. Chris as the outside man has his legs hanging slightly down the slope. As

PLATE 2

*Photo by Edward Cooper*

**North Face of NORTH TWIN, Canadian  
Rockies.**



compensation during the night I have to get up to dig snow off the upper side of the tent.

In the morning even the vertical upper wall is plastered white. However, Alberta is clear. We watch the mists being dissipated by the sunshine as we study the upper wall and our photo for a route. It is obvious that the upper wall will go slowly. There are no continuous crack systems, almost no ledges, and it is very steep. We still feel confident about making the climb. Our experience on Devil's Thumb lulls us into thinking we can climb through most weather and we are over halfway up. A good night's sleep on the flat always helps to increase the optimism.

We start. All the nice little incut holds which make limestone climbing so exhilarating are covered with melting snow. Aiding far too much as a result, I slowly work my way up the first pitch, using finally three different crack systems. The belay is semi-hanging. Chris nails up a slightly overhanging crack to a reasonable stance. Above, 15 meters of free climbing leads to the bottom of an overhanging dihedral. The crack is bad at the bottom and the last pin ten meters below. After much fiddling, I finally manage to get in several tied-off pins. They hold. Above, the crack eats nuts and leapfrogging is easy until a 50-kilo series of stacked chockstones block access to the crack. With a nut just under the first chock I stretch up the overhang. Much effort produces a tied-off lost arrow. As I ease onto the pin, my knee touches the bottom block. Half the stack goes careening down the face, some hitting Chris who is only partly protected under the overhang. Gently I extract the remainder from between my body and the rock and toss them out to the glacier below.

Above comes another stance in slings. Chris nails through a series of loose blocks. I get the first free pitch of the day which leads onto ledges large enough for sitting. We attempt to sit together in the little bivy tent, finding it awkward. The ledge is too small and the tent not shaped right. I think I must do some design work. Still the tent provides a sociable place for brewing a half-size evening stew. Our pace is beginning to become worrisome. We spend the night locked into our own concerns on separated ledges.

It's difficult to move from the warmth of the sleeping bag onto the cold grey rock in the morning. We have begun clinging to our relative comforts too strongly. The day passes as the one before; except a little harder or maybe we're a little softer. Chris ties off knifeblades to a hanging stance. My first rurs on a serious climb lead nowhere. Worse still I have to climb back down them. A wild pendulum brings a surge of desperate thrutching moves to reach a usable crack. Pitons go into ice and reluctantly the crack improves for a hanging belay.

With belaying, the struggle ceases—as does the concentration. The shell of a Gibbs ascender drops into the void. Damn! I know that I can't relax! Pitons are left, in expanding cracks, from pendulums. We no longer have enough to retreat.



We reach an alcove and small ledges in the twilight. As the ledges become smaller it becomes more difficult to coordinate holding the bluet stove, which now has only 3 legs, and to balance the pot on top. The stove can't be dropped. Unlike the ascender we have no backup. There is plenty of snow and ice for water which is now the main part of our diet. The night is spent slipping off the ledge onto our feet which are stuffed into our packs.

More light snow drifts down in the morning. Two free pitches of left-traversing to a dihedral raise our hopes. We think we are near the ice runnel. The dihedral above is loose and choked with ice. Chris chops away rock and ice to get at the crack. He runs out of gear after 20 meters of leapfrogging what he has. He belays, hanging again. Higher, five inches of ice plug the crack. By hauling up another alpine hammer I find that I can tie off one for aid, thus avoiding showering Chris with ice. Belay is a cluster of nuts and pins.

Five meters higher an ice patch promises a possible ledge system leading to the ice runnel. We are only 75 meters below where it appears that the face breaks off into the upper ice slope. The rock above has only rotten discontinuous cracks. On the right the rim is higher, blocked by overhangs and all crack systems choked with ice. Chris goes up to the ice patch, finding loose blocks and only psychological protection. He backs off as a heavy hail storm begins.

I put on crampons for the ice patch, chop away the crack until a pin is good and kick steps in the rock leftward across a small ledge system. From the end of the ledge I can see the top of the ice runnel only 25 horizontal meters away. Smooth slabs, then overhangs block access. The runnel is nearly vertical and a meter-deep spindrift avalanche pours continuously over the lip. I retreat to attempt the rock above the belay and the hail eases.

Some loose nuts are followed by one good pin. A hero loop over a nubbin, a tied-off lost arrow, a sky hook, and a rurp, with free climbing in between, lead 10 meters to just below a ledge where I run out of gear. Chris attempts to pull one of the belay pins as I stand on small holds waiting. Finally I just have to shift positions. Five seconds later I find myself hanging on the ice patch with a badly bruised hip and elbow. The cluster of gear at my waist lacks our last long thin lost arrow, the critical pin for repeating the lead.

We set up a semi-hanging bivy. I have a block big enough for half my bottom and Chris has one slightly larger, but downsloping. Cooking is done holding the stove and pot between my knees. Once the loose burner falls off into my lap. Ages pass searching gently in the dark before I feel it. We eat our last half dinner and assess our situation. We have only 6 pitons, some useless nuts, and three ice screws. The rock above probably won't go, leaving the ice runnel as the only possibility. We may have to rappel 50 meters to get into it. Means of safely climbing that much vertical ice are not obvious especially in our condition.



PLATE 3

*Photos by George H. Lowe*

Chris Jones following on the fourth day  
just after the difficult pendulum on  
**NORTH TWIN.**



PLATE 4

Chris Jones leading on the fifth day on  
**North Twin.**

We attempt to sleep. Although somehow I am so adapted to the environment that sitting here doesn't seem strange, my mind churns through the night. Maybe we can go neither up or down? At three in the morning Chris asks, "Are you awake?" "Of course!" We talk. We are overdue tomorrow. Rescue? Chris talks of people who waited and perished. The basic toughness in him that is so critical in a climbing companion comes out. We will keep going until we are absolutely stopped. I feel grateful to be with Chris. He probably can't lead F10 or extreme ice, but somehow he gets up things, something far more important to me than the ability to climb a tough crack in Yosemite.

Morning comes at last with swirling clouds, but snow. We repeat the lead across the ledges. The smooth slab which seemed impossible in the hail goes slowly, reducing the distance we must rappel. Then a ledge of snow-ice, stuck improbably by winter storms on the vertical wall under an overhang, seems to offer access to the top of the runnel. I ease onto it and layback under the overhang with my knees on the snow. The last piton supports a tension traverse and I'm at the top of the runnel. As I complete hauling the packs and put on crampons, the hail begins again. I cross the top of the runnel to place all three of our ice screws for a belay anchor.

Soon spindrift fills the runnel. But by God, we may get off! We estimate four or five leads to the summit tower. I keep the lead as the impact on the ice bruises Chris's sore knee. Our elation subsides as we climb pitch after pitch. None are really difficult, but each requires meticulous care, a quality difficult to produce now.

The storm increases in intensity with height as does the difficulty of the ice. The last pitches of the fifteen or so are 60° glacier ice. Ice so good that we almost forget the hunger and cold. We exit from the face between the two highest summits of Twins Tower and pitch the tent on a flat spot behind the summit.

Dinner consists of a handful of nuts and cheese and lots of hot water. During the night snow collapses the tent several times. In the morning we have another light snack and move off the tower towards the summit of North Twin.

Whiteout is complete, avalanche danger significant. The mountain is not yet finished with us. We find what we think is the summit of North Twin. Navigation for the rest of the day is by compass. In the late afternoon we reach the col between Stutfield and P 10,900 (Cromwell) with a slight clearing in the skies. A chopper flies by. Hans has flown over in this incredible weather to check on us on his way back from a rescue practice. We wave gaily and then as the chopper turns away realize we could have written "FOOD" in the snow. Well, it can't be too serious as we can see the road.

The snow slope leading down from the col gets steeper and ends in a 60° shale slope covered with new melting snow followed by a 60-meter

cliff. We plod back up to the col, then up to the summit of Cromwell where we spend another night, dining again on hot water. From the top of Cromwell a snow couloir leads to the glacier under Stutfield (new route).

The rest of the day we stagger slowly down over glacier moraine and outwash plain. Coordinated movement is nearly impossible, but we keep plugging. Chris stops the first car we see on the highway by simply standing in the center of the road waving his handkerchief and not letting it pass. We rush to Hans' house just in time to stop a serious helicopter search.

Lilo and Hans are hospitable as always. We relax at their table content that withdrawal is certainly complete. How joyful it has become simply to sit in a warm house having tea and brownies.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Canadian Rockies.

NEW ROUTE: North Twin, 12,085 feet, via North Face; hike to base, August 5, 1974; start of climb, August 6; summit of Twins Tower, August 11; summit of North Twin, August 12 (Christopher A.G. Jones, George H. Lowe III).

