

THE FAIREST CAPE¹By ROBERT BAILLIE²*(Two illustrations: nos. 19-20)*

As we sat and brewed our lemon tea under the crags, we gazed longingly down at the cool, green waters of Clifton beach where we would swim once our business was done. All above us was Barrier Buttress, one of the smaller satellites of Table Mountain, i.e. only about twice the size of Cloggy's East. A warm afternoon on the rocks seemed the best way to clear our festive city heads, so an hour ago we'd caught the bus up the hill. The long routes overlooking Cape Town and the suburbs needed too great a slog for our weary limbs, so we'd strolled along the Pipe Track which leads round the main 'Table' to the Twelve Apostles and Barrier Buttress.

To climb any of the established routes would have meant walking round to the front of the buttress, so we started where we were. The first pitch was a calm enough crack, but the second was too frightening for my condition; and I would have put in even more pegs if an old R.C.C.³ member hadn't been peering disapprovingly at me over his brew below.

The next pitch, I maintained, was a typical example of how one can penetrate the sensational local overhangs. It would in the process solve our main problem, but this sort of 'G' pitch generally does.⁴

The strata of the Table Mountain sandstone often provides a fair abundance of weathered horizontal slits. For the first 30 ft. these were staggered outwards like an inverted staircase and led into the heart of the matter, which was topped with a neat, jutting capstone. Above this, a long, narrow wall led leftwards for 25 ft. to a platform. A sharp-edged horizontal fault split the narrow wall and cried out for a hand traverse. I tried to keep my interest in all this academic, but the others schemingly mocked my idea to scorn; so I was forced to prove my point.

Up the staircase with simian grunts, to crouch under the capstone:

¹ 'This Cape is a most stately thing, and the fairest Cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth, and we passed by it the 18 of June' (1580).—Narrative of Sir Francis Drake's voyage of circumnavigation in Hakluyt's *Voyages*.

² An apology is owed to Mr. Baillie for a reference to him as 'J. Bailey' in a note of his ascent of the North face of the Eiger with D. Haston in our last issue (*A.J.* 68. 293).—EDITOR.

³ Rock Climbing Committee (of the Mountain Club of South Africa).

⁴ South African climbs are graded from 'A' to 'G' in ascending order of difficulty. Of the higher grades, 'E' is roughly equivalent to Welsh Severe, 'F' to Very Severe, 'G' to Extreme.

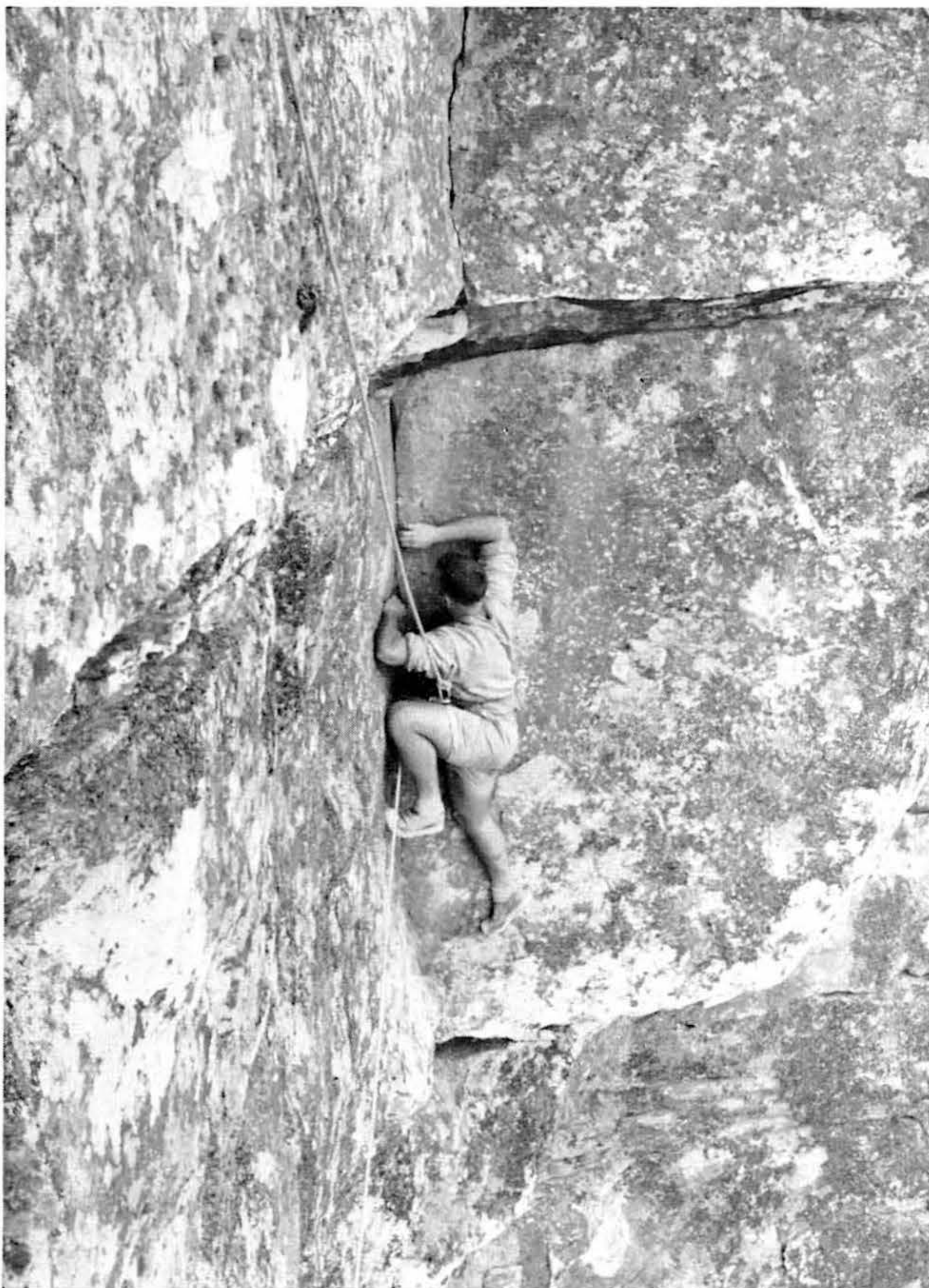


Photo: B. Fletcher]

TABLE MOUNTAIN: THE ROUTE ON BARRIER BUTTRESS DESCRIBED IN ROBERT BAILLIE'S ARTICLE. (*See p. 104*). THE HAND TRAVERSE LEADS LEFT.

(No. 19)

here there was probably a good nut-hole, but as nut-holes hadn't been discovered yet I let the rope hang gracefully and drag-free down to Barry, and leant out for the capstone. Stretched out on the rack, it would have been tricky getting the arms back, so I let the feet arc gracefully out into space and, at 'loss of weight', managed to struggle up.

But the hand traverse was still 10 ft. away and the slit leading up to it, though too narrow for fingers, was just right for pegs; so I hammered one in quickly and then, for company, another, and lashed them together with a thick sling and thought what a fine contraption it all was for baling out, or standing, in or just resting.

Then, just as I had decided that rubbers were not the thing for bridging delicately up the slit (see illustration no. 19), a mad puritanical urge took hold of me and I thrust bits of finger-tip into the slit and scrabbled on the walls with slithering soles and wished I knew how to sprag and didn't even touch the pegs; and there I was holding the hand traverse, wondering what it was all about and feeling suddenly and inconveniently completely sober—which was not quite fair, as it was the next piece that really needed inspiration.

There was nothing much for the feet, so it had to be a swift decision: jump off or hand traverse.

Well, I'd never had a leader-fall, even a 10 ft. one, so trying to keep it that way I swung off panting along the traverse. After about 15 ft. there was a vague wrinkle on the wall, so I tried to catch a brief rest; first one arm, then (when the holding one was about to open) the other—and meanwhile I thought, 'If you go back you may fall near the pegs, but if you go on you may make the ledge; or perhaps you'll fall off far from the pegs; but you can't stay here much longer'.

Eventually I developed a slight surplus of energy and, with falling still a bogy, pressed on. The ledge came nearer as the arms got more taut, and a final mantelshelf nearly settled things in favour of the long drop. But elbows and knees don't get tired so quickly, and finally there I was on the ledge, gazing at a tuft of succulent grass about two inches in front of my nose.

It was dark, and easy above, so we abseiled away down, and went back past the pubs (shut on Sunday) and the waters, now cold and black, to coffee at Bob's.

Well, Table Mountain is very fine for rock gymnastics, but serious mountaineers prefer to voyage the seventy-odd miles into 'the Country'. Here, at the expense of Chamonix-like trudges, are Dolomitic faces with perfect rock. If one must hill 'walk', there's the Hex River Berg to cross for a beginning. It takes about a week, with a couple of 1,000-ft. gorges to cross and several dozen 4,000-ft. and 5,000-ft. peaks to traverse.

Not having the time to spend a day slogging to a completely untouched

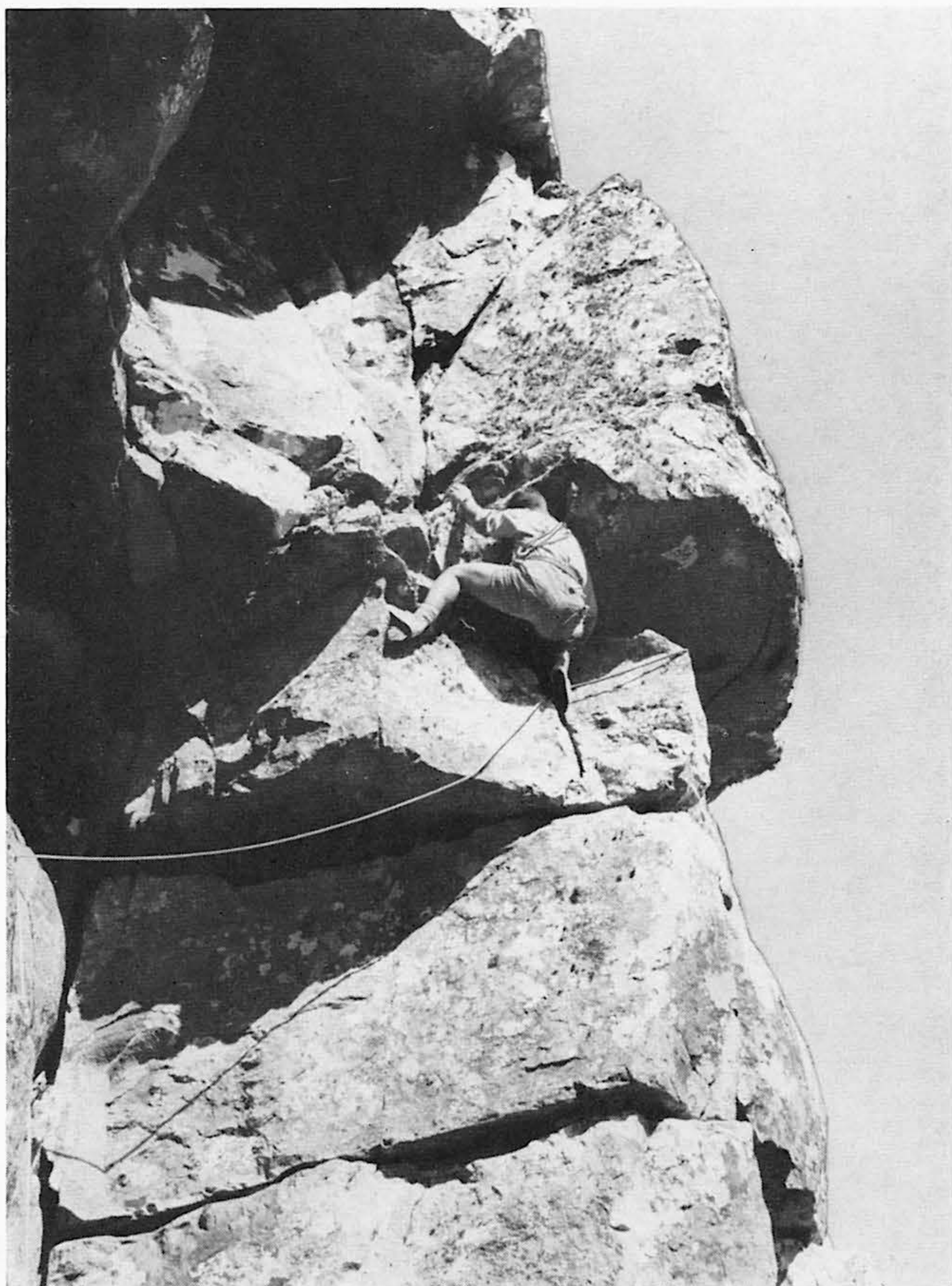


Photo: P. J. White]

TABLE MOUNTAIN: ANOTHER ROUTE ON BARRIER BUTTRESS.

(No. 20)

face, we compromised one weekend and went to Castle Rocks. Two hours' slogging brought us to the face of the Central Turret. This is about 1,000 ft. high and 500 yds. wide at the base. The rock is the usual quartzite, clean and sound; there were only two routes using it all, and over on the right was a fine rib leading up into a jumbled maze of overhangs. This seemed as good a plum as any for us to pick.

We carried bivouac gear, in that we had long socks (turned down) and a jersey (round the waist). In winter, which is the wet season, there's snow and blizzards as in Scotland, with gullies, skiing and people dying of exposure; but in summer the weather behaves.

After six assorted 'E' and 'F' pitches our rib faded out, as we expected and I fumbled for the iron. Now, in the late 'fifties, rumours had come through that abroad people were banging these things in all over the place but, undisturbed, the locals had continued, as in Wales, to climb that sort of thing without them. Though more destructive by nature, I still felt a bit guilty as I scarred and pitted the rock of a fine, slanting groove, and almost felt it was my just reward when there was no stance at the top.

Brian came up to where I hung like a cocoon and drifted off on a long, delicate, unprotected free traverse to some more overhangs. I had just decided that it would be better if I didn't use the waist belay, which would cut me in half like a cheese if he fell, when he got there and I had to start unravelling.

The next overhangs had a nice, deep leaning crack cutting through them and after some mild adventures getting to it, and some more hectic ones getting a peg-runner in, I laybacked up the outside of it. A few shabby pitches finished things off, and we slowly scrambled down to our high camp, to while away the long twilight hours with those final brews of lemon tea.