

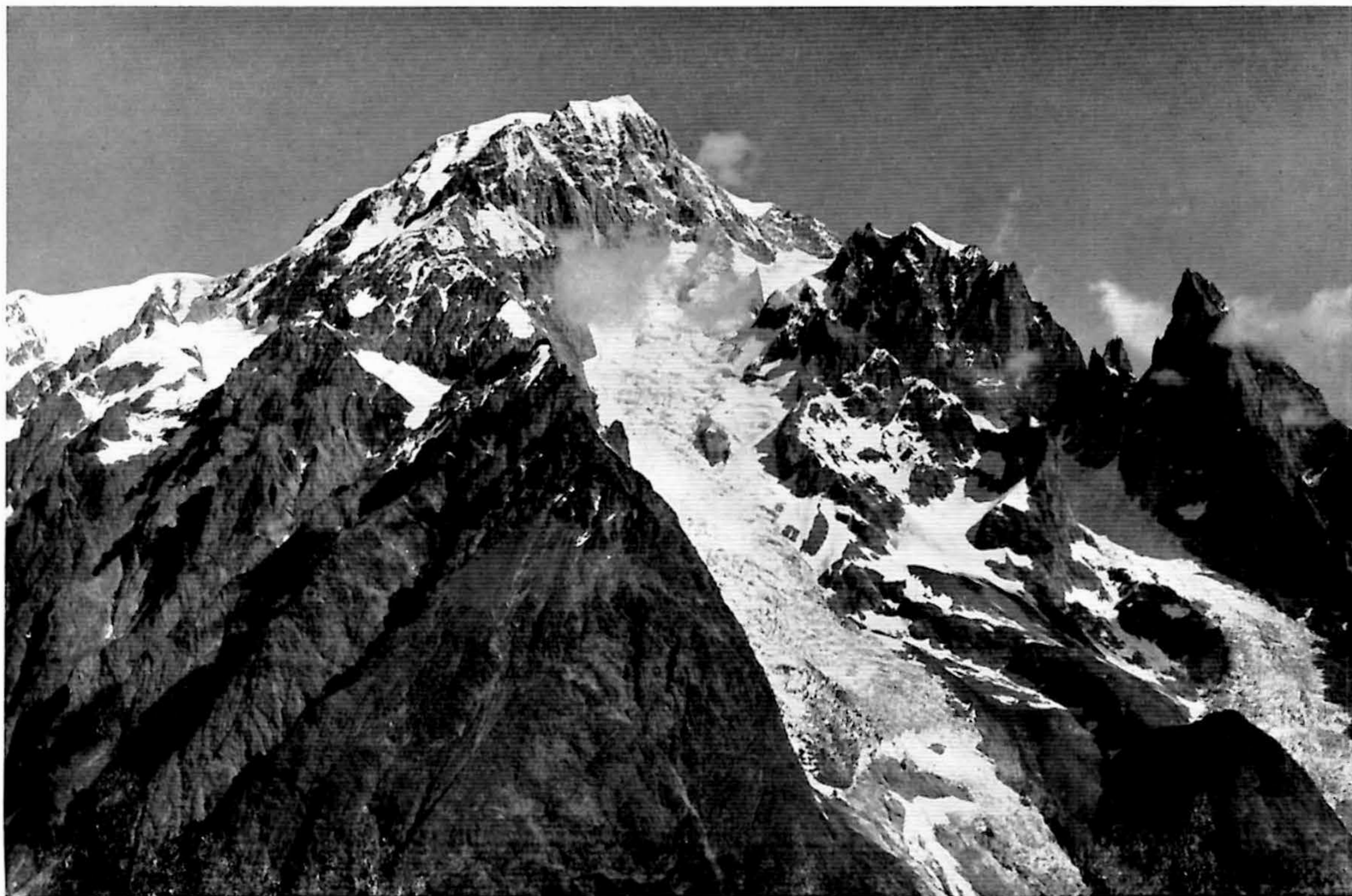
BETWEEN THE WARS

1919-1939

By JACK LONGLAND

IF you try to look steadily at the hundred years of the Club's history, you are forced to the conclusion that the years between the two world wars were for British mountaineering an intermezzo linking agreeably but without great distinction the classic compositions of the past and the brave music of the age in which we now live. This conclusion goes of course against the grain for those who, like myself, did most of our own mountaineering during this period, but it cannot be escaped. Behind us lay the golden and silver ages of alpine climbing, severed by the bitter gulf of the first war : ahead, but scarcely yet to be glimpsed, were the astonishing years in which the greatest Himalayan peaks would fall almost as quickly as those tall poppies of Tarquin's.

Yet it is not an uninteresting story that I have to try to tell. During these twenty years British climbers had first to make good the losses of the first war. We had lost most of the generation who could have set the standards and goals of our climbing in the nineteen-twenties. We had lost much that they could have taught us, but most of all the example of young men at their most active, ambitious and inventive. It was a diminished and middle-aged world which we inherited. Much later, very much later, we had to begin to try to compare our own minor achievements with the exploits, the new techniques and newer attitudes of the young climbers of other countries. And at the centre of our tradition was the Alpine Club, which we were still most proud to be asked to join, but which through its official JOURNAL remained most obstinately backward-looking during most of this period, devotedly preserving the ark of the covenant at a time when our contemporaries in other countries seemed to find special pleasure in throwing arks and covenants down the steepest cliffs that they could discover. It was a time of uneasy and soul-searching adjustment, in which we had simultaneously to measure ourselves against the giants of the past and the alarmingly competent continentals of the present. It was also a period in which, our first awe mastered, we had to try and reassess the position and prestige of the Alpine Club itself against the background of the expanding field of British climbing as a whole. It was not easy to equate the great technical advances in rock-climbing on homeland crags that occurred during the nineteen-thirties, with the generally modest performances of British climbers in the Alps, or to find some



Photo, Alfred Holmes, 1896]

MONT BLANC : THE GAMBA AMPHITHEATRE.

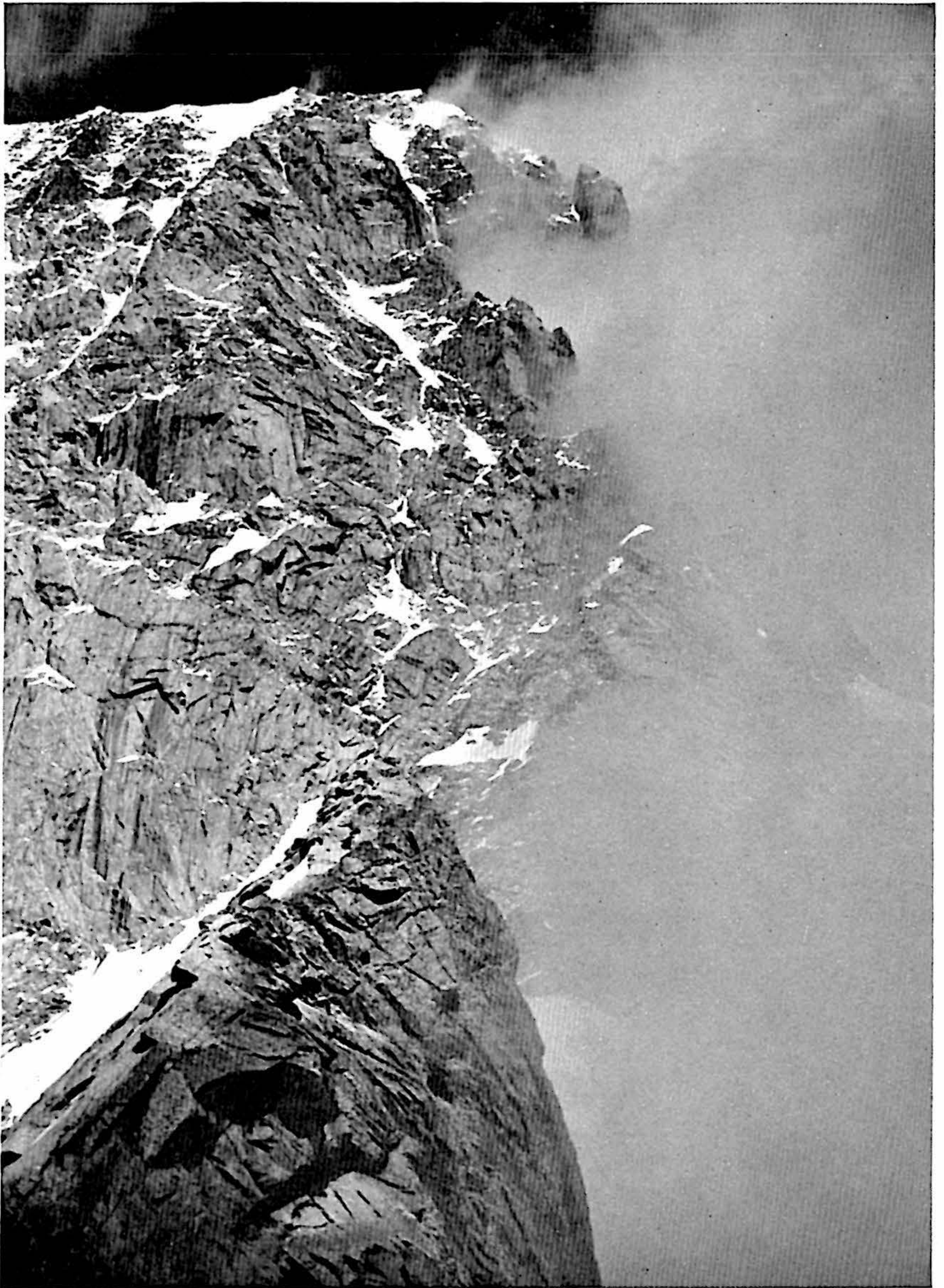
Left centre : The Aiguilles Rouges du Brouillard and Brouillard Ridge.

Right : The Aiguilles Noire and Blanche de Peuterey and Peuterey Ridge.

unifying goal towards which both kinds of climbing might seem to be plausibly directed. It was moreover a period of repeated failures on the highest Himalayan mountains, relieved in part only by some brilliant successes on slightly smaller peaks or among remoter ranges. It was a time in which technical changes, involving such disparate things as the use of crampons and the proper size of a party in various types of mountain country, had to be learnt, progressively argued and fought for, and gradually and precariously justified in practice. And these were also the years in which mountaineering finally and irrevocably changed from being an eccentric sport of the leisured few into the holiday occupation of the many, with all the interruptions of tradition, economics, motives and decorum which this involved. In short, we occupied the stage uneasily but in the main enjoyably during what now appears quite plainly both as a period of transition, and as a necessary training and gathering ground for the splendid assaults that were to follow.

To think oneself back to the start of this period is a difficult and uncertain task. I hope I may be forgiven for trying to picture these years much too obviously in terms of the laborious progress of my own most familiar contemporaries and of myself, the more so since I did not begin to climb until 1925, five years after my allotted period begins, and had fallen out of the race some little time before it ends in 1939. And I must ask especially the forgiveness of those admirable mountaineers who survived the first war, men such as Claude Elliott, Harold Porter, Howard Somervell, and Bentley Beetham, who resumed alpine climbing of a high standard as early as 1920. They, with Geoffrey Winthrop Young, still astonishingly performing with one leg feats which we were slowly and painfully learning to emulate on two, were our exemplars, continuing the great tradition and most patiently generous of their advice and encouragement. There were of course many others, men doing good mountaineering who were too modest to record their climbs, or whom we did not have the luck to meet. I must ask their large tolerance also, when both for lack of space, and because we were brash and new and thought we had to learn most of it afresh for ourselves, I fail to record their doings.

The loyal horse remembers his own first stable, and I have turned up again on their dusty shelves the journals which came in the nineteen-twenties from the university mountaineering clubs at Oxford and Cambridge. It is difficult for those who remember how during the last war climbing and mountain-training persisted both with civilians and soldiers to realise that the break after the first war was so complete. Raymond Greene records in 1921 'some effort has been needed, in Oxford at least, to restore and reorganise the dead mountaineering club'. No less efforts were needed at Cambridge, and, for slightly

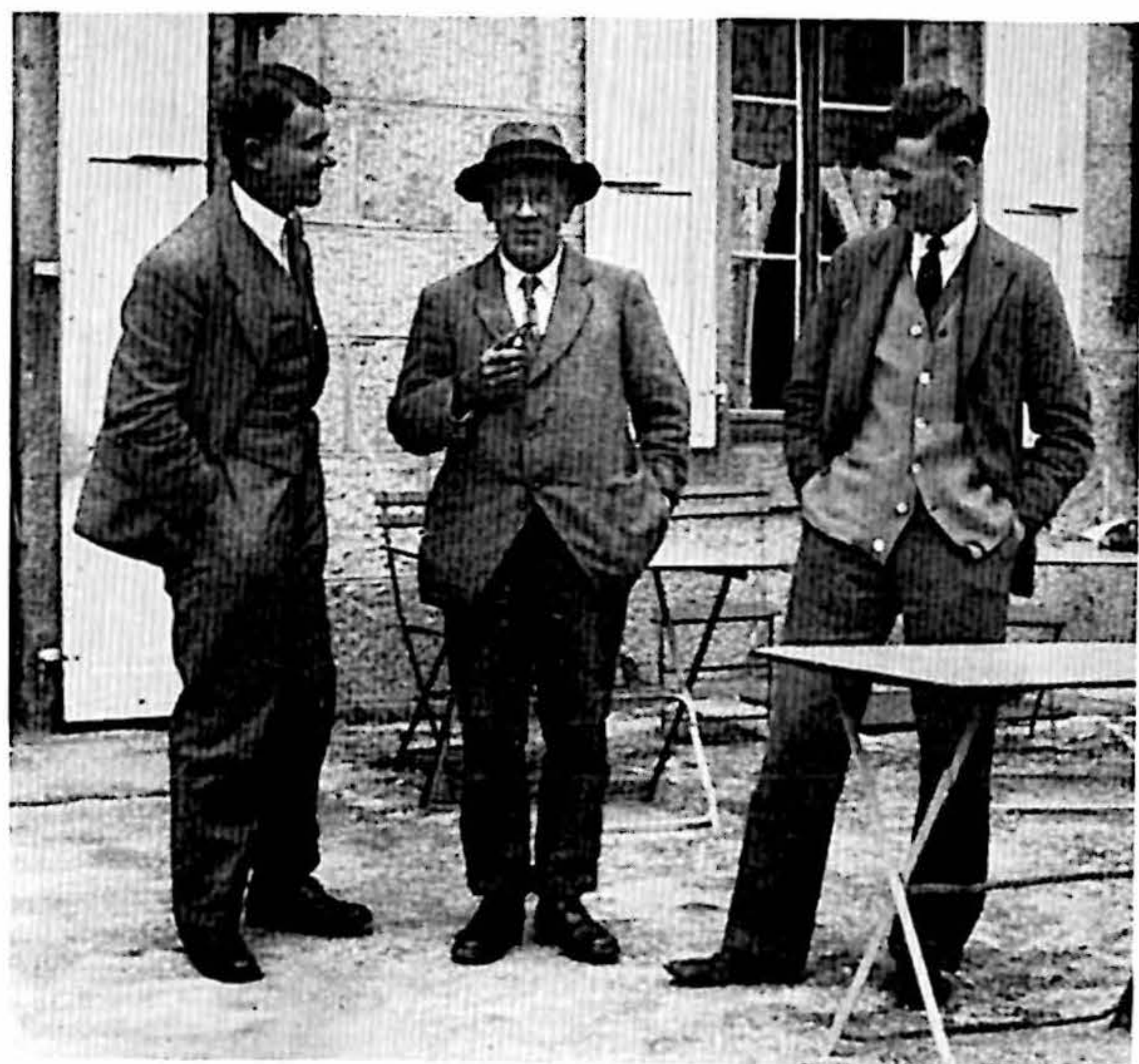


Photo, C. Douglas Milner]

THE INNOMINATA BUTTRESS OF MONT BLANC DE COURMAYEUR FROM
THE INNOMINATA RIDGE.



THE BRENVA FACE OF MONT
BLANC FROM THE COL DE LA
FOURCHE.



SIR EDWIN HERBERT,
T. GRAHAM BROWN
AND F. S. SMYTHE
AT THE MONTENVERS,
AUGUST 1927.

*Photos, D. P. Davis and
G. G. McPhee]*

differing reasons, with the Climbers' Club. A university club depends for its existence on the automatic progression of freshman to third-year man, of climbing tyro into comparative expert, and when there are no undergraduates and, as happened at Cambridge, all the club minute-books are lost, tradition has to be built anew. And numbers were tiny, by present standards: twenty-five members at Oxford, fifty at Cambridge. The joint Oxford and Cambridge Journals, 1921, 1922, 1924, record the slow rediscovery of the mountain world. War-shattered Europe was within economic reach even of undergraduates. J. H. Wolfenden, spending seven weeks in Tirol, tells us 'one can travel (second class) to Kufstein, the gate of Tirol, from London for slightly under £4, and this sum can be reduced by about £1, if the journey as far as Cologne is taken third class', and he lives for 2s. 6d. to 7s. a day, while even in the newly-Italian Dolomites, with the hazards of freshly-drawn frontiers, out of date maps, vanished hotels and huts, and well-engineered paths leading only to gun emplacements, life is more than tolerable at ten shillings a day. Several years later, in 1926, I spent six weeks in the French Alps at a cost of less than £25, including travel both ways. Yet, though there is an almost eighteenth-century arrogance about our assumption that the Englishman had the right to travel so well on the Continent for so little, few of us ever thought of employing a guide. In spite of the favourable exchange, guides already belonged to the vanished pre-war world. A little later, we learnt to rationalise our break with the established tradition of learning alpine techniques from the professional. Lawrence Wager, then President of the C.U.M.C., writing in *Cambridge Mountaineering*, 1925-26, accurately summarises our naïve but hopeful beliefs in his account of the club's alpine meet. 'It enables the expense of a climbing holiday to be reduced by the cost of hiring guides . . . the greatest value of these meets is that they provide guideless climbing. Those who have a little more experience in the Alps form a party with one or two of less experience and, of course, only easy climbs are attempted; as a result the party is of a different nature from any ordinary guided party. The leader has at an early stage the responsibilities and delights of leadership, and the others, for whom the meet is primarily designed, share some of the feeling of responsibility, learn something of route-finding. Such a party will work better as a unit than one formed of a guide, a porter, and two beginners. On snow and ice the leader's technique will always be clumsy and bad when compared with that of a guide. . . . On the whole, however, this tends to produce a better and safer attitude towards mountaineering than difficult expeditions led by a guide, whose rapid and accurate judgment of conditions prevents the beginner from realising many of the dangers of climbing, and whose skill masks the difficulties of technique.'



Photo, John Hunt]

DESCENT FROM MONT MAUDIT (A. D. M. COX AND M. P. WARD).

[To face p. 85.

Lawrence Wager has always been a tough-minded thinker, but I doubt whether even he realised what a break with Alpine Club traditions this slightly defiant attitude represented. True, there had been British guideless climbers before, those who had learnt their craft with guides, but who preferred, either occasionally or of settled habit, to climb with other amateurs only in the party. There had been a few others who, willing to endure the thunderbolts of Savile Row, had always preferred to do without professional help. But, till then, only a very few bold spirits among British mountaineers had, like George Finch, been prepared to erect a whole system of mountaineering training on a refusal to make use of the sensible and obvious source from which this training had previously come. We were undergraduates. The Alps were the biggest mountains which we could conveniently and economically reach. Since guides cost too much, we would learn only by teaching each other. I doubt if we were prescient or priggish enough to realise that we were forming the main pattern of British alpine climbing for the future, and we only gradually realised that young continental climbers had independently arrived at similar conclusions. And only when our doings began to be possibly worth recording, did we realise the weight of Alpine Club orthodoxy and tradition which we were so cheerfully challenging.

To begin with, we ran no risks of awakening either notice or censure. The Cambridge University Club chose districts like the Graians, Les Evettes or La Vanoise, where the mountains were fairly small and presented no great difficulty. In such ranges our impecunious theory that a freshman could be added to a rope as a fairly unprecarious package, that in his second year he would share the responsibility for the leader's compass bearings, and that as a senior he would, given ordinary courage and resolution, lead a rope, was not often contradicted by the hard facts of mountaineering life. The whole party, even the freshmen, had practised and probably achieved reasonable competence on British rocks, and if our performances on snow and ice were cautious and tentative to a degree, we had chosen mountains where caution and lack of technical competence were not likely to lead to disaster.

It is difficult to convey to the modern mountaineer how low the standards of alpine performance were among those of us who started in the early nineteen-twenties. As we read our alpine chronicles, we looked back on the great ridges and faces achieved by Geoffrey Winthrop Young and Joseph Knubel as masterpieces which we might one day copy, rather than as the norm from which we might make fresh advances. An example which comes to mind is the elation which came upon Cambridge mountaineers when our President and Secretary, Van Noorden and Wyn Harris, made in 1925 the fourth ascent of the Young-Knubel Brouillard ridge of Mont Blanc. Here was adult mountaineer-

ing, vouched for by Geoffrey Winthrop Young's generous tribute in our JOURNAL, and I remember the aura of achievement which surrounded our two leaders when they joined us for my own first Alpine Meet at Arolla the same year. It was bliss to be led by Van Noorden, wonderful but entirely in keeping to be fielded by him when three of us cascaded off the descent from the Tsa, more wonderful still to find myself holding the great man on the rope when a hold broke under him on the descent from Mont Collon. But when, later that year after Van Noorden's death, Geoffrey Winthrop Young himself read us the chapter 'Ridges and Failures' from his yet unpublished *On High Hills*, the furthest that ambition could reach was that some day, later rather than sooner, one might hope to follow his steps on the Charmoz-Grépon-Blaitière traverse, or on the then unachieved ridging of Monte Rosa-Lyskamm-Twins-and Breithorn.

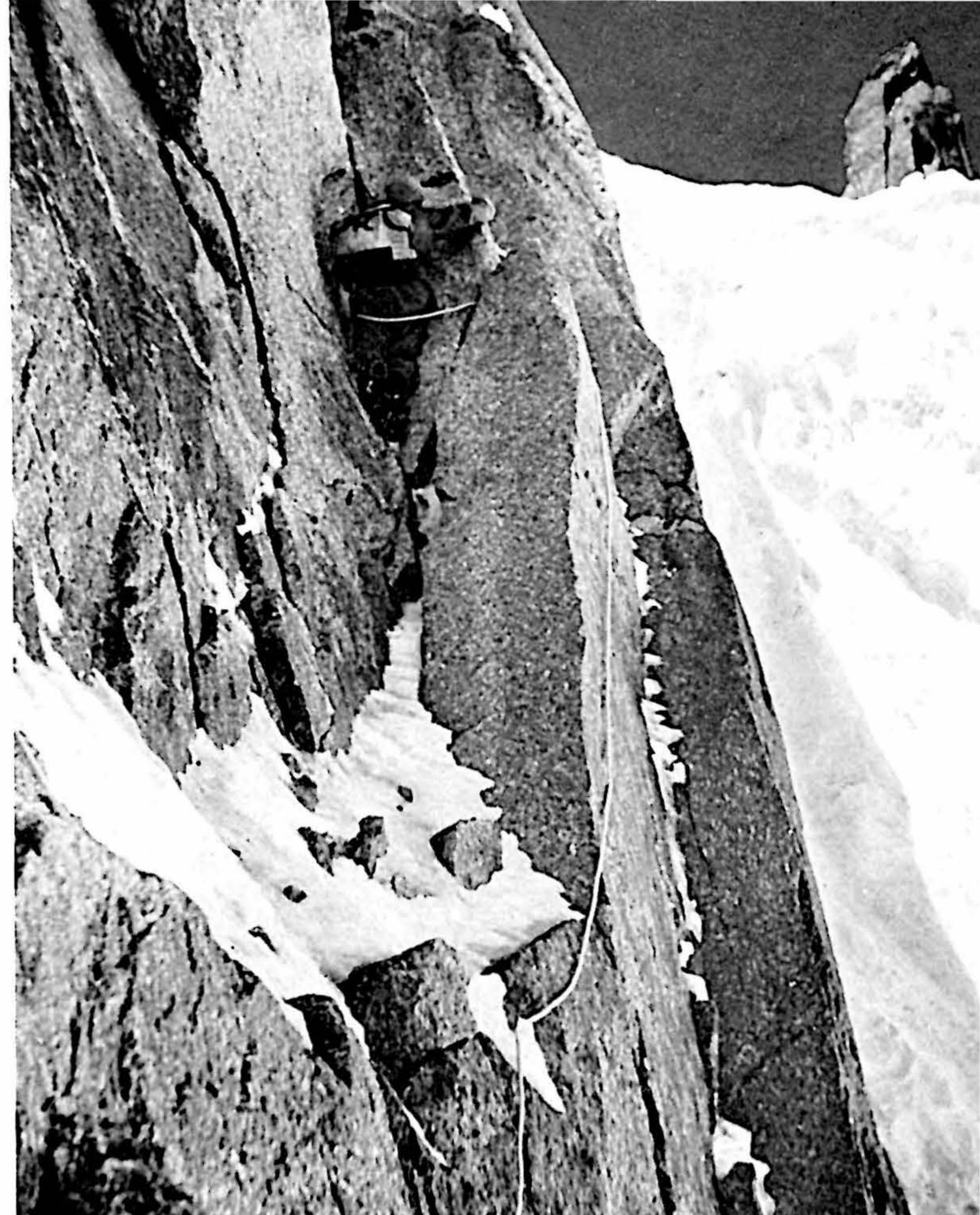
I find it difficult to relate these novice fumbblings and aspirations to the actual mountaineering achievements of the early nineteen-twenties, hampered as we were by the war-caused break in tradition and the impossibility of renewing that tradition by two or three seasons of climbing behind a good guide.

These were the years of the Everest expeditions of 1921, 1922 and 1924. It is so difficult to assess the achievements of these parties, manned as they mostly were by the demigods and paladins to whom we looked up with such awe. Yet it is hard now to resist the belief that these early Everest expeditions came too early for the gathering of wholly competent and balanced teams. To take only one narrowish point, I doubt from my own admittedly partial knowledge of the North face of Everest whether we ever mustered enough first-class performers on rocks, with the exceptions of Mallory, Finch, and perhaps Norton with his knowledge of the limestone cliffs round the Eagle's Nest, Odell, remarkable also for his unique efficiency at great heights, and Crawford and Beetham who did not acclimatise in time, during all the expeditions between 1921 and 1936, who were technically capable of dealing with the rocks above the Yellow Band, in good, to say nothing of the prevailing bad, weather conditions. The earlier Everest expeditions gathered some redoubtable survivors from pre-war alpine achievements, together with expert travellers, managers of porters and of transport, whom we can now see not to have possessed the technique to reach the top of a very difficult mountain. What is galling but necessary to realise is that, during the later nineteen-twenties and the nineteen-thirties, other countries could have provided climbers, whether amateur or professional, or both together, who were better equipped by their all-round competence and by their achievements on difficult mountains than any single team which we could gather together in any particular year. Whether any other such team

would have reached the top of Everest, in the then existing knowledge of equipment and oxygen-apparatus, and against the short-term swing of climatic conditions which worsened during the nineteen-thirties but has apparently improved during the nineteen-fifties, is a matter only for conjecture. The hard fact to be realised is that, during this period, the British were not the most fully equipped all-round mountaineers then pursuing the craft.

I have written the last paragraph with much diffidence, but have been encouraged to do so by two memories in particular. The first is the memory of the extraordinary achievements of Paul Bauer's parties on Kangchenjunga in 1929 and 1931, admittedly on the wrong route, and with theories coloured by experience of vastly different mountains. The second is a note by E. L. Strutt, echoing J. P. Farrar, in the *ALPINE JOURNAL* of May 1927, recording the ascents of some young continental climbers and ending plaintively by asking, 'Where are *les jeunes Britanniques*?' Farrar, who remained young and adventurous in heart to the end, was more generous about the achievements and more tolerant about the methods and ambitions of the best foreign climbers than any British mountaineer of comparable stature. When Farrar died, Geoffrey Winthrop Young, with whom alone Farrar himself could have been compared in honourable rivalry, wrote: 'The Alpine world, no less than the Alpine Club, has lost in Farrar its dominant personality.' What Geoffrey Young did not, and would not do at the time was to record the extraordinary change which came over the *ALPINE JOURNAL* when Farrar gave up its editorship. No doubt Farrar, if he had continued as editor, would have found much to criticise and even to censure in the changes in alpine tradition, in the attitude towards rashness and disaster. But Farrar always remained astonishingly alive to the need for change and development in a sport so excellent as mountaineering, and in paying tribute to the achievements of younger climbers, however different from his own in traditions and ambitions which they exemplified.

Colonel Strutt, who was Editor of the *JOURNAL* from 1927 until 1937, was a perplexing personality. I owe him much gratitude for being so kind and generous of his time and of his vast alpine knowledge in helping the plans of a young climber, and for his willing praise of our own modest achievements. But Strutt had little sympathy for the revolution in continental mountaineering which was taking place before his angry eyes, and little understanding of the causes and purposes of the changes in technique and ethics alike. During this period the *JOURNAL* too often appeared in the role of a shocked and censorious maiden aunt, appalled by the immoral goings-on of the younger generation. There was of course much to criticise, so long as the Alpine Club could properly be regarded not only as the inventor but as the guardian of good alpine practice and tradition. But the



censor's profession demands understanding and sympathy, and the editorial bludgeon was swung so indiscriminately that long before the end of this period young climbers, British as well as continental, had to turn to other journals to find sympathetic understanding of their philosophies and techniques. You need to lay alongside each other the ALPINE JOURNALS of those years and of the nineteen-fifties to see what an astonishing change in the attitude of the Club's official spokesmen has taken place, but a few examples can appropriately be given. One stems from Strutt's fixed belief that crampons were an invention of the devil. It is ludicrous now to recall the trepidation with which we mentioned in our accounts of climbs that we had used these accursed instruments, and the careful and defiant documentation of our belief that crampons had really helped us and improved our times. That great Swiss mountaineer, Walter Amstutz, records modestly in the JOURNAL of May 1927 the tremendously fast times which his party had achieved on great ice climbs on Monte Rosa, the Peuterey, and the Brenva, which, said Amstutz, 'shows what one can do with Eckenstein crampons'. Pat comes the editorial note: 'Any reader requiring an *un-biassed* view on the said (or any) crampons, should apply to that great mountaineer Pierre Blanc of Bonneval-sur-Arc', which is rather like calling in Sir Isaac Newton to disprove the theory of modern electronics! Strutt's dislike is the more curious in that many highly reputable British parties had used crampons regularly before the First World War.

If crampons were bad, pitons were of course much worse. The ALPINE JOURNAL for May 1928 has an editorial note on the first ascent of the Capucin de la Brenva 'by two young fellows of Courmayeur' with the comment: 'This sort of exploit is quite beyond the pale and is a degradation of mountaineering. Any steeplejack could have done the work better and in a tenth of the time.' Strutt would never have admitted that the practice of artificial climbing might be a question of taste rather than of ethics, still less that the natural urge for new explorations among the young might be forcing keen and expert climbers to use new methods on alpine peaks that had been so thoroughly and so selfishly worked out by the great masters of the past! And yet one has to admit, as often, that Strutt's *technical* criticism in his last sentence contained a great deal of hard sense. It nevertheless requires an effort of imagination to recall that it was the ascent of the same Capucin by Tom Bourdillon and Hamish Nicol, and by an even more difficult and artificial route, that provided such a pleasant and interesting piece of descriptive writing in the ALPINE JOURNAL of a year ago, and that today's Editor forbore to comment! An even more fascinating glimpse into Strutt's mind is given by a note of his in the November 1932 JOURNAL, which I must quote in full.



Photo, André Roch]

ON THE SOUTH-EAST RIDGE OF MONT MAUDIT.

On the previous page : (left) PEAR BUTTRESS (photo, D. P. Davis). (right) PEAR BUTTRESS : ON THE LAST TRAVERSE (taken on the first ascent, 5.8.1933, by T. Graham Brown).

'SPORTING METHODS IN 1932.—*Alpinisme*, No. 27, reports the following tools as employed by an Austrian party in an attempt on the N. face of the Grandes Jorasses : 250 m. of rope, 78 rock pitons, 20 ice pitons, 25 *karabiner*, 10 "stirrups", 6 hammers.

'For the attacks in 1933 we suggest the following *addenda* : one crossbow per man, two "Stokes" 3-in. mortars and necessary ammunition, one light mountain 3.7-in. howitzer in position on Les Périades, and, as a development of the methods of Hannibal, one or more largest size *Flammenwerfer* for the removal of overhanging ice-walls. These articles should be obtainable at Geneva or The Hague. But the construction of a *téléférique* would provide the most practical solution.'

The note is such fun that it is a shame to analyse it. But one searches in vain for any understanding of the compulsion which drove young men bent on new exploration towards 'the last great unsolved Alpine problems', the Matterhorn North face, the North face of the Jorasses, the Eigerwand. Intrinsically there was not much difference between their ambitions and those of the original conquerors of the Matterhorn or the Meije. And it never occurred to the JOURNAL that these elaborate equipments might be *necessary* on the gigantic rock and ice structure of the Jorasses. A fairer criticism would have been that too much equipment was taken and so failure made more likely, and that these young enthusiasts were perhaps not tremendously competent even at their own game, as was shown by later ascents of the Jorasses North face by parties of guides, using much fewer devices, taking only a fraction of the time, and probably making the ascent in much greater safety. It is perhaps rude to add that a small mortar was actually among the equipment taken to Everest in 1953 !

The trouble was that much was happening in the wider mountaineering world which the ALPINE JOURNAL of the day did not normally understand, and disliked instinctively when it did. The three keys which would have resolved the riddles which furrowed the brow of the alarmed Editor were the spread of serious climbing among sections of the population which had not previously discovered the sport, their general lack of money, and their relatively straitened periods of leisure. That these keys had been temporarily lost is shown by the editorial comments on alpine accidents, which were given with remorseless regularity in JOURNAL after JOURNAL. Now a high percentage of accidents, particularly of avoidable accidents, brings discredit on any sport which is not an overt substitute for war, a topical expression of general Weltschmerz, or a barely disguised vehicle for stupidly competitive personal ambition. And I want to return to the question how far these motives, irrelevant and immoral in the conduct of any sport, played a

part in setting some of the patterns of mountaineering in the nineteen-thirties.

The immediate point I am trying to make is that the ALPINE JOURNAL failed to sympathise with the more sober compulsions that were then at work among young mountaineers. Here is the Editor on the accidents of 1927: 'But it still remains a fact that the percentage of competent to incompetent parties is far too low. There are reasons for this disastrous state of affairs. Before the war beginners were wont to acquire their mountaineering experience under competent professionals; now, with increased guides' tariffs and decreased incomes, most beginners prefer to learn their business with amateur leaders often nearly as inexperienced and sometimes more reckless than themselves. Quite casually they start their career with the most difficult ascents—ascents which thirty years ago the aspiring mountaineer would never have dreamt of undertaking before his third or fourth season. . . . To such parties the use of CRAMPONS is a snare and a delusion. . . . Another fruitful source of accidents is the modern craze among amateurs for climbing in bad weather. This evil is becoming ever increasingly prevalent, and too many persons who have successfully climbed Welsh, Lakes, or Saxon "Switzerland" boulders in rain, imagine that serious expeditions may be attempted with similar impunity in the High Alps.'

The point that is missed is that there was an almost inevitable link between the fact that from now on most young climbers had little money and insufficient time for the classic alpine season, and the kind of climbs which they were tempted to do. Toni Schmid and his brother would not have bicycled from Munich to the North face of the Matterhorn and camped among the Hörnli rocks if they had had money for the train-fare, hotels and hut fees. It is true that such men had trained, often since their early teens, on Bavarian or Dolomite 'boulders'. But they went to the great Alps with a sense of high adventure. They had read their alpine literature devotedly, and with a background of rock-climbing skill at least that few other amateurs and not many guides could rival, they drove straight at their objective, one of 'the last great unsolved alpine problems'. They were rash, no doubt, but there was neither money nor time to serve a further apprenticeship, doing moderate peaks in good weather through several leisurely seasons in the high Alps. They were adventurous and ambitious, and so were Whymper and Mummery. But, unlike the pioneers, they found their mountains criss-crossed with the tracks of other men, on routes which were admittedly great but which had lost their glamour by repetition. And if during their brief holidays the weather remained bad, the temptation still to try and reach their long-planned objective was very strong. Strutt was also not a little blind to the kind of toughening experience

provided by bad-weather climbs on those homeland 'boulders'. Men who, among our own mountains, could safely lead Scafell Central Buttress in the rain, or deal with the seeping ledges and cracks of Clogwyn du'r Arddu, or even tackle one of the great Ben Nevis ridges in Scottish wintry conditions, were not so badly equipped for fighting ill weather among bigger mountains. What was in fact gradually emerging, with over-heavy casualty lists as part of the process of learning, was the ability, backed by better equipment, technique and toughness, to ride out storms in the middle of a route up still more ferocious mountains, an ability which has made possible the great Himalayan successes of the nineteen-fifties.

The other obvious point is that the increased number of alpine casualties, which quite rightly worried both the *ALPINE JOURNAL* and all those concerned with the good name of mountaineering, stemmed not only from ambition, inexperience, and mistaken tactics, but very largely from the vastly greater number of climbers. In earlier days an alpine accident involved friends, or the friends of friends, or at least climbers with whose performances one was likely to be familiar. In that much smaller mountaineering world, the *ALPINE JOURNAL* used quite naturally to sound a note not only of personal loss but in a real sense of personal responsibility. But, in the between-war years, when the mountains began to be flooded by climbers from new sources, with different traditions and beliefs, the semi-proprietary attitude of the *ALPINE JOURNAL* towards the sport became harder and harder to uphold. The victims obviously could not read what Colonel Strutt had to say about them, the young proposers of rash or at any rate of new climbing plans almost certainly did not. And there were more understanding voices. The *JOURNAL* of May 1932 records a symposium on accidents, and I regret to find from my marginal notes, scribbled at the time, that I must have found many of the comments made in the discussion by distinguished members of the Club a trifle middle-aged and uncomprehending. There were strictures against traversing glaciers two on the rope, against learning without guides, and a wounding ignorance of the high standards of rock-climbing competence which I think many of my contemporaries had by then achieved! But that old and heroic warrior Tom Longstaff spoke up stoutly for the younger generation. 'To my mind you cannot say that any mountain or any route up it is unjustifiable.' He gave a sardonic twist to our habit of going guideless by declaring: 'I think there are very few first-rate guides indeed . . . and there are a very large number of very bad guides and very bad porters.' Finally, apropos the current dispute whether the Schmid brothers were rash young fools or bold and skilful mountaineers, who chose precisely the right conditions for their first ascent, Tom Longstaff notes: 'The North face of the Matterhorn is probably much safer with snow on it.'



Photo, J. R. Edwards]

East Buttress

Middle Rock

West Buttress

Far West Buttress

CLOGWYN DU'R ARDDU.

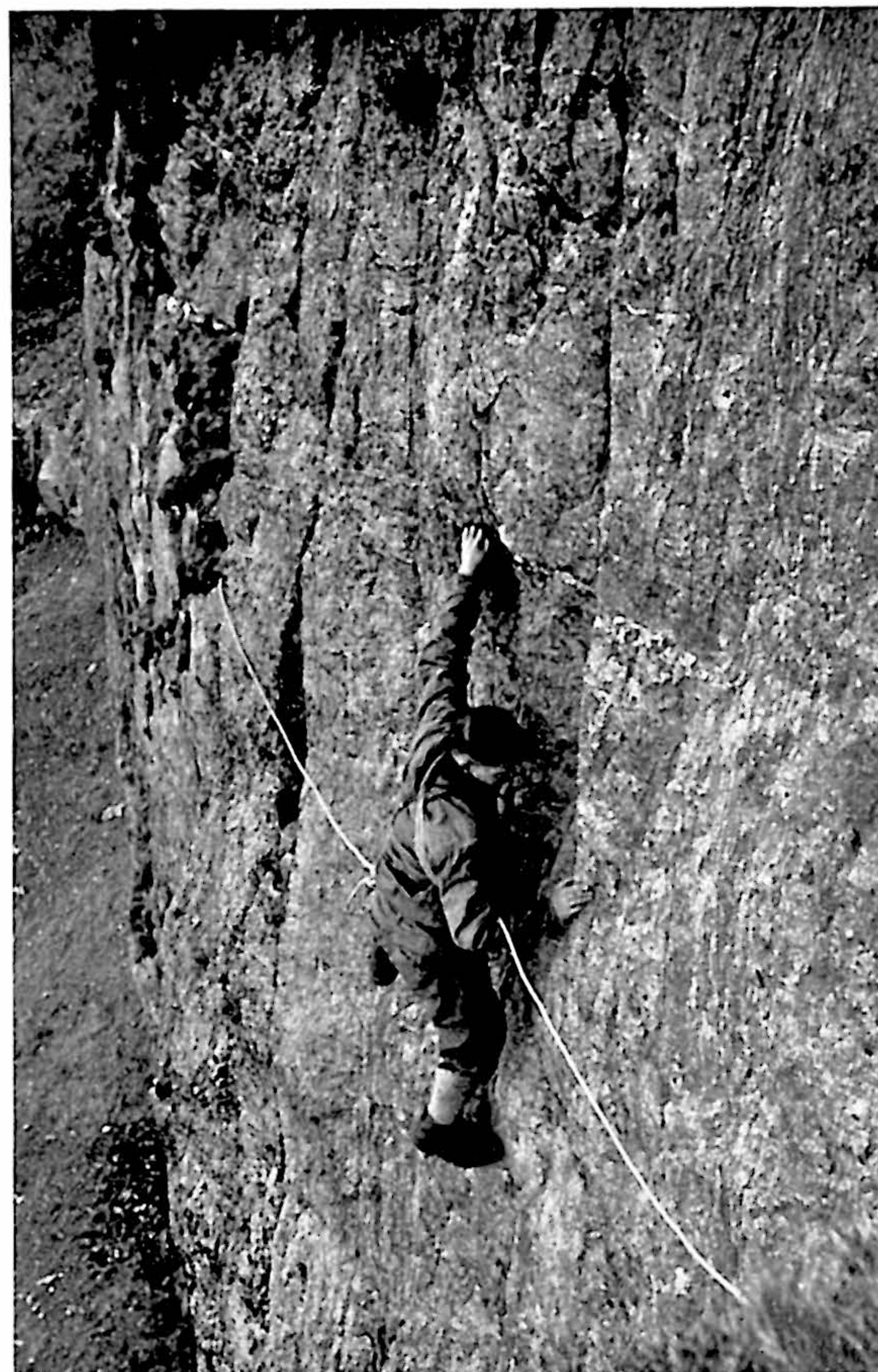
This symposium on accidents was wound up by Douglas Busk, who has always seemed to me among the most admirable of Etonian revolutionaries, and who during these years was always at the heart of the recurrent attempts to reform the Alpine Club and to bring it into that sympathy with what young mountaineers were trying to achieve. Douglas Busk throws down a brave challenge: 'The main conclusion we can reach is that there is no reason why guideless climbing should be more dangerous than guided, *as long as the rules of the game are observed.*' He added, and I do not think I am imagining that a slightly despairing note crept into his voice at this point: 'The A.C. is the oldest of all Alpine Clubs. It was founded by young men and it should be its proudest boast that it is the youngest in spirit.'

There was the rub. I do not wish to exaggerate the frustration that many young mountaineers felt at what they conceived to be the attitude of the Club and of the ALPINE JOURNAL towards the most significant changes which were then happening in the outside climbing world. Every club, however adventurous its founders, passes through periods of middle age, from which it must be rescued by successive palace-revolutions. Every active young club member feels at times that his club is dominated by men who have long ceased to climb, in his sense of the term, and that his own motives are misunderstood and his ambitions frowned on, and all this is almost certainly very good for his soul. But the Alpine Club had held a very special position in the whole mountaineering world, and this perhaps gave impertinent young members some justification for worrying rather specially about its future. It had begun as a largely social club for the small group who invented and developed the sport of mountaineering. Its membership had included, at least up till 1914, nearly all the best and boldest climbers throughout a period of nearly sixty years. The record of their doings in the ALPINE JOURNAL was the definitive history of the general progress of mountaineering, and it included the exploits of Club members who were innovators, iconoclasts, and sometimes plain dangerous. But the Club and the JOURNAL had survived into a very different world. It could no longer be assumed that the greatest new expeditions, in whatever ranges, would almost certainly be accomplished by its own members. The Alpine Club, while encouraging, recording and indeed sometimes fathering expeditions to the bigger ranges beyond the Alps, had remained astonishingly aloof from British climbing at home. The spread and fascinating independent development of this climbing at home went almost unrecorded in the ALPINE JOURNAL. Partly in consequence, the sturdy and often local British climbing clubs hardly thought of looking to the Alpine Club for leadership. This might not have mattered, particularly if there had been any deliberate decision by the Alpine Club to dissociate



Photo, J. Firth Burton]

DIRECT FINISH, EAST BUTTRESS, CLOGWYN DU'R ARDDU.
A. S. PIGOTT LEADING J. K. COOKE.



Photo, C. Douglas Milner]

LINNELL'S LEAP, WEST BUTTRESS, CLOGWYN DU'R ARDDU.
D. P. DAVIS TRAVERSING.

itself from climbing in Britain. There was in fact no such decision, but the distinction drawn in practice between 'mountaineering' and 'rock-climbing' was made more absurd by the fact that many Club members with respectable alpine reputations were also experts in the remarkable developments of home-grown climbing. Much more serious was the realisation during the period between the wars that the Alpine Club had lost the leadership of the alpine world. The ALPINE JOURNAL still spoke with enormous authority, but the trouble was not only that it spoke with dislike of much that was happening, but that many people simply stopped listening ! This is a shocking thing to say, particularly in our centenary year, but in mountaineering, as in other things, you have to recognise the existence of a kind of Shavian 'Life-Force' and to realise that this does not belong as of divine right to any one nation or club. During this particular period it is the coincidence of two quite separate factors that mattered. The more important was that mountaineering had spread, largely through British invention and British example, to many other countries, and that for a number of good reasons the main mountaineering developments were now being made by climbers from other countries and from other clubs. The second factor was the accident that during this period the ALPINE JOURNAL became obstinately backward-looking and so largely forfeited the sympathy and thus the leadership which it had till then been accorded by the most active mountaineers at home and abroad. The Editor recorded in 1932 his attendance at the third *Congrès International d'Alpinisme* at Chamonix, and ironically notes : 'A representative of the A.C. was asked at the banquet by the delegate of a newly-formed republic and society whether Great Britain possessed an Alpine Club.' The really terrifying thing is that in 1932 this republican ignorance might not either have been assumed or wholly unjustifiable.

This long excursion into the role of the ALPINE JOURNAL and, by implication, of the Club during this period has regrettably obscured two important things. The first is, of course, that there were many splendid achievements by British mountaineers during these years. The second is that the sport of mountaineering is pursued at all levels, and, if it is to remain a healthy and satisfying sport for tens of thousands of happy climbers, must be so pursued. The great achievements hit the headlines, and more than that, they provide developments of attitude and technique which eventually penetrate, in some degree or other, down through these other levels. Originally revolutionary methods of use of the rope, of belaying, of footgear, of clothing, the attitude to exposure on difficult routes, or towards the use of crampons on snow and ice are all simple examples. But we believe in mountaineering not only because John Hunt leads his party brilliantly and safely up and down Everest, but because countless unrecorded climbers find

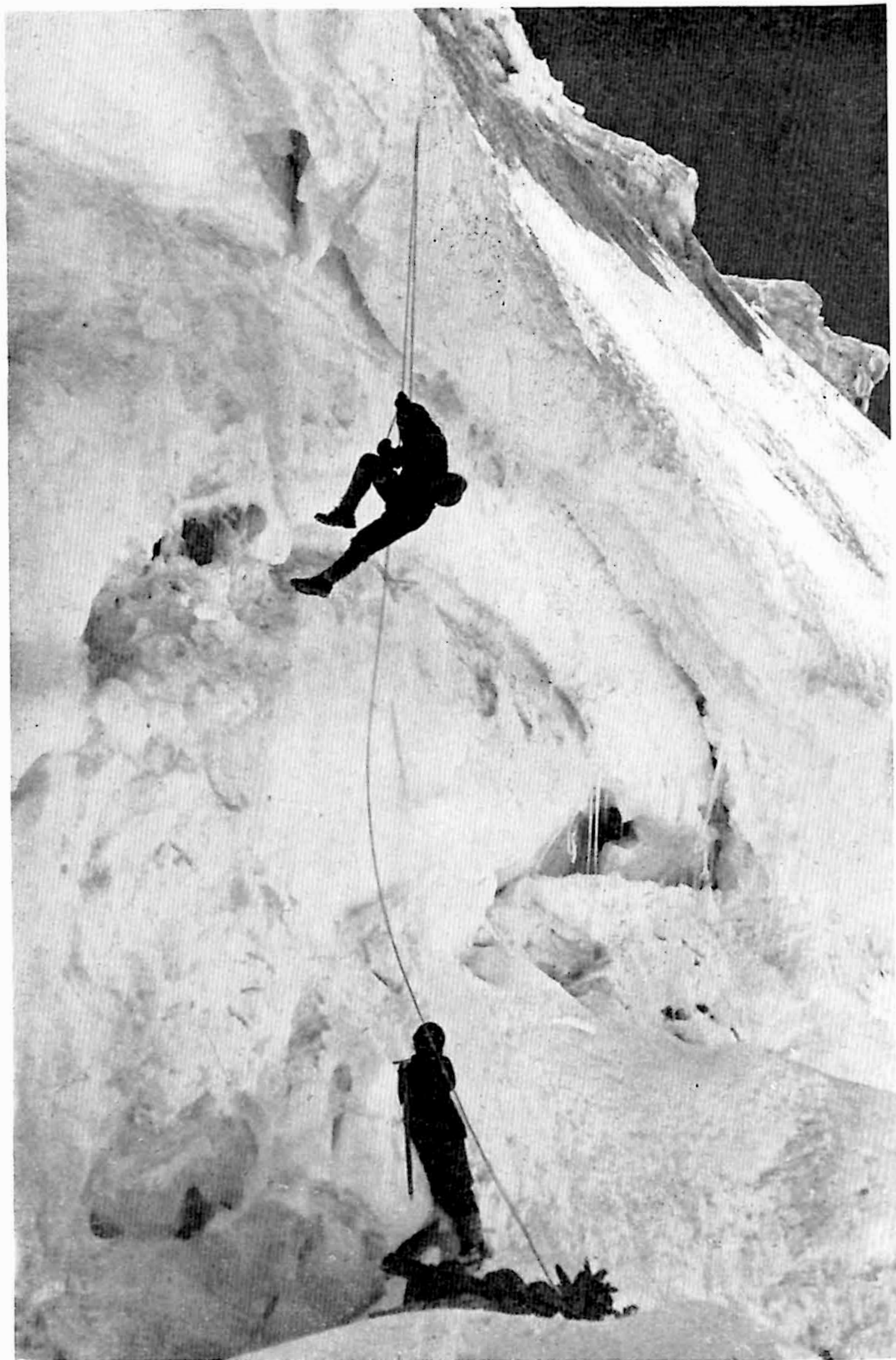
unique satisfaction, often for year after year, in doing ordinary climbs. Their pleasures, in the nature of things, cannot be recorded in an account of this kind, but they are the solid base of the pyramid which enables us to assert that climbing is not the eccentric hobby of a handful of desperadoes !

I have also assumed that it was not my task to make a catalogue of achievements. But a short summary, to show the quality as well as to hint at the limitations of British mountaineers of the period, must finally be given, with more than the usual apologies for its nature, since both inclusions and omissions must be highly eclectic.

The first great inventions which placed British mountaineers alongside their continental peers were those of Frank Smythe with Graham Brown in 1927 and 1928 in putting their original seal on the vast confusion of the Brenva face of Mont Blanc. Even earlier, in 1919, was the remarkable Innominata route made by Courtauld and Oliver. These routes stood up fairly against the background of the overrunning of the Aiguilles by the French G.H.M. group and their later movement towards the great ice faces, and they came earlier than the sieges of the Jorasses and Eiger North walls that were to follow. At the same time another 'last problem', the North ridge of the Dent Blanche was solved by I. A. Richards and Dorothy Pilley, with Joseph Georges le Skieur. These are reasonably apt examples which define a watershed in British mountaineering. The old tradition was that of the skilled partnership between great guide and first-rate amateur, seen at its best in the classic climbs made in the first fifty years of the Club's history. Graham Brown carried on this tradition stoutly in his unravelling of the tangles of the vast face of Mont Blanc, including the extremely difficult Via della Pera, with Alexander Graven, and in a series of fine ice-climbs elsewhere in the Alps. Eustace Thomas, too, marrying this with the continental goal of achieving all the four-thousanders, polished off the lot with Knubel in a fantastically small number of seasons, and in relatively advanced middle-age. Frank Smythe went the other way, and though still active in the Alps for several years more, turned to organising Himalayan expeditions, succeeded admirably on Kamet, and went as near getting to the top of Everest as any man then could. Wyn Harris and Eric Shipton's second ascent of Mt. Kenya is a good parallel. Smythe is also perhaps as good an example as any of the way in which exploring mountaineers were turning away from the over-exploited Alps towards the bigger and lonelier ranges. There was already a strong tradition, particularly at Oxford and Cambridge, of mountain exploration in the Arctic, with Tom Longstaff, James Wordie, and later Gino Watkins, whose early death, I believe, alone prevented the achievement in the nineteen-thirties of the crossing of the Antarctic continent, which may now be

completed by a British party in 1958. The Himalayas themselves also began to be proved possible goals for more than the occasional elaborate and expensive Everest expeditions, with the growing interest of Army officers serving in India in mountaineering as well as shooting, and with the rediscovery by Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman of Longstaff's and Kellas' earlier proof that a cheap and small expedition could go far, have a very good time, and write admirable books about its defiant lack of elaboration. Spencer Chapman's ascent of Chomolhari is another good instance. And, be it said in amends, the *ALPINE JOURNAL* gave very full space and credit to those more distant ventures, which began gradually to monopolise its pages. In the Himalayan record, for all the failures on Everest, British achievements stood higher than that of any other country, with Kamet and Nanda Devi climbed. Eric Shipton, in particular, well deserved his unique reputation among climbers of all countries as a great mountain explorer. Moreover, we were beginning to show the way of competent and undramatised achievement against the background of the German holocausts on Nanga Parbat, misguided in substituting national prestige for healthy mountaineering ambition, overmanned with individually ambitious climbers, and disastrous in their sacrifice of the Sherpas on whom big Himalayan mountaineering depended. The evil shadows of growing national rivalries and of the false doctrine that mountaineering achievement is a proper means of enhancing a nation's prestige fall heavily athwart the mountaineering scene of this period, and it is to the honour of Colonel Strutt that in the *JOURNAL* he never ceased to recognise and denounce the evil wherever he saw it. We are not clear of it even in the nineteen-fifties, but the British Himalayan expeditions of the nineteen-thirties did at least lead the way to the soberly and safely contrived successes of the last few years, in which some of our pride can properly stem from the contrast they make with other Himalayan successes, achieved with unnecessary sacrifices and inappropriate heroics.

In the Alps, the British, for the reasons I have tried to give, could not keep up with the leaders of the hunt. The Jorasses North face, the Eigerwand, Lauper's North faces of the Jungfrau and Mönch, the North-east face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey and the complete Peuterey ridge over the Noire to Mont Blanc, the North-east face of Les Droites, and a whole series of astonishing ice-climbs all fell to foreign parties. Moreover, as speed in very general terms indicates competence, we could not match such achievements as when the guideless Amstutz and von Schumacher in 1928 left the Torino at 1 a.m. and reached the top of Mont Blanc by the old Brenva route at 8.30 a.m., or when Amstutz and Walter Risch traversed in one day the complete circuit Pizzi Roseg, Scerscen, Bernina, Bianco. One reason for these successes was of course that for these hardby-dwelling Swiss, French



Photo, E. E. Slipton]

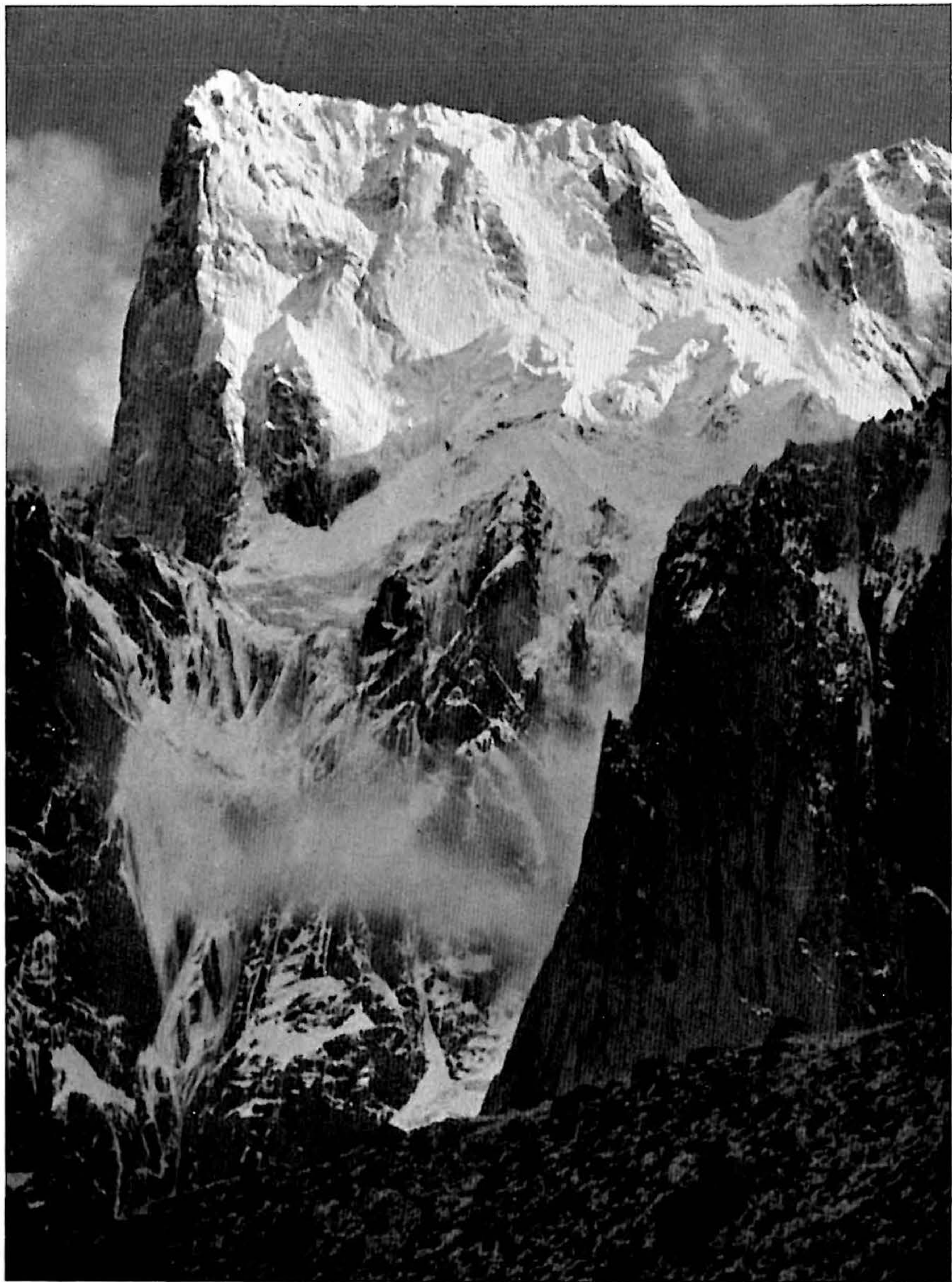
DESCENDING AN ICE CLIFF WHEN CROSSING A PASS AT THE HEAD OF THE CHOKTOI
GLACIER, KARAKORUM HIMALAYA, SEPTEMBER 1939.

[To face p. 96.

and Austrians big mountaineering had, with better transport, become a week-end sport. In the account of the ascent of the North-east face of Les Droites it is recorded that this was 'the seventeenth occasion during the last 5 years that Lagarde has slept at the hut for this ascent, the previous 16 attempts being all repelled by bad weather'. How could the British climber, with his single short alpine season a year, hope to compete on level terms with men like that !

Nevertheless we had great fun. The urge to reach sufficient competence just to repeat some of Geoffrey Winthrop Young's great routes and traverses was enough to keep me happy for a number of seasons, as it certainly inspired Wilfrid Noyce later on at the beginning of his climbing career. And I shall probably never enjoy a mountain day as much again as that on which we took Geoffrey himself one-legged over the Grépon in 1929, when for a short time I fancied myself as second guide, or at least leading porter to the tremendous Hans Brantschen ! And at times, by pegging away quietly in a forgotten district, one found genuine new routes that the French or the Swiss had overlooked.

My period ends with splendidly encouraging portents of the future. John Hunt was remorselessly pursuing Himalayan peaks in the Saltoro range and in Sikkim. Wilfrid Noyce and Armand Charlet did the great traverse of the Verte over the Aiguille Sans Nom. Michael Taylor and John Jenkins went up Mont Maudit by the South-east arête. Robin Hodgkin, with Jenkins and Taylor, had the best British foray into the Caucasus for many years, including the South-east ridge and East face of Ushba. Eric Shipton was in Shaksgam, and Peter Lloyd writing, most significantly, about 'Oxygen on Mount Everest, 1938'. Skirmishers and spies perhaps, but for the faithful eye, whole battalions would soon follow. The seeds of the great renaissance of British climbing after 1945 were already sown, and it has been the most genuine pleasure for one very middle-aged mountaineer to watch them flower, and to know that he played a small part in preparing one tiny corner of the ground.



Photo, E. E. Shipton]

“BLANK ON THE MAP” . . . AN UNNAMED PEAK ABOVE THE TRANGO GLACIER, A
TRIBUTARY OF THE BALTORO.