THE CHILEAN CORDILLERA CENTRAL

(PART II)

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To approach the mountain area thus described (*A.J.* 64. 228) is a simple matter for the residents of the larger cities of central Chile, since they are located within the mountain region itself. Thus, with suitable transport arrangements, it is quite possible to climb over 16,000 ft. and return home, all in one week-end.

It is a pleasant experience for a local mountaineer to enter valleys or tread glaciers seldom or never visited before by explorers, or to tackle new walls or even new peaks after a short one- or two-day approach march, and be spared the ordeal of dusty plains and hot valleys as the Himalayan traveller experiences; in other words, there exists here the happy medium of a range less trodden than the Alps, but more accessible than the Himalayas.

To endeavour to give an idea of the peculiar mountaineering developed in Central Chile, which it can be said, is not Alpine in character but still not Himalayan, the writer describes below some personal experiences in the mountains of the area, which are typical of what is being done and can still be done in the region.

By the late 1940's most peaks of the Cordillera Central behind the cities of Santiago and Los Andes had been climbed, including nearly all those of five-thousand metres (*c.* 16,400 ft.) and over, which are a much desired prize locally. However, in the southern half of the Cordillera Central, behind the cities of Rancagua and San Fernando there remained, and still remains, a wide field for mountain exploration; true, the mountains of this part of the area are below 5,000 metres, but they are by no means unworthy. The writer, who participated in two journeys to this particular sector, was able to prove that there was here an ideal playground. Sharp rock peaks, including several Matterhorns, soared above deep gorges. Height in such an area meant nothing; what mattered more was the scenic beauty. Since the mountains of the southern half of the Cordillera Central receive heavier precipitation, snowfields descend to lower levels; there was more water, more vegetation, more beauty.

Particularly appealing was the very southern extreme of the area; little was known of it. The Tinguiririca river, born in this sector, is the mightiest of the whole area and it was to be assumed, therefore, that

large glaciers fed it. Luis Risopatrón, foremost Chilean geographer and explorer, only mentions in his works the ' potent snows ' of the Tinguiririca. But no mountaineer suspected that here lay the third, or perhaps the second, largest glacier of the Cordillera Central until in 1949 a small party visited it and brought the news.

A Mountaineering Holiday[1]

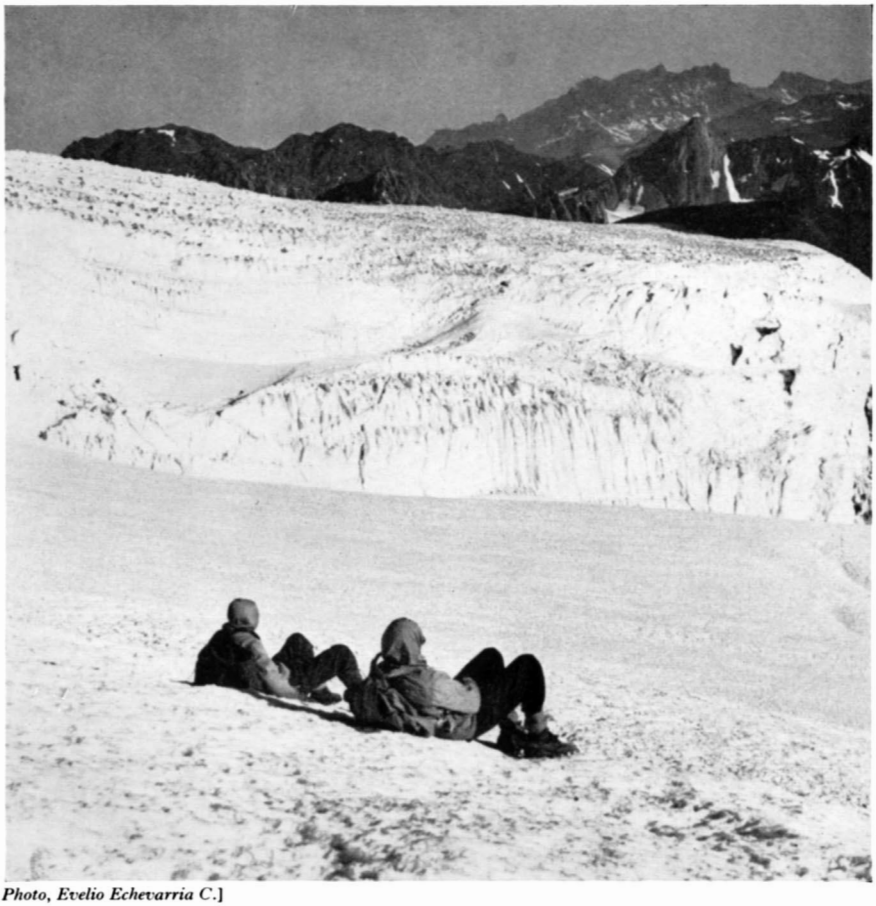
The 1949 group was organised by Walter Bachmann, a Chilean of Swiss extraction, who had made a reputation by climbing Aconcagua and other high peaks between 1940 and 1949. By the latter year he had already become acquainted with the joys of exploratory mountaineering and, naturally, he had it now in mind to seek new ground. Realising the possibilities that the southern extreme of the Cordillera Central offered, he collected two associates, Luis Covarrubias and the writer, who, both being novices in this area, saw themselves unexpectedly introduced into exploratory mountaineering without getting acquainted first with the classic climbs that local mountaineers feel necessary for their initiation, such as the well-known courses on Altar, Plomo, Morado, etc.

The less information about the region to be visited, the more mysterious it appears to be ; all we knew of our choice was that a fine ice peak, El Palomo (The Pigeon), 15,912 ft. high, rose among the ' potent snows ' described by Risopatrón. But what existed around El Palomo we could only guess ; it was a fascinating prospect.

On the first day of December 1949, Walter Bachmann, Luis Covarrubias and I loaded our climbing gear and food for a fortnight into a hired station-wagon and drove 110 miles southward to San Fernando city, in Colchagua province. From this place we took the dirt road leading east to the famed Colchagua thermal baths, near the Argentinian border ; we were dumped, together with our gear, at the junction of the road with the Tinguiririca valley. There began our journey.

Since our needs were modest, we had no trouble in persuading a local muleteer to carry our loads on his two mules to a convenient place on the lower Tinguiririca valley. We found we were not the only occupants of the place ; five hillmen had been appointed by a local landlord to take care of the irrigation of the lower valley and of a number of cattle. The place was a dream of a base-camp : water, wood and grass abounded. Handsome trees, like willows and cypresses, served as a foreground to a landscape of rock walls, and a legendary rock peak, El Brujo (The Wizard), unmarked on the map. However, here we were pestered by flies, an unusual occurrence in the Chilean mountains, which are remarkably free of insect life. Undoubtedly, cattle were the

[1] Sketch Map: *A.J.* 64. 236.



Photo, Evelio Echevarria C.]

CHILEAN CORDILLERA CENTRAL. THE ILL-SURVEYED SAN JOSÉ GLACIER, WITH ARGENTINIAN PEAKS IN THE BACKGROUND.

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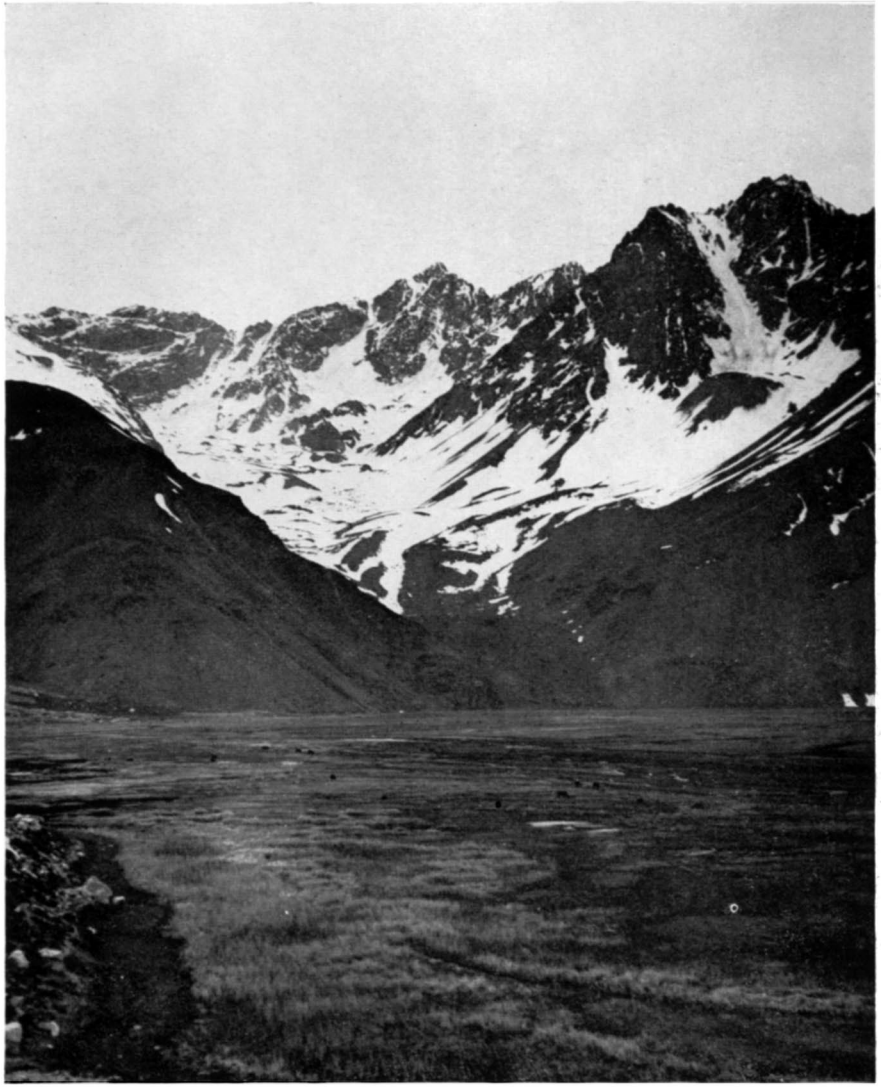
Photo, Manuel Bazan]

CHILEAN CORDILLERA CENTRAL. A TYPICAL GLACIAL VALLEY AND GLACIER.



Photo, Manuel Bazan]

CHILEAN CORDILLERA CENTRAL. THE ALTAR GROUP, WITH ALTAR (17,100 FT.), IN UPPER CENTRE, SEEN FROM THE EAST.



Photo, Evelio Echevarria C.]

CHILEAN CORDILLERA CENTRAL. GRAZING GROUND, OR 'VEGAS', OF UPPER ANDEAN VALLEY. THREE UNCLIMBED WEST FACES IN THE BACKGROUND.

reason for this pest but, since the hillmen offered us an ample supply of cheese and milk, we placed our tents at a convenient distance from their store-room and resigned ourselves to the presence of flies.

Our mountaineering holiday was simply devised; we would devote our energies first to El Palomo, the only peak named and located on the map, and the rest of the time available to explore the subsidiary valleys of the Tinguiririca basin and attempt some of the higher or more attractive mountains at their heads.

On December 4 we shouldered our rucksacks with food for five days; our climbing gear included a light three-man 'Aconcagua' tent, eider-down sleeping-bags, windproof parkas, crampons and ice-axes, all locally produced with the exception of the two last items, traditionally imported from Austria or Switzerland. Our boots were nailed, as used in Chile and Argentina, because of the terrible effects of the scree slopes that are commonplace in these two countries. This modest outfit met all our needs; we did not have with us implements for artificial aid, not only because we had rather conservative ideas in this respect, but also because we had, like most native climbers, a low standard of artificial climbing technique.

Our path lay along the San José valley, which is a subsidiary of the lower Tinguiririca; after clearing charming forests of cotton-wood and 'maitenes', which formed a noble foreground for the wall of El Brujo, we came upon the sources of the San José river. The upper San José valley is typical of the Cordillera Central because of its low brushwood, grass beds or 'vegas', the inevitable yellow and brown scree slopes on the hillsides, and the moraines at the snout of the glacier.

As we stepped on the hard, dry ice of the San José glacier, we gazed with awe and admiration at the jagged row of uncharted peaks that rim the San José to the north; they looked strangely different to what we had so far seen in the area, perhaps because of their granite-like rock constitution and their hanging glaciers cascading between avenues of aiguilles. We were the first to explore its southern approaches and we exercised, therefore, our right to christen it; we named the row of peaks Sierra de los Punzones, or Chisel range, not only because of its jaggedness, but also because of an important pass west of it, locally known as Punzones pass.

To climb El Palomo, two camps were necessary: one, not far from the snout of the glacier, and the second on top of a morainic hillock, at some 12,000 ft. above sea level. We left the latter at 4 a.m., and after a morning of pleasant going along the smooth dry ice of the lower San José glacier, we came face to face with the horror of the Chilean mountaineer; long and wide fields of penitent snow lay between us and the final cone of El Palomo. We resigned ourselves to the exasperating and taxing labour of breaking a trail across the snow pinnacles,

which were, fortunately, only knee-high. We led by turns, of half an hour each, the leader being relieved of carrying his load. To cross the two miles or so of penitentes took us six hours of hard work and it was not until 4.30 p.m. that we wearily climbed the final ice slope.

Naturally we had hoped to be the first climbers of the peak, but it was quite a surprise to find on the top a good-sized cairn, under which there was a bottle with a paper note inside, which said :

' Primera ascensión de El Palomo, por la aréte norte ; Paul Schucan, del Club Alpino Académico de Zürich, y Damasio Beíza, de la ciudad de Los Andes. 1–1–1927.'

The disappointment we felt was somewhat reduced by the double fact that Herr Schucan was known to us as a capable alpinist, and that we had also opened, at least, a new way via the unexplored San José glacier.

It was now too cold and too late to stay on the top, so we added our cards to Schucan's, took one or two pictures and gave a quick glance at the panorama ; we gazed with indifference at the Argentine pampas, grey and barren, but with wonder and amazement at the savage ice cascading from the jagged Punzones peaks down to the San José. But we had little time, even to draw a sketch of the peaks ; we had to clear the penitentes before sunset ; so we descended quickly. The sun was with us no longer when we finally cleared the upper snowfields, where most of the crevasses were. It was not till past midnight that we crawled into our sleeping bags, too weary to add to our exertions that of preparing a meal. In one more day of pleasant wandering down the San José valley we reached the base camp, where we found the lentils and coarse beans that formed the daily diet of the hillmen surprisingly good, while they helped themselves joyfully to our tedious canned and concentrated food.

We had seen enough of this particular region to convince ourselves that the Punzones range, and not El Palomo, was its predominant feature. We felt it was our duty to learn more about the range in order to encourage further expeditions. Accordingly, we set out again with our climbing gear and food for five days. Since we had to cross the mighty Tinguiririca river, we asked two of the hillmen to put us safely on the other side with the help of their saddle horses ; they knew where the only good fording place was, but still it was a risky business ; the horses went across the river with the water reaching almost to their haunches ; of course, we had forded the river at a very early hour, since the snow melting that takes place mainly in December and January makes the mountain rivers swollen and treacherous by noon.

We had entered the Portillo valley, which runs north to south along the western flank of the Punzones range and into the Tinguiririca basin. The Portillo valley is a beautiful lane of green ' vegas ', cascading

glaciers and castellated rock ridges ; big condors soared over the crags, glancing at mountaineers and cattle alike in a most sinister way. The upper part of the Portillo splits in two ; one, leading north, ends at the Punzones pass, while the other is a lateral valley running along the western and northern slopes of El Brujo. We entered the latter, fording the Portillo river, each tied to the climbing rope and each holding his rucksack on top of his head.

The second valley was somewhat barren, but its steep hillsides were rock-walls crowned by hanging glaciers of lovely blue and green tones. An intervening ridge obstructed the view over part of the Punzones peaks ; the 1 : 50,000 survey map by Risopatrón (1901) gave no hint of the rugged terrain ahead of us ; undoubtedly we were the first mountaineers to behold the row of sixteen-thousanders due east of El Brujo ; as for El Brujo itself, it was the only peak in the neighbourhood which seemed to offer good chances for an ascent as well as a good panorama from its top.

We did climb El Brujo (15,700 ft.), a first ascent, via its rather easy West face, on December 10 ; we placed a camp at some 14,000 ft. and planned to make the remaining 1,700 ft. in a few hours, but it took us almost a whole day. Admittedly, we had had a late start—7.30 a.m.—but also a rock gully entertained us for four hours, which reveals the defects of our rock technique. When we arrived at the top it was 4 p.m., and once again we had time enough only to take a few pictures, to build the traditional cairn and to glance quickly at the panorama. The view over the valleys and to the distant Pacific, to the west, was veiled by mist and clouds ; unexpectedly, the high peaks were in full sight. But we could see now only the two higher Punzones, because the others were concealed behind them ; El Palomo shone in the afternoon sun, white and serene, and to its right, the crater of Tinguiririca volcano marked the very end of the Cordillera Central. Farther south still, stretched forests, rivers and isolated snow cones bearing Araucanian names.

After El Brujo and back again to the luxuries of the base camp, we wondered about our next move. We had still six days before us and also a wide variety of choice ; we should have returned to the Portillo and explored the northern faces of the remaining Punzones. Only Güssfeldt, in 1883, and Risopatrón, in 1900, had been there before and the map showed some blanks ; but there were obstacles to face : first, six days were not enough to carry out the project and return to Santiago, and also, the Tinguiririca river had now grown to a point that it could be dangerous to ford, even in the very early morning. It was the latter point that made us take an easy stroll up Los Humos valley, due east of our base camp, and ascend Tinguiririca volcano, 14,108 ft. It was a pleasant journey ; we slept in the open, glancing from our sleeping

bags at the Southern Cross and at Antares. The pale light of the stars was enough to delineate the outline of the peaks and to reveal the snows with a faint silvery glow.

The panorama from the top was superb ; seldom does a mountaineer in the Andes arrive on a top with enough time to enjoy his achievement. But we had then fine weather and plenty of time and we enjoyed both thoroughly ; the Punzones peaks were displayed before us in full. We could make out, besides El Brujo, four bold peaks, every one worth a small expedition, and many lesser ones rose above the San José glacier. El Palomo is isolated in the centre of the upper glaciers, which can be said to form a sort of circumference to the mountain ; the lower part of the glacier is a typical river of ice, running along the Southern face of the Punzones and fed by the ice cascading from them. The San José must be eight to nine miles long, enough to place it third, or perhaps second, among the glacial systems of the area.

With this panorama we were fully recompensed ; with it, also, our holidays were at an end. Later, in Santiago, our report stimulated projects to ascend the highest of the Punzones, but this hope was dashed by a Swiss party led by Mr. Frederic Marmillod, who accomplished it one month after our visit. It was not until 1956 that the region was revisited, by a party from Santiago, some geological and glaciological surveys being carried out ; in 1958, another party made the third ascent of El Palomo. But the rest of the redoubtable Punzones still remain today new ground, as ignored and unknown as we beheld them for the first time from the Portillo valley ten years ago.

A Classic Peak

Unlike most local mountaineers, I was initiated with less known peaks and untrodden valleys. I knew I could not ignore forever some of the well-known courses, like Altar, Plomo, Morado, etc., which are a ' must ', but I postponed the occasion and returned whenever possible to that fascinating form of mountaineering, combining climbing with some minor-scale exploration.

In 1951, however, the chance for a ' classic ' peak came. Manuel Bazán, a good climber and photographer, proposed to visit Altar ; we would not need leave from our jobs, since he had planned to make the climb within one regular week-end. Altar is 17,000 ft. high, while our home town was less than 1,800 ft. above sea level ; but Bazán believed that it was entirely possible to reach almost 14,000 ft. without any exertion on our part, provided good transportation was arranged to that height.

Altar is a fine mountain, located some twenty-five miles north-north-east of Santiago ; its steel-blue southern cliff can be seen advantageously from the capital, particularly at sunrise or at sunset. The first

known ascent of Altar dates back to 1922, when Herrn. O. Pfenniger, Swiss, and S. Krückel, Bavarian, reached its top, only to find a cairn and an empty tin of British tobacco under it. Who might have been the unknown climber or climbers is still a mystery; one may be tempted to believe that the Englishmen, Messrs. R. Temperley and H. Trewhela, who were active in the region in the early 1910's, were responsible, but that is difficult to prove. By 1950, Altar had been repeatedly climbed, the usual route lying along the West ridge connected to the gap with La Paloma (16,195 ft.); in 1941 Walter Bachmann opened a new way up the eastern slopes. Manuel Bazán himself tried the difficult South-east ridge in 1948, but it turned out to be exceedingly broken. It was in order to have another look at this possible route, this time from the top, that Bazán wanted to try this peak via its classic route. As for myself, my interests lay not only in the mountain itself, but also in a certain curiosity, not without apprehension, to find out how I could endure the altitudinal changes in the short time we had allowed for the climb.

Our first day, a Saturday, dawned fine; the third member of our party, Leo Stramwasser, drove us in his car from Santiago to the Los Bronces mine. The car was the first to suffer from mountain sickness; this meant, for us, a good deal of pushing, a most unwelcome occurrence, since we were now at 11,000 ft. There, at the mine, the 'arriero' Bazán had hired was punctually waiting for us; we rode *en route* across a high pass and dropped down to the head of the Rio Blanco basin, of which the Olivares glacier, which runs along the northern foot of Altar, is a tributary. We reached on horseback a height of 13,700 ft. by 3 p.m. Clouds were gathering when we paid off the 'arriero' and we started the climb with our loads to select a camping place as high as possible. Although we had planned to continue the ascent until 7 p.m., which is entirely possible during the Chilean summer, we had had enough by 5 p.m. Altitude had begun to play its part, for both Stramwasser and I were suffering from headaches and felt our hearts pounding, but Bazán looked as fresh as ever. We called it a day and placed camp, as usual, by levelling with our ice-axes a platform on the moraine. That night we retreated to our sleeping bags with little interest in food, sleep or mountaineering.

None of us slept well; by dawn the clouds had dissolved, although the tops of El Plomo and the six-thousanders of the border bore a dark banner. Since we had to achieve the ascent and return to Santiago that day, we set out without breakfast, in order to gain time, and proceeded across the Olivares glacier.

Although the Olivares is famous for its penitent snowfields we were lucky to find a trough of smooth ice and had to break a trail only in the last one hundred yards before reaching the foot of the scree slopes

leading to the gap between Altar and La Paloma. The part of the climb that followed was the crucial one; we knew that the classic route of Altar is technically easy, but we also knew that many parties had failed to surmount the steep scree slopes that descend from the gap. We found these slopes more taxing and more exasperating than 'penitentes'; it requires a certain technique and also a certain philosophy to endure the scree slopes of the Andes. Often one finds that if one step is placed upward, one may descend two, because the soft surface of minutely broken stones gives way under the pressure of the foot; sometimes a minor scree slide can be started. The best way to climb scree slopes is by making slight zig-zags, slowly and rhythmically when over 15,000 ft., helping oneself with the ice axe; if the scree gives way, it is better to remain still until the involuntary descent stops. On Altar we tackled the problem by taking to the broken rocks whenever we found them, but still there was much waste of precious energy and time. To climb the last 300 yards required much patience and frequent rests, but at last we lifted ourselves out of that nightmare and stood on the gap, facing, much to our dismay, mists gathering as a prelude to a stormy afternoon.

Bazán urged his refractory partners to move on quickly, but both Stramwasser and I needed a rest. To climb from Santiago to over 17,000 ft. was quite an experience, hardly to be repeated. A little above the gap Stramwasser was forced to abandon the climb, while I slowly followed Bazán's steps. The last 500 ft. are an easy walk; I even noticed at times, quite disgustedly, traces of a path made by previous parties. To my right was the abyss of the Southern face and to my left, the broad expanse of the Olivares glacier, the largest of the Cordillera Central. When we arrived at the top we were not able to see much of the panorama; clouds had gathered quickly over El Plomo and neighbouring peaks and the wind had grown bitterly cold. There was not much time to stay on the top; we wrote our names in the 'Gipfelbuch' placed under the cairn, an operation that took long because of the low temperature, and then took a quick survey of our surroundings. The view was restricted, but we were conscious of being atop a high mountain. Bazán was interested in examining his beloved South-east ridge in order to study a possible new route; I resigned myself to wait, but since it was too cold to stand still, I decided to have a look at the famous Southern face of Altar; I descended carefully a few yards among broken rock of abominable looseness and when I got to the edge of the cliff, lay down flat on my stomach. When I retraced my way back I did it even more carefully; some day, perhaps, the Southern face of Altar will be climbed, but it will never be declared an easy route.

Bazán had already completed his investigation; we descended

quickly, feeling ourselves weak and empty. We rejoined Stramwasser and ran down the scree slopes below the gap. Here, the only pleasant side of a scree slope became manifest; it sufficed to lift slightly one foot after the other and let oneself slide together with a small avalanche. The ice-axe is particularly useful as a third foot; in twenty minutes we had lost the height it had taken us almost three hours to gain. Soon we were inside the tent; we should have broken camp and rejoined the ' arriero ' at the upper Rio Blanco, but instead we lay down indifferently on our sleeping bags, without even an interest in food. Half an orange was all I had during the day; we suffered from sore throats and weariness. It was not until shortly before dark that we felt tempted to lift camp and descend to meet the ' arriero '.

Our arrival at the mine and then at Santiago was uneventful; we had made Altar, as we had planned, in one week-end, but we had to admit that we had been lucky in many respects. We also had to confess that if we had allowed an extra day for the climb, it would have made a world of difference in enjoyment and pleasure.

It is difficult to attempt to classify the particular mountaineering practised by the Chileans. In some respects, it can be said to be Alpine in character, since the mountains of the area, where most of the local ' andinismo' takes place, are typically Alpine; besides, the local ' andinismo ' tends to repeat in the area the history of Alpinism, with its gradual development of new techniques and the necessity for new fields, after most of the peaks have been conquered. However, on the other hand, several aspects peculiar only to Himalayan mountaineering can be noticed, for practically every climb requires the organisation of a minor expedition, since there are no more than nine or ten huts dispersed in the whole area. The bridges and roads are neither good nor plentiful, there are no capable guides to teach or to lead, nor have adequate maps and guides been published.

Chilean mountaineering has retained a charming aspect of its own: it has developed enough so as to offer to every mountaineer a certain amount of comfort and safety, but its organisation and growth has not yet reached perfection. Some day, huts will be placed at the foot of the Punzones and pitons and fixed ropes will facilitate tourism up the Southern face of Altar, but all this is for the future. Today, adventure still can set free the imagination, when the eyes wander over peaks and glaciers where still there remains something to be done.