

## Hourquette de Heas

By Tim Mason

"The unpredictable and knotted grain of the Pyrenees"

The barrier that was in front of us had separated glaciers in the past, then countries - so it was very effective in diverting us from a direct route. We were contouring around the Cirque de Troumouse. The severe northerly slopes of the Pic de la Munia and its rugged supporting spurs fending us off from any direct access over to the Spanish side.

After three weeks following variants of the 'Haute Route' we were becoming accustomed to the unpredictable and knotted grain of the Pyrenees. Our early exuberance and direct approach had been replaced by more tactical circumnavigation of the roughest ascents, by a more studied hunt for the relenting folds and helpful creases in the land that would lead us slowly eastwards and to the other sea.

The intermittent path round the cirque was giving us a good line between long tiers of cliffs and after a short drop to a group of long-deserted shielings we picked up the reassuring red and white paint flashes of a HRP 'variante'. This promised a relatively straightforward ascent to the Hourquette de Heas and a 'balcon' route to the Refuge de Barroude. On the map the refuge was only two kilometres east of where we stood, but it would take us all day to get there. But it is not helpful to think like that so I tried to imagine the route folding out through the day, as if in a straight line rather than an almost completed circle.

My two companions were up ahead and I was content to have them there - close enough to spur me on and upwards, but not so close as to break my self-contained mood and my focus on the rugged surroundings. The path was zigging steeply up to a high pasture below the pass. The unmanned bothy at Aquila was soon behind us as I dropped my pack and slid down for water. The light was sharp in its rocky gorge, reflecting from the tight and solid walls and from the hectic stream. The chute of water had laid bare and polished underlying granite. The silver liquid ran solid and quick as mercury and was then melted into a turquoise haze in the pool below me in which were magnified the striations and agglomerations of the long washed stones.

Within this enclosure I could still turn and look back across the ranges to the distant Ossoue glacier whose slopes, from this angle lead invitingly up to the final crest of the Vignemale, the highest point on the main ridge and now already three days past.

Traces of cloud were moving together below me and from opposite ends of the valley. This I knew as an early sign of changing conditions and I suddenly felt isolated, aware that I was out of earshot in this confined gully. Resisting the temptation to take any weighty souvenirs from the pool with me I scrambled up to my pack and the path.

When I reached the other two they were about to approach a stranger. This was the first person we had seen that day and he was clearly here for other reasons than those of hill-walking. The bright, light material of our trekking gear stood out against the heaviness of his working clothes. He looked the part in his dark beret and with a hessian sack freshly laid down by his boots. He needed no sunglasses to protect his gaze and stared deeply as we approached. Time to get some local knowledge we thought.

"Bon jour monsieur, ca va? Vous travaillez ici?"

"Naturellement, et vous?" - he replied seriously.

"Nous allons au Refuge de Barroude"

"Par la Hourquette!" he seemed a little alarmed, but we were encouraged that our basic French was getting through - even if we couldn't match the clanging consonants of his Occitan accent. "Attention messieurs" he continued quickly "- un orage viens, toute suite." He pointed behind us and the Vignemale had been blanked out by a rising wall of mist below encroaching streaks of

higher cloud.

"Mais la Horquette - y a-t-il aucunes difficultes?" we asked

"Quelquefois elle est trop difficile. Attention - ne montez maintenang!", this last was driven into us both by his eyes and his intonation.

"Arretez ici, messieurs-dame - voila vos places" - he pointed to a shallow spot between some protecting flanks, then quickly shouldering his sack he turned and stroud up to a small stone howff that we had not noticed before and to which we were obviously not being invited.

"Il arrive - vang minutes", this last spat out over his shoulder.

No matter, it didn't take us that long to get up the two lightweight tents - we were well enough practised by then.

Neither did it take that long before the first bellow of thunder was followed quickly by a shutter of sheet lightening. The mist was swirling between the tents but the sky above was still clear blue and the flat profile of the Horquette was stark against it. As was the rocky cairn at the col - suddenly accompanied by a smaller and thinner shape as someone moved up the final slope to reach it. Some place to view the power of the approaching storm, but a risky one at that, where the highest point to attract the lightening was likely to be oneself! We stared up incredulous and waved foolishly - far too distant and insignificant to be noticed. Yet the wave was returned - or more likely whoever was up there was exalting in the advancing power before them which now obscured our view and sent us scurrying into our tents with the first crack of its tail. Here we were pelted with hailstones, increasing in size and ferocity until they threatened to shred the tents, whacking into the fabric or bouncing up to a foot into the air from their momentum as they pounded into the ground. This pelting transformed itself into the equally solid thud of storm born rain descending with venom from escalating clouds. The sound and lightning seared our brains as we plugged our ears and shrank into our sacs - pulverised by the power of the onslaught over our heads.

This was both terrific and terrifying.

But as the tents demonstrated that they would stand up to the onslaught and our appointed spot showed no sign of flooding we relaxed. The gentle purr of the gas stoves contrasted now with the continuing cacophony outside our modest but effective shelters.

After a few hours we emerged - pleased to see that our tents had taken the punishment and exhilarated to take in the scene that was emerging through the ragged strips of mist. The grass was fresh from its dowsing and a thin gauze of snow had been drawn over the upper slopes towards the col. The brightness reasserted itself and demanded that we pack and move to see it all from further up. We blinked into the strengthening light and glanced around for our knowledgeable guide - but no sign. We couldn't even locate his howff in all the emerging details of the mountain side.

No matter - to the col and a bright blue yonder!

We quickly picked up a good line which zagged through boulders and between crags to the rocky edge of the Horquette itself. This turned out to be sharp and slabby on the other side where it descended to a subsidiary col, a small lake was sparkling below and a route to a rocky corner hinted at our 'balcon' route beyond. Round this corner came a small group of fellow trekkers - their sticks pulling them up the steep and final steps to our spot by the cairn. We glanced down to our hollowed refuge spot, clear enough in the sunshine and beyond that once more to the glacial bowl of snow and ice below the peak of the Vignemale. The bright sun was showing us details all afresh. Why we could even see once more a dark and lonely figure standing close to our spot and it was looking up - maybe staring towards us, here by the prominence of the cairn. We waved again and - yes - one slow wave in return. One hand held long and high before the door of that lowly howff.

We turned to greet the newcomers as they came up to join us from the other side. We wanted to share our experiences of the storm. They were locals also - although from another valley. They had sheltered in the refuge and, yes, the balcon route was clear and fine - two hours only. The young Madame was in residence and keen to cook for les 'randonneurs' - the day was just getting better and better!

But our questions about the lonely storm watcher we had seen here on the col drew blank looks and a few puzzled shrugs - they had seen nothing, the route was narrow and no one had passed them. Anyway, they said, this place was well known as dangerous in any storm. There had been deaths here before and not so long ago.

The Hourquette de Heas was a place with a history it seemed and not altogether a happy one. Why else, they seemed to be suggesting would such an attractive pasture as that down below, where we had been, be so deserted and unused?

But not entirely deserted we ventured. There was still at least one shepherd below, at least now in the summer and we had met him. We recounted our meeting and the warning that we had received - proud to tell of our recent exploits.

The new arrivals looked strangely at this.

"Un berger? Un homme, tous seul!!"

"Pas possible - il y a personne la-bas pour quelques annees!"

"And my friend" now our informant broke into English as if to emphasise his point "The last to live down there was killed - just here at the Hourquette, by a ---- a ----" he searched for the word.

"Par un orage!" I completed the sentence and turned back to our pasture and the lonely figure by that howff - knowing for sure there would be no one to be seen.