

AIGUILLE POINCENOT

By D. WHILLANS

AS THE engine rose to an ear-splitting scream and the great jet began its run down the tarmac, I chewed on the piece of gum issued on take-off and thought how it all began.

During the summer of 1961, while I was in Chamonix, a letter posted some three weeks earlier had at last laid me by the heels. As well as the usual reprimands about not writing, I read of a very interesting proposal, mentioned in an off-hand way as unimportant by my wife; and reading between the lines, I deduced that she didn't want me to go. It said simply, 'If you're interested in going on an expedition to South America, write to Frank Cochrane in Dublin'.

I was interested, and wrote without delay to the unknown person. But nothing was heard until I arrived home from the Alps and found a letter waiting. It said that owing to lack of financial support the expedition had been called off, but that it had been intending to attempt the ascent of the Aiguille Poincenot in the FitzRoy area. I had just posted my condolences, when another letter arrived to say it was on again and could I find £150?

After long pondering, I sat down to put pen to paper. I couldn't afford it, and I would have to be stern with myself; but the damning words refused to be written. My wife looked up from her knitting and said, 'Why don't you sell the bike?'; and the problem was solved. I was as good as on my way to South America. Correspondence flew at a rapid rate between England and Eire; and after weeks of rushing about I arrived home from work ready to begin packing for the trip to London to meet my unknown friends. A telegram from Dublin lay on the table: 'Hold everything. Airline strike. Will inform.' For two weeks I waited anxiously for news that the strike was over, then at last in desperation, and combining business with pleasure, went to London and met the correspondents of the past months in the flesh.

Apparently the airline had gone bankrupt, and one way and another we found we were short of £200. Every wangle possible was thought up in order to raise the cash, but they all fell through. However, at the last moment we were saved by the kindness of one of the members' parents, who loaned us the necessary amount.

But the preparations for expeditions are a sordid topic, money figuring much too largely in this connection.

Now, as the silver plane climbed shrieking into the blue sky, there

was no doubt about it: the Irish Universities Andean Expedition was on—and, in a manner of speaking, off. There were five of us on the plane: Frank Cochrane (the leader), Francis Beloe, Clive Burland, George Narramore and myself. The missing member, Tony Kavanagh, had gone by sea weeks earlier, and was, no doubt, worried about the non-arrival of the expedition. Airports came and went—the twinkling lights of Lisbon, the smell of the sea to greet us as we stepped from the plane at Dakar during the night. When dawn came, we were flying over Brazil, stopping at Recife, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, then Montevideo and at last Buenos Aires. A long figure, Kavanagh, waved, greeting us with obvious relief and a barrage of questions; then bundled us into the airport bus. At last we were reunited, and confident that all would go well from now on. The Argentine Army had promised full support for the enterprise, so what could go wrong?

We booked in a hotel and, as the blarney flowed, so optimism grew. Frank raced round the hot, bustling city collecting the hundred and one official stamps required for the release of our equipment from the customs shed. And at last the document that was to open all doors to us was completed and duly photographed for its great role in the expedition.

The next two weeks were, for us all, an absolute nightmare, as we hunted through the vast dockland for our missing equipment in the stifling heat. In our anxiety to avoid missing out any essential government stamp, the human element had been overlooked: the Argentine dockers, who in the face of threats, appeals or bribes remain entirely against their sworn enemy, work. As the days slipped into weeks, spent trying with complete lack of success to move officials to take some action on our behalf, we lost heart. Our source of encouragement, seven hundred cans of Export Guinness (supplied in Ireland to the expedition), drained considerably.

One day I squeezed between some wooden cases beneath a tarpaulin on a barge, and discovered the missing equipment. It was a joyful moment; and the equipment took only three days to clear from the barge, although it was held up for an extra day at the last moment for a missing stamp. Christmas was almost upon us, and our hopes of leaving Buenos Aires crashed as the Army announced that the plane would not be available for five days. Christmas was therefore spent around the night clubs in B.A.

As we loaded the equipment into the plane, we felt that we had suffered all the misfortunes that could possibly befall six men, but were dumbfounded when after an hour's flying we disembarked to find ourselves back on the same airport, with engine trouble. Eventually, however, we arrived at Bariloche, where a captain and a doctor, along

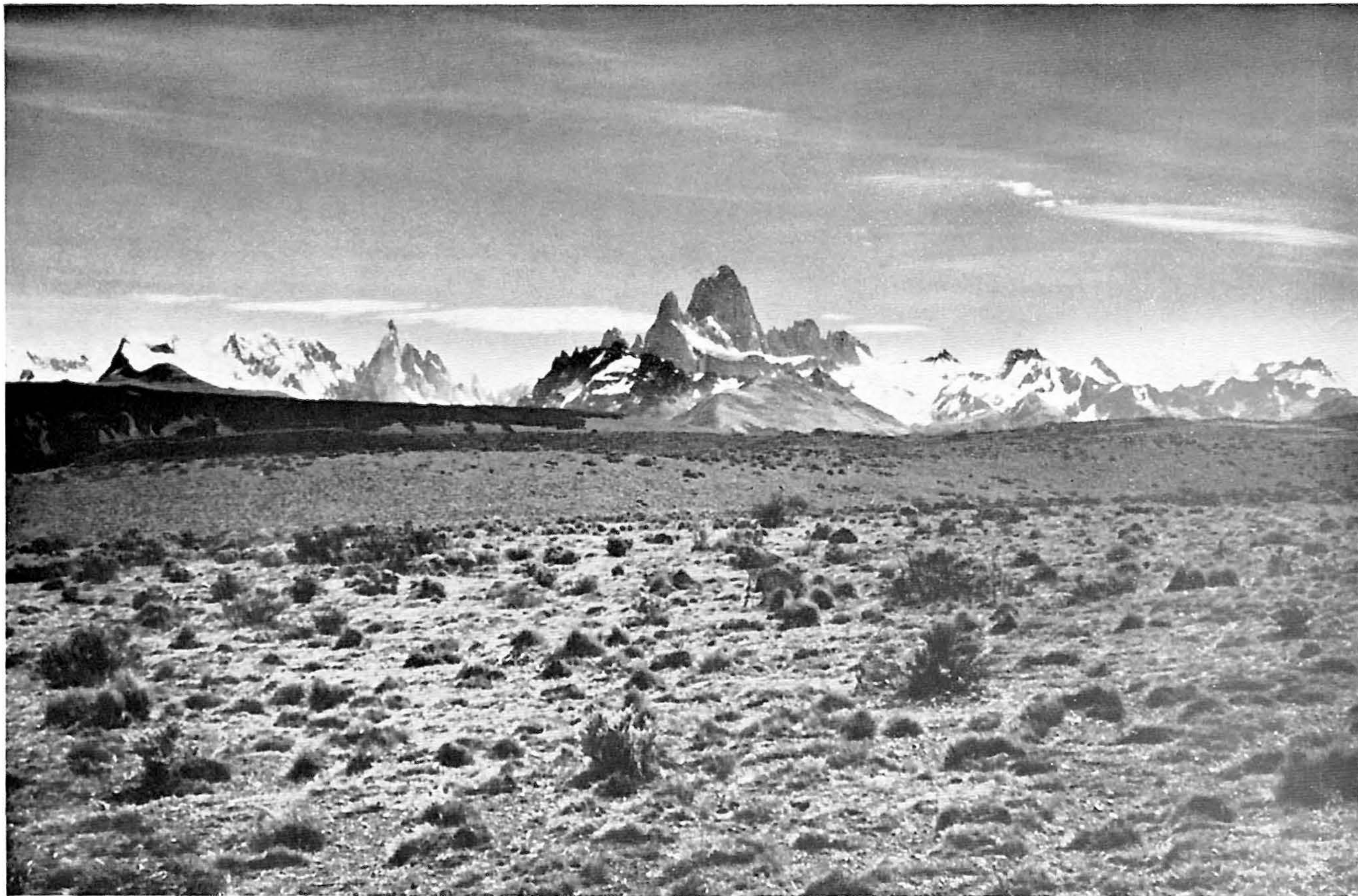
with three sergeants, awaited us. We were close to the Chilean border, and even those of the party who were airsick looked out of the windows as we swooped over the mountains and marvellous lakes.

That evening we were entertained by the Argentine Andino Club, and their opinion that the Poincenot would be more difficult than FitzRoy caused us to wonder if we had bitten off more than we could chew. The following evening we touched down on the *pampa* by Lago Viedma, with FitzRoy and the Poincenot visible about forty miles away.

A battered lorry appeared as if by magic, and we bounced along the rutted track towards our objective, taking with us the carcase of a sheep which had been given to us for supper. We were installed in a large garage of corrugated iron sheets at the Estancia Cristina, where we would have to await the arrival of the lorry from Santa Cruz to take us across the Rio Las Vueltas, the first of the big rivers we had to cross. A week of perfect weather went by, with frustration growing every minute. Stories of one day's good weather in a season made us think we were wasting seven years' good weather. Some of us prepared to sit it out and wait until something happened, while some went off to walk the fifteen miles to the Madsen *estancia*, close to where we would begin the journey on foot to the site of the French Base Camp used for the ascent of FitzRoy.

With the assistance of a giant tractor, driven by a character called Rocco who chewed on a big cigar, the heavily laden lorry was hauled across the deep and fast-flowing Rio Las Vueltas. The next natural obstacle was the Rio FitzRoy, and from here mechanical transport had to be abandoned. Awaiting us was our hired *gaucho*, a huge, colourful character named Ruffino, who lost no time in showing his skill with the *bolas*. That night we sat down to our first *asado*, or sheep-eating ceremony, and sipped some of the local tea, which I was becoming accustomed to.

Madsen had left his *estancia* since the visit of the French, and it was now occupied by Herr Stanhardt, an elderly German, who lived almost the perfect life of peace and serenity in magnificent surroundings with his horses and dogs. He offered to guide us to the site of Base Camp, and on a glorious day we left the small hut to plod slowly after the fine figure of the old man seated on his horse with a dog loping along at its heels. The view from Lago Capri of the Poincenot and FitzRoy was the most magnificent view I have ever seen; it was a view with everything—lake, woods, glaciers and fantastic, clean, brown granite spires shooting vertical for thousands of feet from the white glaciers flowing from their base. Overhead, the huge condors glided effortlessly on the air currents without a single movement of their wings. Stanhardt's horse cropped the grass, while he stood and absorbed the



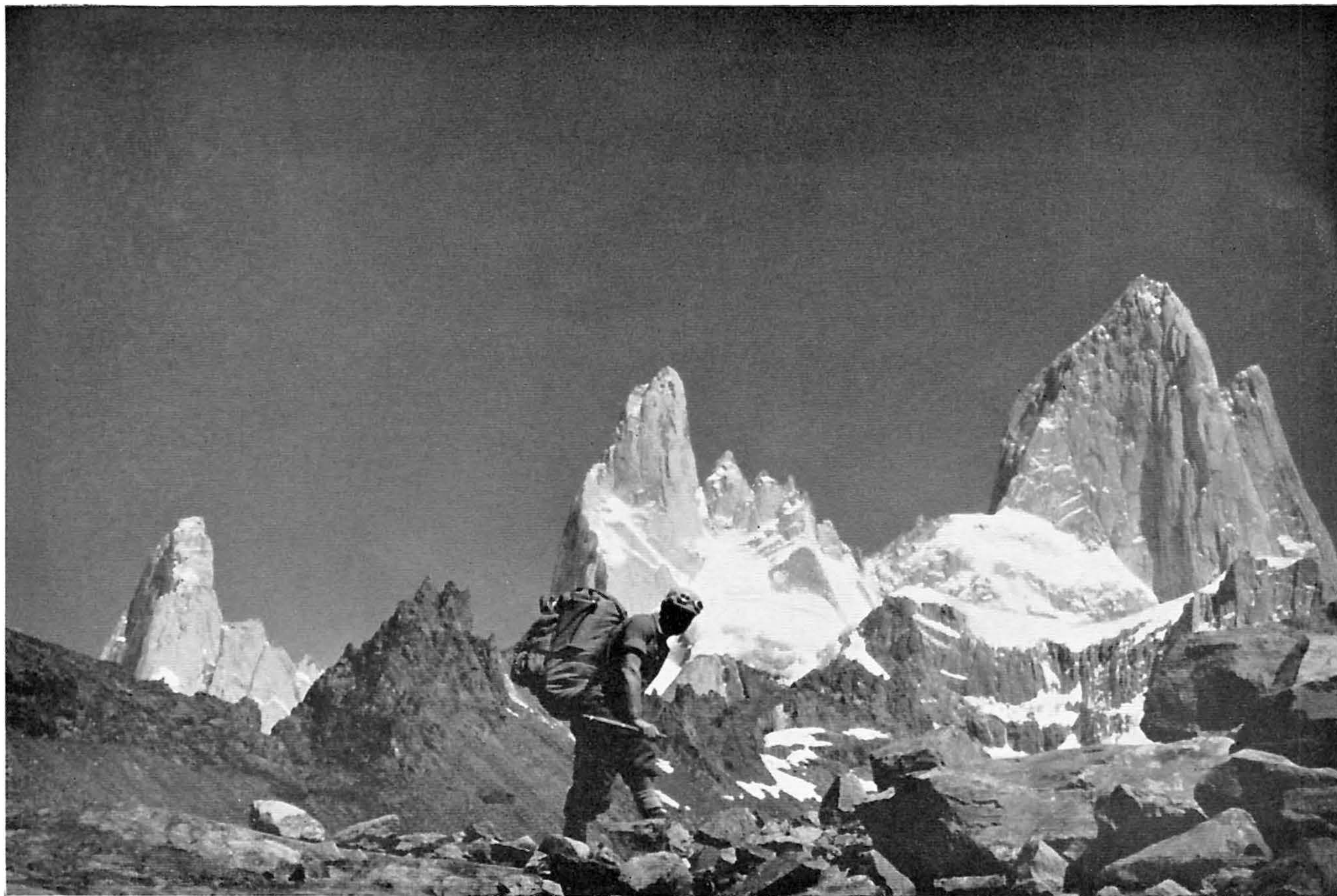
FITZROY GROUP FROM ESTANCIA ROCCO, SHOWING (LEFT TO RIGHT) CERRO TORRE, AIGUILLE POINCENOT, FITZROY.

scene which he had seen many times and would never tire of. It was undoubtedly nature at her best, so clean and unspoiled by human habitation that we felt that it had been worth all the trials and tribulations just to be there.

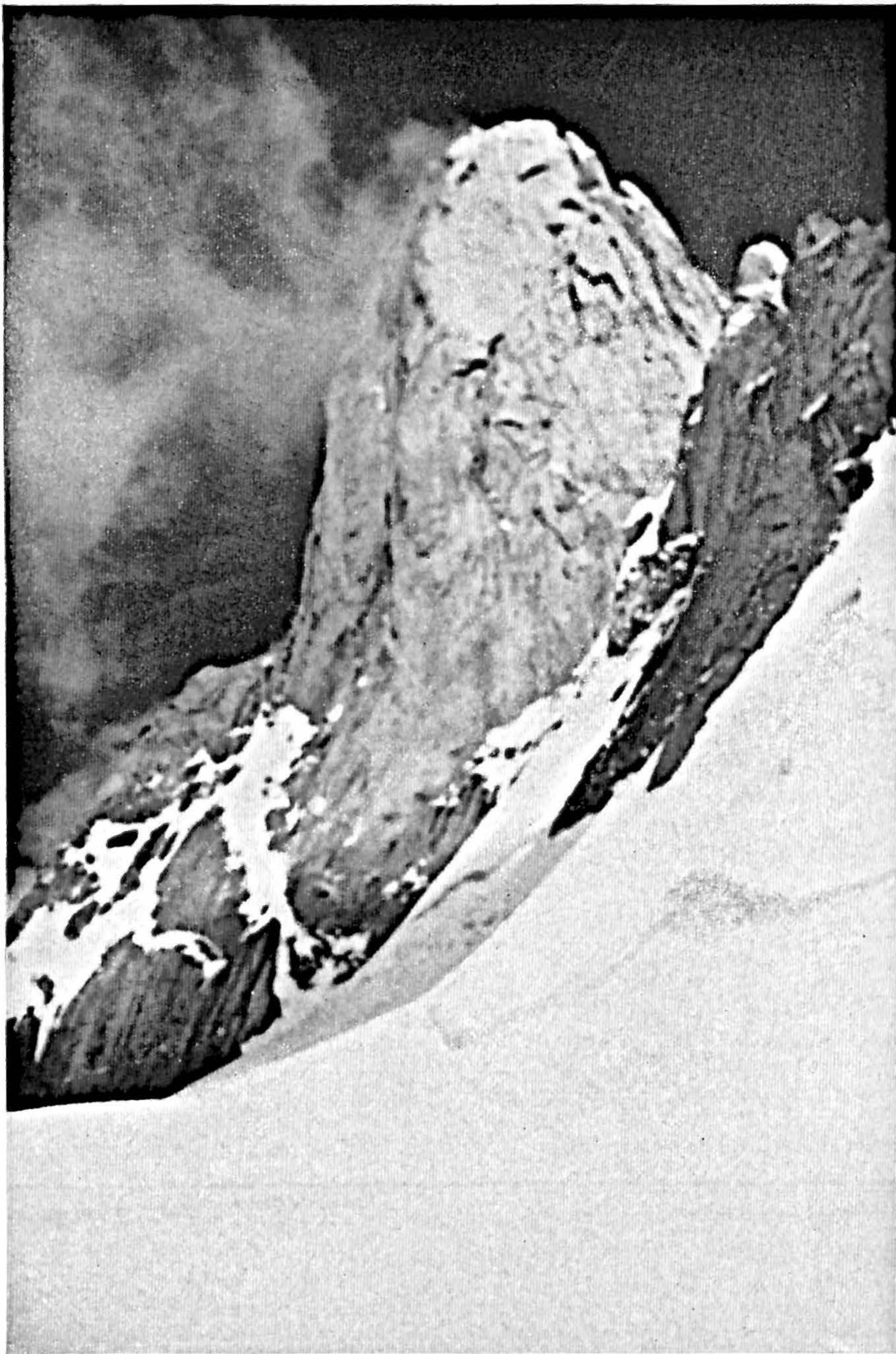
With the setting up of our Base Camp close to a thick wood (for protection from the tremendous winds which would howl over the mountains when bad weather came), we began the laborious business of setting up camps and stocking them with food, etc. Camp I was situated by the edge of the Tres Los Lake, about three hours' walk up the terminal moraine of the Tres Los glacier, and was in a magnificent situation by the turquoise lake. From here, the route to Camp II climbed the Tres Los glacier, past a rock rognon at half height (christened by the French 'the Luncheon Room'), then over a small rock rib where we discovered a rotting fixed rope, left ten years previously, which broke at the first pull. Then on to the col between the glacier Rio Blanco and the glacier de Piedras Blancas, which had been the site of the first French snow-cave. We followed suit, and constructed our Camp II there. Times varied considerably between I and II, from three hours to six hours, depending on conditions. The site for Camp III was selected, and another snow-cave constructed and stocked; and we were ready to begin the assault on the final tower of the Aiguille Poincenot. The route selected was up a diagonal ramp of ice cutting right across the East wall and finishing on a small shoulder of the South-east ridge. We could see that from there the difficulties were wholly on rock, and judged the final ridge to be about 800 ft.

While the others worked like automatons bringing up supplies, Tony Kavanagh and I, loaded with pitons, wooden stakes and fixed rope, set off to equip the Ramp with a handrail, which was essential if a retreat in bad weather should be necessary. After driving in two wooden stakes and leaving fixed ropes, I cut across the steep couloir and reached the beginning of the icy Ramp. The average angle of the Ramp was about fifty degrees, and it is best described as a narrow strip of ice twelve hundred feet long, clinging to steep, smooth granite slabs which plunged almost 4,000 ft. to the glacier Rio Blanco. Above, the huge orange wall of the East face soared 2,000 ft. to the summit. It took three days' hard work to make the Ramp a safe proposition, and a thousand feet of hemp line decorated this formidable line of descent.

On January 20 I left the ice-cave with Tony Kavanagh. In record time we swarmed up the fixed ropes and over the previously dangerous and difficult places without pause, and stood beneath a formidable-looking icy chimney barring our passage to the Shoulder. I cut steps in the tongue of hard ice filling the back of the chimney, and slowly worked my way up towards the overhanging part of the chimney, banging in pitons wherever possible. A strenuous pull over the over-



FITZROY (RIGHT) AND AIGUILLE POINCENOT (CENTRE) FROM NEAR CAMP I.



FORESHORTENED VIEW OF AIGUILLE POINCENOT FROM CAMP III.

hang, with crampons clawing the granite, followed by a welcome knee-jam, solved the problem; and the route to the Shoulder was assured. But the cloud had descended during our climb and, instead of making an attempt on the ridge, we dumped all the food and pitons at the Shoulder, and made a desperate and uncomfortable descent of the Ramp, which was swept throughout its length by powder snow on its 4,000 ft. journey to the glacier Rio Blanco. Our arrival at the ice-cave was a great relief to Frank and Francis, who had fears for our safety in the storm.

It was a great pity that we had not been able to see the difficulties of the ridge because of the storm; but we now had food and plenty of equipment at the Shoulder, and would be in a very good position when the next spell of fine weather came.

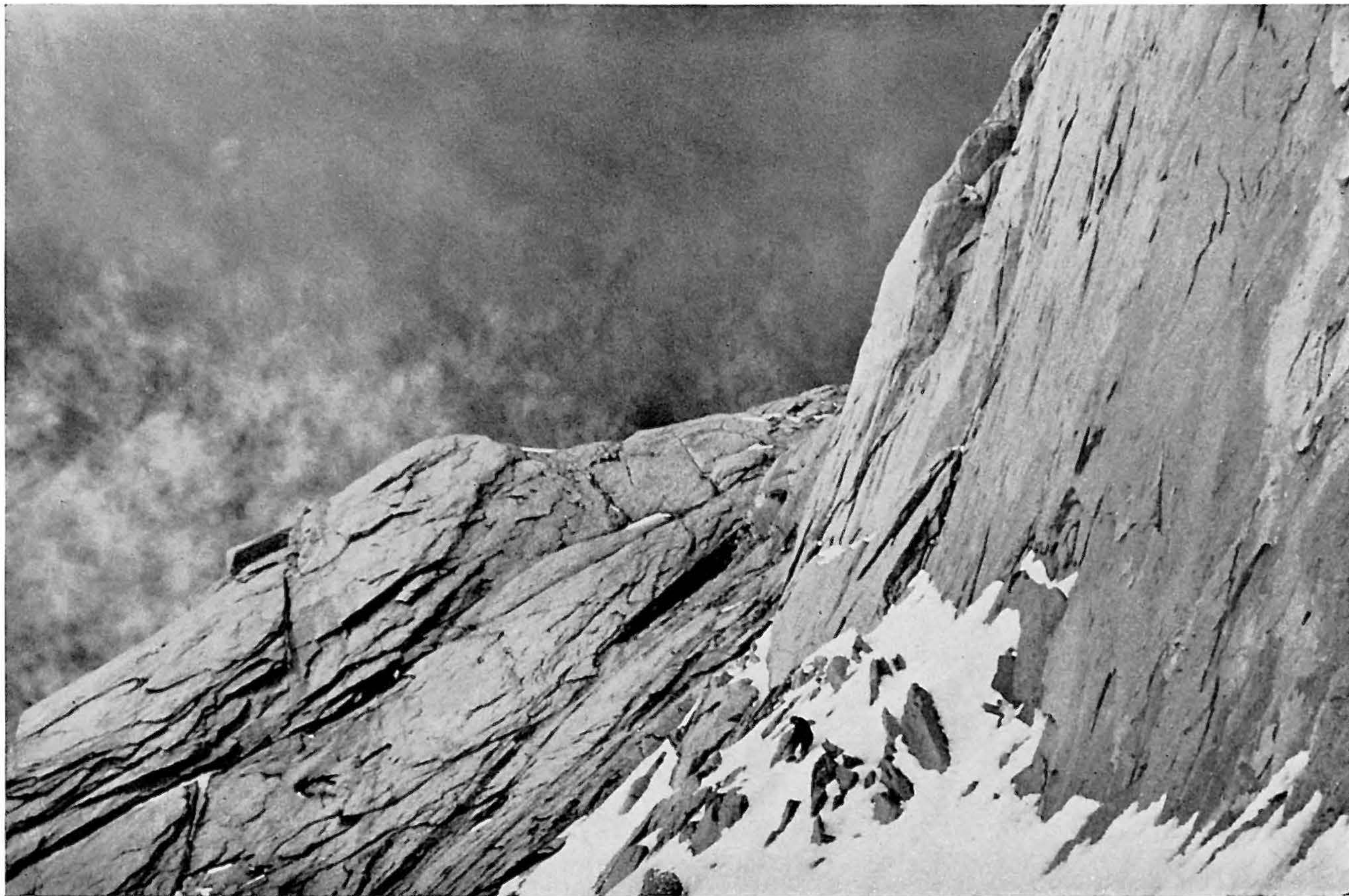
The weather failed to improve, and a retreat to Base Camp was made in order to dry out the sleeping bags and restore morale. Three days later, we were back at Camp III, with Frank replacing Tony in the assault party; since the stormy descent of the Ramp, Tony had lost interest in the summit.

George Narramore, the pessimist where weather was concerned, forecast a break in the spell of good weather; and the next four days were spent digging frantically to keep the passage to the cave open. Ten feet of new snow had built up over the cave roof, and an ominous crack in the roof was the final straw that prompted us to flee through the storm back to Base Camp, to find the big tent ripped to pieces, but still anchored by the trees.

We had been on the mountain about a month, and Ruffino was due to arrive any day with his horses to evacuate us. As we staggered into Base Camp, the sun appeared and a spell of fine weather began. The idea of a last attempt to climb to the summit began to formulate itself. It would have to be in the Alpine style, a fast party of two installed at the ice-cave of Camp II with food for three days. With an early start, they might make the Shoulder by midday. If great technical difficulty were found, they could place the pitons during the afternoon, then retreat back to the Shoulder for a bivouac. Next day should see them on the top. It was not too difficult, they might reach the top and get back to the Shoulder the same day.

While Frank and I strolled comfortably up in the perfect weather, the others sweated and puffed beneath our loads. We brewed some tea for them; then they wished us luck and stamped off down the slope to Base.

It was clear and starry when I looked out at 3 a.m. next morning, but some cloud in the west made me wonder if we might have another desperate descent before the day was through. As we trudged up the frozen Piedras Blancas glacier, the moon shone brightly, and the huge



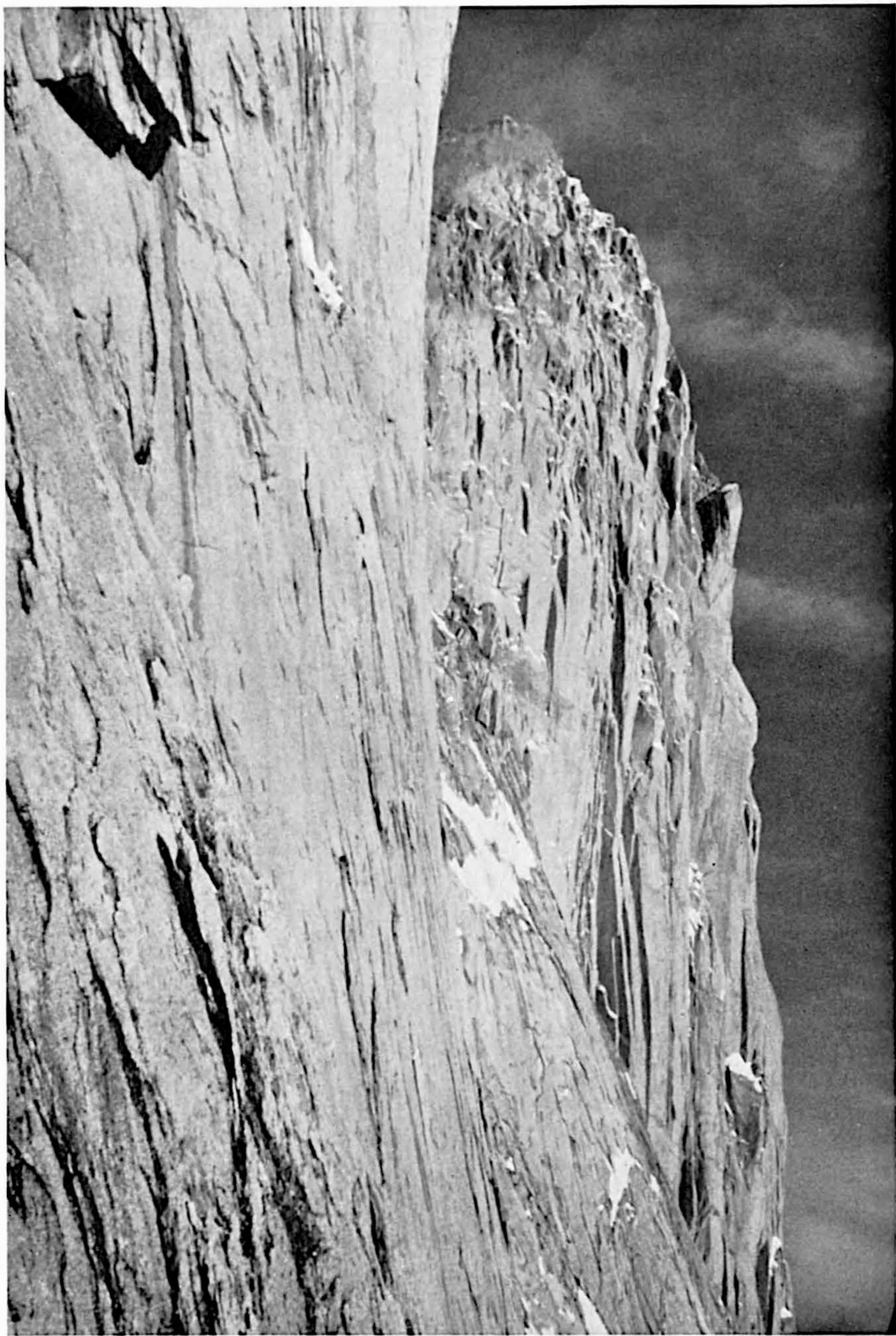
D. WHILLANS CROSSING FROM THE TOP OF THE RAMP TO THE SHOULDER.

5,000 ft. East face of FitzRoy was bathed in light. Steadily we approached the big bergschrund and the first fixed rope. But the monumental storm of a few days before had completely filled it, and likewise buried our fixed ropes higher up. At the top of the third fixed rope the sun warmed us, and very soon we were sweating as we hauled on endless ropes.

Frank had been very impressed on the Ramp and was greatly relieved when we stood on the Shoulder. The ridge ahead looked hopeful, but the weather did not; great clouds were banking up on the west side. Frank was doubtful about going on, but we both wanted to press on to see the problem at close quarters; and without stopping even for a drink we crouched behind the ridge and quickly sorted out the equipment. The wind blowing on the west side was a continuous roar, and the slap of wind on the rock sounded like a giant slapping the rock with a wet towel. Not at all eager to be exposed to the full force of nature, we made towards the foot of a long, wide crack on the east side.

After a tentative attempt, and deciding it was much too difficult to begin with, we felt we should have to brave the wind and see what lay round the other side. Following a zone of ascending ledges, we gained height and were soon clinging to the rock for fear of being blown over. Cloud moved past at fantastic speed, and snowflakes shot by like bullets. I glimpsed the Cerro Torre across the valley before the clouds closed in, and an unforgettable sight it was. I can best describe it by quoting Azéma in the FitzRoy book: 'I seemed to be looking at supernatural monsters, a fantastic ride of the Valkyries; nightmare aiguilles stared across at us, hurled defiance and then vanished. From a bubbling devil's cauldron, where clouds heavy as pitch boiled up from the depths, and eddies of snow chased each other in the gale, there emerged at intervals the summits of the Cerro Torre and its satellites. Like immovable reefs in a raging sea, the black slabs reared up towards the sky, to be smothered by the stupendous ice-caps, sparkling with fresh snow, which overhung on all sides—glittering lighthouses, whose foundations were submerged in foam.'

It is a perfect description of my glimpse of the Torre, which was missed by Frank round the corner. An amphitheatre seamed with cracks ran a long way up the wide ridge. Quickly we made our choice. The snow was being blown straight up the rock, and if the climbing stayed reasonable we might get up. Clinging to the rough rock even on stances, to avoid being blown away, we climbed quickly up grade IV rock, rejoicing that we were making such good progress. At length we were stopped, and a semi-pendule had to be made to gain another break on the right. The odd pitch of V was ruthlessly dealt with by banging in a peg whenever slight difficulty showed itself.



THE EAST WALLS OF THE POINCENOT AND FITZROY FROM THE TOP OF THE RAMP.

Our estimated 800 ft. of climb on the ridge had been away off the mark; it was nearer 1,000 ft. already, with the top still not in sight. I was relieved to see that there was no chance of Frank wanting to give up in face of the uncertain weather, as he was waiting impatiently for me to get up the pitches. I wriggled up a small chimney through which the wind howled at fearful force, and looked along a wedge-shaped ridge which was the summit. I quickly looked round to see that there was nothing higher, then brought Frank up; and we took turns in sitting on the top for photographs. I banged in a French piton as a memorial to Jacques Poincenot, and Frank dropped an Argentine *pesa* into a small crack. It was 3.15 p.m. on January 31. It had taken us eleven hours to reach the summit; could we possibly reach Camp II before darkness? Quickly we began the descent, climbing wherever possible—it was impossible to throw the abseil rope down because of the wind. When the rope was pulled down, it refused to drop and stood vertical, lashing like a mad thing in the air.

Abandoning surplus equipment at the Shoulder, we slid quickly down the rope onto the sheltered side of the mountain. But the rope jammed behind a flake, and I had to lead the icy chimney again to free it. Quickly we slid down the fixed ropes, walking down the steep ice with the rope across our backs, and arrived at the steep couloir at the bottom of the Ramp as darkness fell. Frank was very tired, and slowly we plodded back down the Piedras Blancas glacier to the little haven of ice that seemed to offer everything a man could wish for after almost twenty hours' gruelling effort: a drink, food and a bed.