# NORDWANDS FOR THE AGEING

By WILFRID NOYCE

On February 2, 1960, Mr. C. W. F. Noyce read a paper entitled, ' Nordwands for the Ageing ', which was illustrated with slides. He described some Alpine face climbs done by him before the last war, including the North face of the Wetterhorn, South face of Weisshorn, Mer de Glace face of Grépon, and compared these with some done more recently, including the Welzenbach route on the North face of the Dent d'Hérens and the North-east face of the Signalkuppe (Monte Rosa). He also showed pictures of the Furggen ridge direct of the Matterhorn (see *A.J.* 64. 266, 268 and 269). He introduced his descriptions as follows:

The climbs which I shall describe gave leisure, as most climbs do, for meditation. Having in mind that Anthony Rawlinson had already put me in the bag for a lecture to this club, and that my pictures were unlikely to last more than half an hour, I started to indulge in some reflections on whys and wherefores. These might lead me to discover why a member of the Alpine Club now in his middle years should be flinging himself so violently at rock and ice, not to mention pledging himself for an uncomfortable time next year in the Karakoram.

Being well away from books I had some excuse for starting from the beginning, or from memory, unencumbered by all that has been excellently written on why we climb. To me, just then, it all began to seem either much too easy or much too difficult. If I had asked ' the Prof.', Professor Pigou, the straightest thinker I ever met, he would have looked up with those wide blue eyes and remarked, like Henry Ford in another context, ' it's all bunk.' He might have gone on, as he once did, to say: ' I climbed because I liked it. Of course I wasn't very daring. There was that time when we were benighted on the Mer de Glace . . .' and we would have ended up, as we often did, with the way he started climbing. Already in his thirties, he was taken up the Central Jordan Climb on Pillar. So great was his terror that he had to recite gender rhymes under his breath to keep himself from gibbering aloud. Once down he vowed never to climb again—and was back there the next day just to see if he could not do the wretched thing better. After which he never looked back.

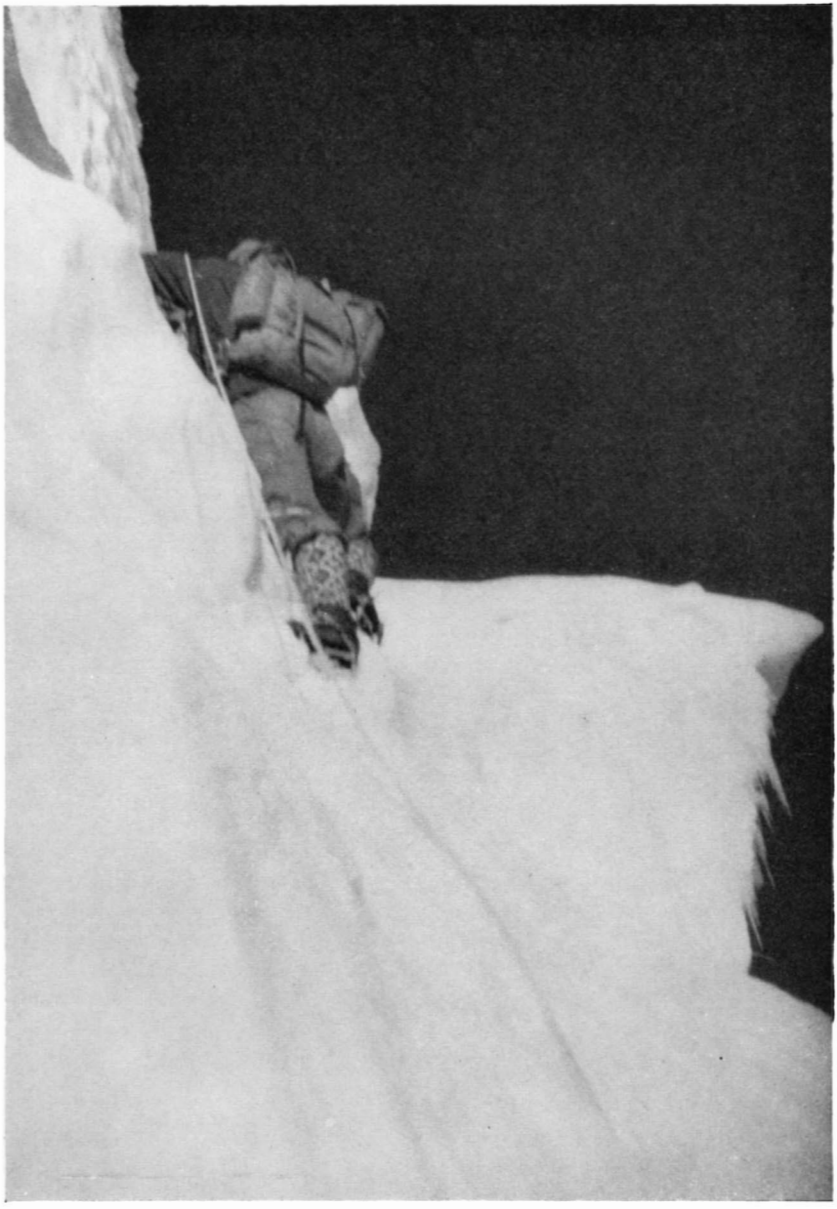
That is the uncomplicated approach, and a discussion with its exponents usually ends in an orgy of magnificent views, great pitches,

champagne baths and the rest, as in *The Meaning of Good* Lowes Dickinson's characters are unanimous on the various goods of purely physical sensation. The second approach, the sternly psychological and as complicated as you like, seemed to me, particularly when looked at in the light of sunrise over Monte Rosa, to go too far the other way. Apart from the fact that I am no psychologist, I did not feel it appropriate to suggest to members of this club that when they speak of the ' breasts ' of mountains they are harking back to some concealed mother or Oedipus complex. When they refer to a ' virgin ' peak remaining ' inviolate ' their intentions, I am sure, are still most honourable. When Charles Houston asks, in *The Savage Mountain*, 'Are we masochists ? ' he does not, I believe, refer to chastisement at the hands of his lady. And when we announce that we have dreamed of falling, down gullies or faces, we are I hope innocent of the horrid suggestions which such dreams would arouse in the mind of a good Freudian.

I do not mean that psychology cannot help us. It can and greatly does, when we go really off the rails. But I have a natural dread of veils being torn too far aside, of mystery being reduced to black and white, and perhaps also I have a dread that mountaineering will be discovered by the experts to be a dangerous and mentally deranging occupation. A man who strikes a small ball across a field and then pursues it to strike it again is a harmless lunatic compared with you who ' batter your bones and endanger your skin, Trying in vain to revert for a season Back to the ways of your simian kin '. Much is at stake, and the expert might point an accusing finger at our literature. This sort of thing, in a guide book. 'A delectable climb ', it starts, and then later, describing the pleasures of the delectable climb : ' a move is made on poor holds up to an awkwardly sloping ledge. The groove above is painful to start and narrows uncomfortably to an overhang, best surmounted by jamming the right knee and pulling up on tiny fingerholds. This part is usually wet and greasy.' What court of law would uphold the sanity of that ? Perhaps after all it is the fear of being certified that makes me borrow from the psychologist's vocabulary while still maintaining man's inalienable right to be vague and inconsequential.

The cards are on the table. You are not going to have an explanation and the mystery will remain wrapped up, at the end. But a study of various adventures has given me an interest in untying the wrapping —just a little—and that for a few moments is what I hope to do.

Once I thought that I could get at the essential quality of mountaineering from a consideration of different people whom I knew or had climbed with. What common denominator have General Bruce, Angtharkay, Armand Charlet, Cox, Edwards, Kirkus, Brantschen, Hillary, Bourdillon, Whillans, Tenzing, Rébuffat, the 'Prof.', Geoffrey



SADLER ON THE FIRST ICE-WALL, DENT D'HEREUS.

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Winthrop Young, John Hunt, Shipton, Evans, Alf Bridge, Ang Nyima? None, I thought on closer examination, except a leaning towards physical activity which is common to adventurers of most sorts. The very fact that men are mountaineers is often due to chance, as is the case with other activities. Shackleton did not intend the Antarctic but had designs in other directions. The ace-pilot A. E. Clouston wanted to be a seaman but had to give up because he suffered from sea sickness. And Menlove Edwards, to whom extreme physical exertion was a necessity, varied his amazing rock climbs with equally amazing feats on water, such as rowing solo across the Minch to the outer Hebrides or swimming the Linn of Dee. It might be amusing to look at different people's approaches, but no common denominator except the hills themselves seemed possible.

More instructive, perhaps, to look at the categories which I artificially created in *The Springs of Adventure* and see if there were any special ways in which the mountaineers fitted these. The hair shirt, obviously, to begin with, the uncomfortable bivouac on the Dent d'Hérens, the thunderstorm on the descent of the Matterhorn. 'Are we masochists?' Houston asks, and the question is not unapt. While he did not mean sexual perverts he did mean perverts in another direction, men who go out of their way to be uncomfortable simply *because* they will be uncomfortable. Anybody visiting the higher peaks of the Karakoram, it seems to me, should have something of this perversion, and that worries me a little because I am about to visit them myself and incline to think that past, say, the middle thirties one begins to acquire a respect for comfort. One no longer leaps with the same joyful abandon at the rain-shrouded buttresses of Tryfan or watches wet flannels clinging about the legs like a mermaid's scales. In those early days it was a point of honour with me to climb without underpants. But now—one likes the tents nicely set and the tea made. A sign of old age, I sadly fear.

We all of course vary in our method of putting on the sometimes inevitable hair shirt. Some endure doggedly because it will be so nice afterwards, like the man beating his head against a stone wall. Some openly revel in numb toes and ice-stiff joints. These are the real perverts. Most accept the hair shirt of suffering because if they can master that, or rather their reaction to that, they will achieve something that seems to them worth grasping. It may be K2, it may be some quite unknown climb in Snowdonia like those grassy perpendiculars up which Menlove Edwards used to struggle in his clinker-nailed boots. I used to ask Menlove why he preferred these, when rubbers would have done the job more effectively. The answer was characteristically unsatisfactory. Perhaps it was too closely bound up with his highly complex make-up. Certainly it was not fame he was seeking,

since he would record only some crashing understatement in a guide-book like: 'A little harder in boots', or 'boots add to the interest.' In his case, though one cannot speak of him without simplifying, the hair shirt was a sort of compensation for the too easy and common living of every day. Sheer physical discomfort, like blistering the hands on the Minch journey, was a sort of tribute that he paid; as well as a proof to himself that he could overcome his own feebler part and pull up alongside those who showed to better advantage in the everyday graces.

The pleasure of contrast cannot just be dismissed as head-beating. It is an essential ingredient of pleasure in most activities; all mountaineers who have arrived at the top of some dank gully to be greeted by warm grass and sunshine will understand Keats placing cayenne pepper on his tongue, so that he could better savour the perfection of his claret. 'If I were asked the most agreeable thing in life, I should say it is the pleasure of contrast', Freya Stark has it, and Shackleton speaks in similar terms of a bed after the Antarctic. The one gives sense and value to the other, which in normal life one accepts without bothering to think of it.

> 'Men with a mind on a rational basis
> Walk on the road, as I'm sure that they should.'

Nobody, the contrast-lover will argue, is so well placed to appreciate that road as the lunatic who has just done some dizzy *sestogrado* in the Dolomites. He appreciates, because for a time he has escaped.

But the mountains, what of the scenery which is the bond joining these very diverse people? 'Have you forgotten,' I can hear the indignant aesthete exclaim, 'Sunset on Mont Blanc, the Coolin rising out of a June haze, Kangchenjunga from Tiger Hill?' In a way, yes, that is a bond. But the attitudes of different types of person to mountain scenery are so different that they make me think the tie is far less powerful than is generally supposed. To the Sherpa, for instance, the mountain is bread and butter, not beauty or even, usually, fame. I well remember sending down one Sherpa, with another who was sick, from near the top of the Geneva Spur on Everest. When he was told that he would receive the chit of a South Col Sherpa all right he showed no disappointment at all at not having made it, nor do I think that he missed the view over the other side for which many would give their noses. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as in Auden's lines:

> 'Love must have an object,
> But this varies so much,
> Almost, I imagine,
> Anything will do.



MORTLOCK ON THE OVERHANGING ICE-WALL, DENT D'HEREUS NORTH FACE.

> When I was a child I
> loved a pumping engine,
> thought it every bit as
> beautiful as you.'

It is unreasonable of us to expect every mountain dweller to enthuse as we do. Angtharkay, when he came over to Paris after Annapurna, could hardly be dragged away from the Métro. He failed to understand why a nation which possessed so great a marvel as an Underground should bother with the Himalaya.

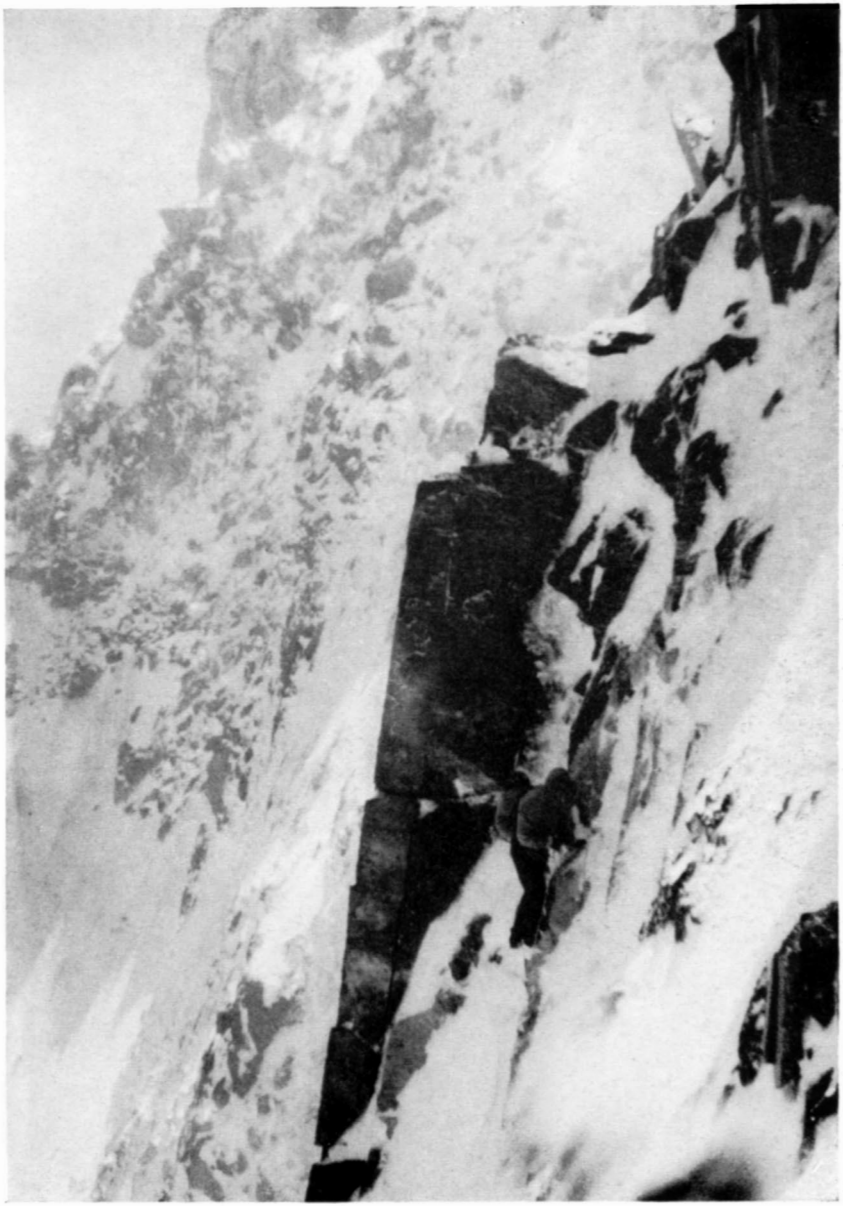
Everyone knows the story of Leslie Stephen's guide who came to London and gazed out over the chimney pots. 'That is not so fine a view as we have seen together from the top of Mont Blanc.' 'Ah, sir,' he said, 'it is far finer!' I try to convince myself that, with the mountain-bred, beauty comes in through the pores, not the eyes. They would not really be happy elsewhere. But as I survey the row of brown inscrutable guide faces lined up outside the Monte Rosa in Zermatt waiting for the next Matterhorn-goer, my faith wavers. I suspect they would all much prefer the job of a suburban bus conductor. And coming to the amateur climber of our day—I am not speaking of the walker or artist or general mountain lover—I am struck by one very simple trend, a generalisation if you like. More now come because they are attracted by difficulty, by the problems of an exciting technique, than because they are attracted in the first place by the beauty of the hills themselves. Impossible to prove, but I strongly suspect.

It is impossible to prove because to many active climbers the two are inseparable. When I lay convalescing from the bad accident in 1937 I imagined that my return to the hills would be a calm, dignified affair, nothing to do with my own prowess but an acceptance of their own entity and dignity. Little did I know. As soon as I discovered that my physique was unimpaired I went at the game as hard as ever. And I know of men permanently incapacitated by illness who have found their first return to mountains almost disagreeable, because they had not realised how much their enjoyment of the beauty had been bound up with their own sense of well being and achievement on those slopes. I must sympathise. Did not I myself enjoy the old view of the Matterhorn's great pyramid all the more this year because of the new blood the Furggen seemed to have pushed into my veins? The full acceptance of hills entirely for themselves comes later, as a rule gradually, and if not, with a struggle. A supreme example of the struggle is Geoffrey Winthrop Young on the peg leg; and of the acceptance, his reflection on top of the Rothorn that he was doing the wrong thing. He was making mountains into just that trial-by-

strength gymnasium which he scorned. My point is that while, as climbers, we are in the ' storm days of our strength ', the pleasure of technique is intimately bound up with the total pleasure. More intimately, as technique advances. So intimately, in these days, that this may be one reason why the ' why ? ' of the pioneers, their doubts and self-questionings, is replaced increasingly by the all-absorbing ' how ? ' How to make that overhanging hand-jam, how to get out of that dièdre, how to find a good bivouac. The sunset flames in the background, and is ignored.

Skill is the most obvious common bond in the game ; whether the smooth placing of camps on moraine or glacier with Sherpas, or of pegging up a ' six supérieur '. In all cases it is the art of getting safely up and down a mountain, and the pleasures are the well-tried pleasures of doing anything well, of rhythm and co-operation with others, of adapting oneself and being prepared for surprises. But once this common ground is agreed, the differences of viewpoint are endless. The Sherpas, who are weak in the arms, find it hard to understand climbing rocks for their own sake. Some Parisians, on the other hand, with the playground of Fontainebleau on their doorstep, can hardly trouble to go to big mountains ; like John Hunt's friend, who was asked how he had enjoyed a season at Chamonix and said, ' Yes, it was very nice. It was excellent training for Bleau '. Then there are the Americans engineering their way up crackless faces with expansion bolts and some of ourselves in Britain still having a sneaking feeling that even pitons are faintly caddish, like shooting foxes. Geoffrey Young argued, in *Snowdon Biography*, that the line should be drawn against pitons, because they interfere with the rock surface as free climbing does not. But I read recently an equally convincing argument by Georges Livanos, specialist in ' Beyond the Vertical ', maintaining that pitons are an extension of ordinary equipment such as the axe and the claw, and can be removed ; whereas expansion bolts, which make a permanent alteration in the rock face, are obviously on the wrong side of the line. So it goes on, like the argument of Voltaire's Parsees and Christians, leaving the ordinary man more than ever enthusiastic for the virtues of tolerance and the middle way.

But I am steering off the point, which is that mastery of a technique is enjoyable. *Mountain Craft* says the rest. Whether the technique is to be practised in solitude or in company is another question. For most the companionship of the rope is the most satisfying feature of climbing, and if I look back at the climbs which you will soon see, it is to enjoy again the bivouacs shared, to relive the dramatic moment when the rucksack swung out over 5,000 ft. of Italian Matterhorn, to remember the satisfying glance back at the others when I attacked a nasty piece of Signalkuppe. But for some, and not necessarily the



NEAR THE TOP OF THE SIGNAL KUPPE (MONTE ROSA) SNOWSLIDE IN THE FOREGROUND.

eccentrics, the challenge comes best when they are alone. There is a characteristic story of Hermann Buhl. Climbing solo in the Dolomites he arrived in the afternoon at a difficult crack above a ledge. He fell out of the crack, back on to the ledge. Most people would either have had a desperate second shot at the crack or given up. Buhl went to sleep on the ledge till next morning, then completed the climb. Less well known, but perhaps equally daring, was the Italian poet and music critic Ettore Zapparoli, who pioneered some extraordinary solo routes on Monte Rosa before he was lost in 1951 on the East face. To each his taste. Most of us so-called ' normal ' climbers find that a few hours, or days, spent alone from year to year act as a good yeast to the pleasures of companionship, introducing once again the pleasure of contrast in another context.

Indissolubly with the question of technique the problem of danger in climbing presents itself, and I cannot avoid it. It has always worried me, and I doubt if I have always been honest with myself over it. Before I fell, I was fairly convinced that only fools did. Then I had the big smash, at 19 ; not my fault possibly, but still a big smash. The conviction had vanished, and it has been kept well under by the sobering thought of the number of safe climbers I have known fairly well who have been killed on mountains.

It would be absurd to suggest that one goes to places because they are dangerous ; but equally absurd, to my mind, to suggest that people visit north faces because they are as safe as Piccadilly. And not only north faces. It cannot be denied, the spice or sniff of danger, firmly controlled by technique, is an ingredient in the pleasure of the mildest of Great Gable ridges. On harder climbs, especially big ones, the element of doubt increases and can become unpleasant. Most of us can remember admitting that we did not know what would happen if such and such an exit proved impossible. And thinking now of the farthest extreme of difficulty I believe that men who make really exceptional ascents are in the last resort prepared to pay the penalty. They take every precaution, yes, they change their rope slings, find every runner and spy out every happy landing. They do climbs safely which for most would be rank suicide. As an instance, it turned out in a discussion recently that nearly all of a famous group of ' tigers ' had fallen off at least twenty or thirty times—counting a fall as anything over 20 ft. But with no harm done. They had taken the possibility into account beforehand and protected against it.

Twenty or thirty times. But the thirty-first ? It might just not work. One is resigned to that, as anyone who climbs the Eigerwand, however great his skill, must ultimately be resigned to the luck going against him. Here is a revealing sentence from Livanos's book, about a climb he particularly wanted to do. ' Je ne vais jamais à ma limite,

mais pour cette course je serais peut-être capable d'aller jusqu' au bout.' I think now that with some men this very idea, that all rests in the lap of the gods, tautens the muscle, strengthens the nerve, provides the challenge—that hackneyed word so misused by journalists and others that it has been dropped, perhaps unjustly, by the serious adventurer.

I am coming to the conclusion that ultimately we are divided into those who are prepared, if put to it, to go the whole way and those who are not. This may explain some accidents that happen to the really ' safe ' expert, while the fact that the very act of climbing means a certain minimal danger which is usually ignored might throw light on accidents like that to Brian McKenna last summer. The extremist can fail at a calculated hazard. The non-extremist like myself can only too easily let the control slip for that fatal half moment, or alternatively, if he climbs long enough, be knocked out by the impossible-to-guard-against boulder or snowslide. If it were not so it would not be worth climbing, and that's a paradox we accept and are thankful for.

If I had been reading this paper one hundred years ago, I would probably have said a lot more both of the spiritual benefits of the hills and the material benefits of science. If I read it a hundred years hence, science again would probably figure far more largely than it does at present. It is curious but true that the scientific mountaineer, the kettle-boiler who was snorted out of court by Leslie Stephen, is returning slowly into his own. For him there is no incompatibility in his two loves. As for the unbelieving, they are susceptible to the cash argument ; the most ardent purist may be compelled to pocket his pride and tap whatever learned society he can find for the funds necessary to take him to some distant range. Thus the gentle sisters of cartography, physiology, sociology and their kin add lustre to the worth of every exploit. Thus, while very few would claim that they went out for no reason but the scientific, an increasing number are forced to admit that they have learned something about beetles or blood-cells, maps or marmots, or even Abominable Snowmen, in order to come by their funds. As Tilman has it, if Henry thought Paris worth a mass, then a visit to the Nepal Himalaya is surely worth the swallowing of a strong prejudice.

At the same time I must confess that the march of science back again into mountaineering leaves me with a certain dread alongside holy awe. The idea that, for instance, the physiological results obtained on Makalu may be of assistance when it comes to choosing the first man to visit the moon does not fill me with the enthusiasm proper to so high an endeavour. Trying to analyse my feeling, I think I have always regarded mountaineering as one of the purest adventures because it seemed to have no ulterior motive *whatsoever*. If you cross the



SADLER AND MORTLOCK IN THE COULOIR, MONTE ROSA (SIGNAL KUPPE).

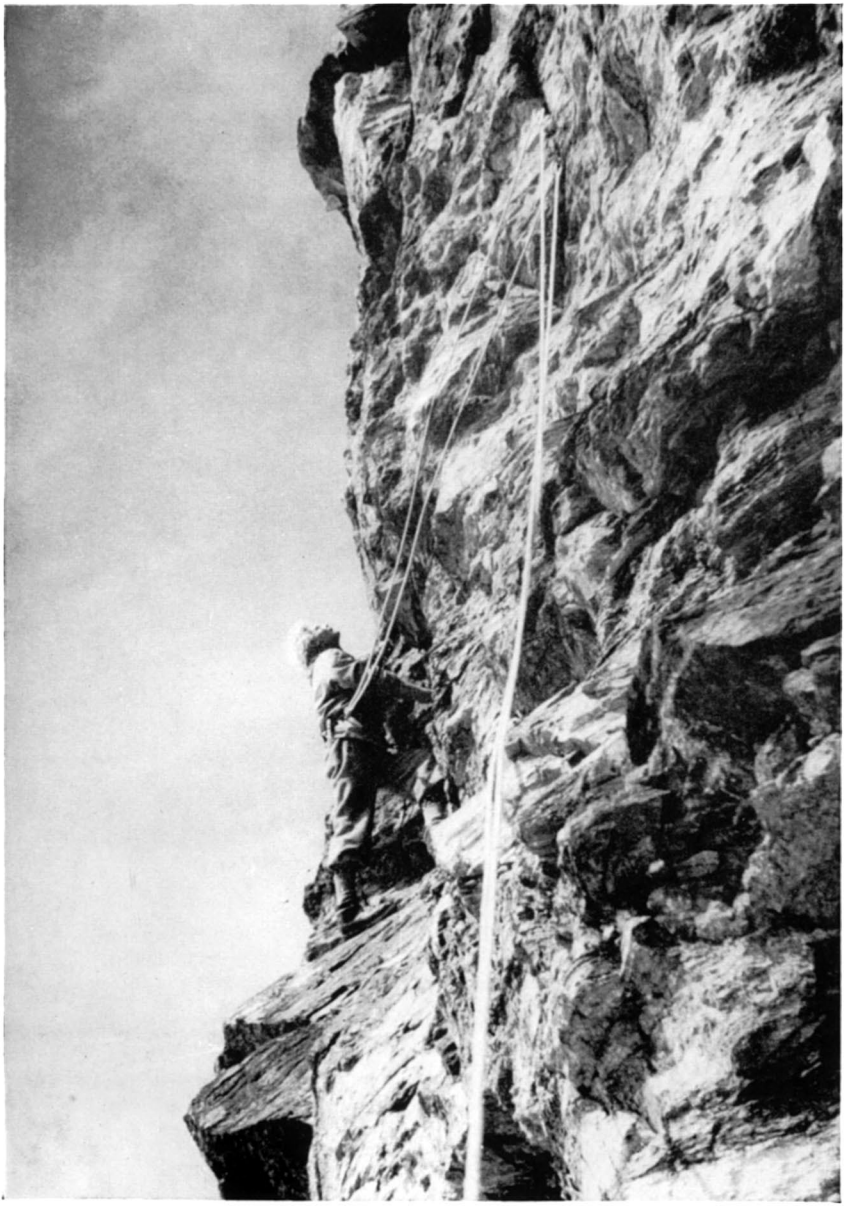
Antarctic continent you can claim you measure the ice cap and add to the sum of scientific knowledge. If you dive in the sea you can explore its vast untapped resources. If you fly at great speeds you can test the strength of metals. But for spending months of time and thousands of pounds on climbing a peak so that two men may stand on one particular patch of snow and then come down and tell their friends about it there is absolutely no justification in rational terms, however grateful we may be to science and technology for making the feat possible. I have liked to think, with G. K. Chesterton, that ' the immense act has something about it human and excusable ; and when I endeavour to analyse the reason for this feeling I find it to lie, not in the fact that the thing was big or bold or successful, but in the fact that the thing was perfectly useless to everybody, including the person who did it.' But that view, I realise, may soon be badly out of date.

Finally, what you might call the uplift side of mountains. Can I glorify that against the scientific ? I doubt it. We are farther away from Bishop Burnet than Ruskin was, and the Mountain Glory no longer calls for justification. But I sometimes think we fall into the opposite error, and in a wider sense than that which I have indicated when considering simply the scenery. I am a little appalled to reflect how much I took for granted last summer ; how much of sheer delight these pictures recall, which at the time had simply passed me by. We accept and therefore forget, and that may be why, once the initial wonder of the peaks and surprise at being among them is gone, we can invent all sorts of odd and extraneous reasons for our climbs. The keen enquiring edge is gone. Thus the Chinese author of *The Ascent of Minya Konka* tells us that the climb was undertaken ' to enhance the athletic activities of our motherland ', while Muztagh Ata was climbed to emphasise the solidarity of the Sino-Soviet trades unions. Or, alternatively, one can climb for competitive reasons, overtly confessed in this book and some like it, less open but still present in some European quarters. We in the West are not blameless in this ; we do not yet have medals for the ' best ' or ' top ' climbers but there have been, as is well known, scrambles for ascents whose motive can only be ulterior to what we have been discussing. It has always seemed to me a charm of climbing that I was not in direct competition with anyone but myself. For competition, like the other ulterior aims, nullifies our relationship with the mountain itself.

Yes, I have come to it at last, the mountain itself to which the Chinese author quoted pays the most scanty lip service. Unwrap as much as you like or can, the mystery of this thing of ' larger rhythm and line ' remains impenetrable as before. The essence of what everybody in this room believes about mountains defies even the noblest



MONTE ROSA FROM THE STRAHLHORN.



MORTLOCK BELOW THE CRUX, FURGGEN RIDGE.

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attempts to trap it in words, let alone this half hour's poking in tentative directions. It is a sum total of experience in which the mountain itself and action upon it, companionship and an indefinable sense of greatness are equally involved in a combination which I can find in no other adventure. To say more would be to end in a rhapsody, a most unwise thing to do when one is climbing with an American. But I felt and feel a great thankfulness for being alive and a great joy to be among hills.