

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE CORDILLERA BLANCA OF PERU

BY H. L. STEMBRIDGE

(*Six illustrations: nos. 30-35*)

OF the nine weeks that Alf Gregory and I were together in Peru in the middle of 1963 five were spent among the mountains of the Cordillera Blanca, two in the 'hotlands', the lush, humid forests bordering the Alto Madre de Dios river, the remainder in the central uplands where the great ruined cities of the Incas are to be found. Each phase had its attractions.

If the ruins enthralled us, the jungle was far and away the most amusing, though a trifle uncomfortable, but for unalloyed pleasure a three weeks' journey through the Cordillera Blanca takes pride of place.

I suppose that most of us, at some period in our lives, find that the urge to lay siege to a peak diminishes—that our happiness among mountains spreads itself to embrace everything that surrounds them, that to travel along the valleys and ridges and over the passes camping, photographing, meeting a people whose history and customs intrigue us, gives to us as much pleasure as do the mountains we manage to scale.

For people who enjoy this sort of thing, there can be nothing better than the Cordillera Blanca.

Greg says the peaks there are as fine as any in the world, and he should know. Equally impressive were the accessories—the flowers in late spring, more colourful than the Alps, birds amazing in variety, a climate set fair from May to August, unexploited antiquities and, of course, the Indians, primitive, splendid, colourful, dirty, completely uninhibited—most of all the Indians.

There is a great deal to be said for a two-man expedition. Organisation is simple, set plans with carefully worked-out schedules are unnecessary and, provided both members are broadly in agreement on what they want to do, the whole affair can be almost carefree.

Thanks to the good offices of Señor Cesar Morales Arnao, President of the Club Andinista Cordillera Blanca, our meagre gear, which had been sent ahead, had already cleared customs duty free when Greg and I met in Lima on May 21. Within twenty-nine hours of landing, the whole expedition, baggage and all, piled into one hired car, was speeding north on the Pan American Highway. For 130 miles we drove through the dreadful sand desert that lies between the Andes and the

Pacific, then turning inland we left our tarmac road for a dirt track which climbed steadily into bare, arid uplands. The journey was not without incident, a considerable amount of string and old rags, not to speak of patience, being necessary before we topped a rise and realised, with some relief, that the rolling 'puna' in front of us was the top of the Cordillera Negra. Few cars have the distinction of climbing from sea level to 14,000 ft. in the day and we forgave our battered friend its little idiosyncrasies in our pride at its achievement.

Far away, across the Santa valley, the whole eastern horizon was filled with a fantastic array of glittering peaks—it was the Cordillera Blanca, looking for all the world as the Andes do in the atlas, the icy backbone of South America.

We dropped into the Santa valley as rapidly as the rough road would permit and above the town of Huaras we put up at 'Los Pinos', a comfortable little hotel well known to mountaineers. Here, at over 10,000 ft., we 'acclimatised' in delightful surroundings. Sitting on the verandah with cooling drinks at our elbow we watched humming birds hover as they sipped nectar from flowers in the patio.

But between drinks we found time to clamber among the surrounding hills, we bought supplies and weighed our gear into donkey loads, we hired six donkeys (burros), an arriero (Juan Ichipachi) to look after them and guard our camp, and an experienced porter (Donato Solani). Both Juan and Donato were half-breeds and they turned out to be grand fellows, faithful, reliable and full of fun.

Early on May 27 Juan left with the burros for Yungay, nearly forty miles down the valley, and on the following day Greg, Donato and I, with the gear and three weeks' basic food, followed him by truck and joined him above the town. Yungay (8,500 ft.) lies at the foot of Huascarán (22,205 ft.) and, in 1962, an avalanche from this mountain wiped out part of the town, killing 4,000 people. Separating Huascarán from Huandoy (20,981 ft.) to the north is a narrow cleft, the Yanganuco gorge and, passing through this, we made our first camp by a large lake at about 12,800 ft.

Our march next day was a sheer delight. For a few miles we followed a good track past two turquoise lakes and through the flats beyond to three huts where the track veered to the east. Here we left it for a side valley running towards a snowy col between Yanapaccha (17,914 ft.) and Chacaraju (20,056 ft.). Contrary to preconceived ideas, for we had expected to find nothing but tawny tussocks and gritty aridity, this valley was aglow with flowers. There were thousands of blue bush lupins, sweet-scented and up to six feet high. Calceolarias, asters, pentstemons and innumerable other flowers amazed us by their abundance, and the level turf on which we camped was covered with mauve gentians and large, stemless daisies.

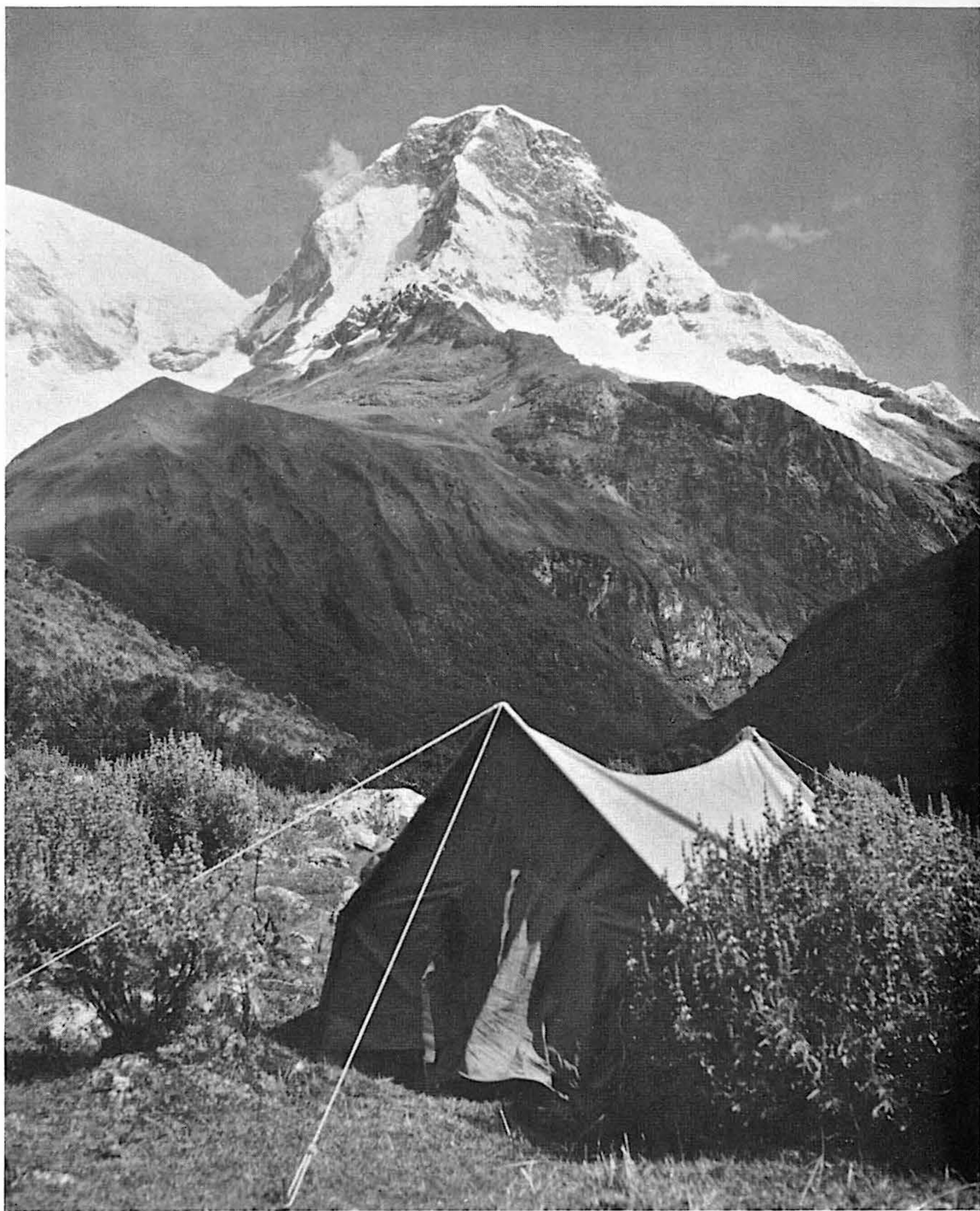


Photo: A. Gregory]

HUASCARAN (NORTH PEAK) FROM THE EAST.

(No. 30)

Pisco, a peak approaching 6,000 metres and not far to the west of us, seemed a possibility so, next morning, we pushed, pulled and, at times, lifted our burros up steep slopes of tussocks and boulders to a small combe where we pitched the bungalow tent as a base. Leaving the burros to graze we shouldered loads and climbed 1,500 ft. to pitch Camp I beside a large moraine at 16,200 ft. Here Greg, Donato and I crowded into the two-man mountain tent for the night. We spent most of the following day worrying our way through the intricacies of a glacier whose surface was covered with precariously poised boulders and we only gained 1,100 ft. in height before we found a good site for Camp II. It was still dark when we moved off shortly before six next morning and Donato led the way, moving quickly up a steep moraine and then up easy rocks, too fast for me, for I was panting hard until we forsook the rocks for steep snow and stopped to put on crampons.

Here Greg took the lead; his pace suited me better and, when step-cutting became necessary, I had time to look round and enjoy the view. Our situation was superb, close at hand and to our right the South face of Pisco, precipitous rock glistening with ice, was overhung by the enormous cornices of its summit ridge still 2,000 ft. above us. To our left the three peaks of Huandoy soared from the head of the large glacier which had caused so much trouble yesterday. Ahead lay a wide col which, when we reached it, brought into view more impressive peaks beyond the Parron valley.

Above the col the snow steepened but it was in good condition and, with Greg cutting the steps, we got on well until we were immediately below some large séracs where a certain amount of zig-zagging was necessary to avoid crevasses. By eleven we reached the long slope that led to the summit, but the sun had got at the crust and more often than not we went through up to our knees. We were now nearly 19,000 ft. and it was hard work. But not for long, for we were on top by noon and the sight before us was exciting enough to banish all thoughts of previous discomfort. Seemingly quite near were the unclimbed West ridges of Chacaraju, excessively steep and slim as serrated blades. The ascent of the West Peak in 1956 and the East Peak in 1962, both led by Lionel Terray, were made from the opposite side.

Not far away to the north we could see Artesonraju whose perfect symmetry is equalled only by Alpamayo, also just visible to the north-west. We stood in the middle of a ring of some of the world's finest mountains. Our height, according to Kinzl and Schneider, was 'about 19,685 ft.'—Oberlin (*A.J.* 60.73), probably with more accuracy makes it 5,850 m. (19,193 ft.).

Apart from snow balling on our crampons the descent presented no problems. Juan came up to Camp II to meet us and, with his help, we carried everything to Base Camp; but we took a bad line across the



Photo: A. Gregory]

PISCO (FROM BELOW COL TO THE WEST).

(No. 33)

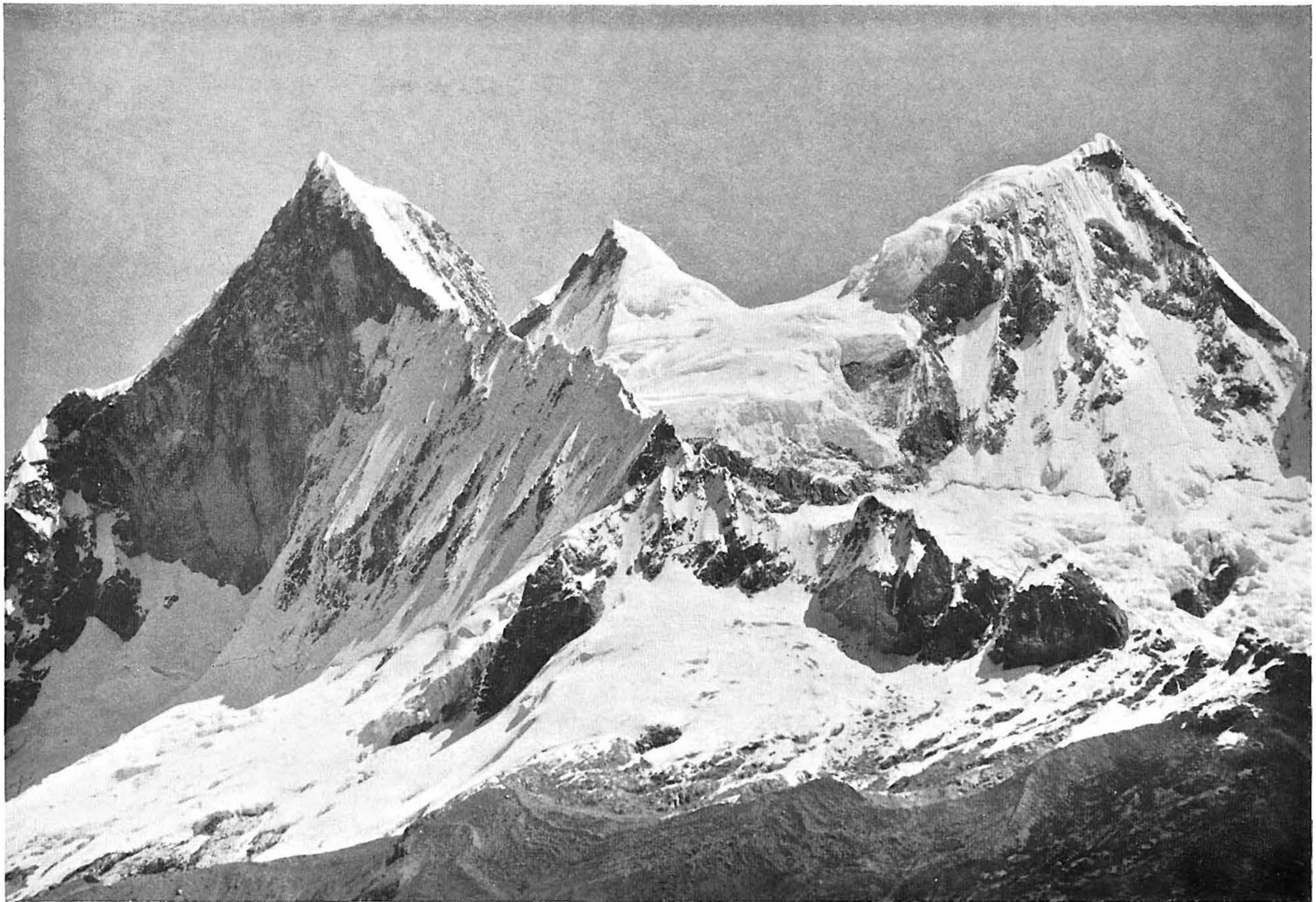


Photo: A. Gregory]

THE THREE PEAKS OF HUANDOY FROM THE EAST.

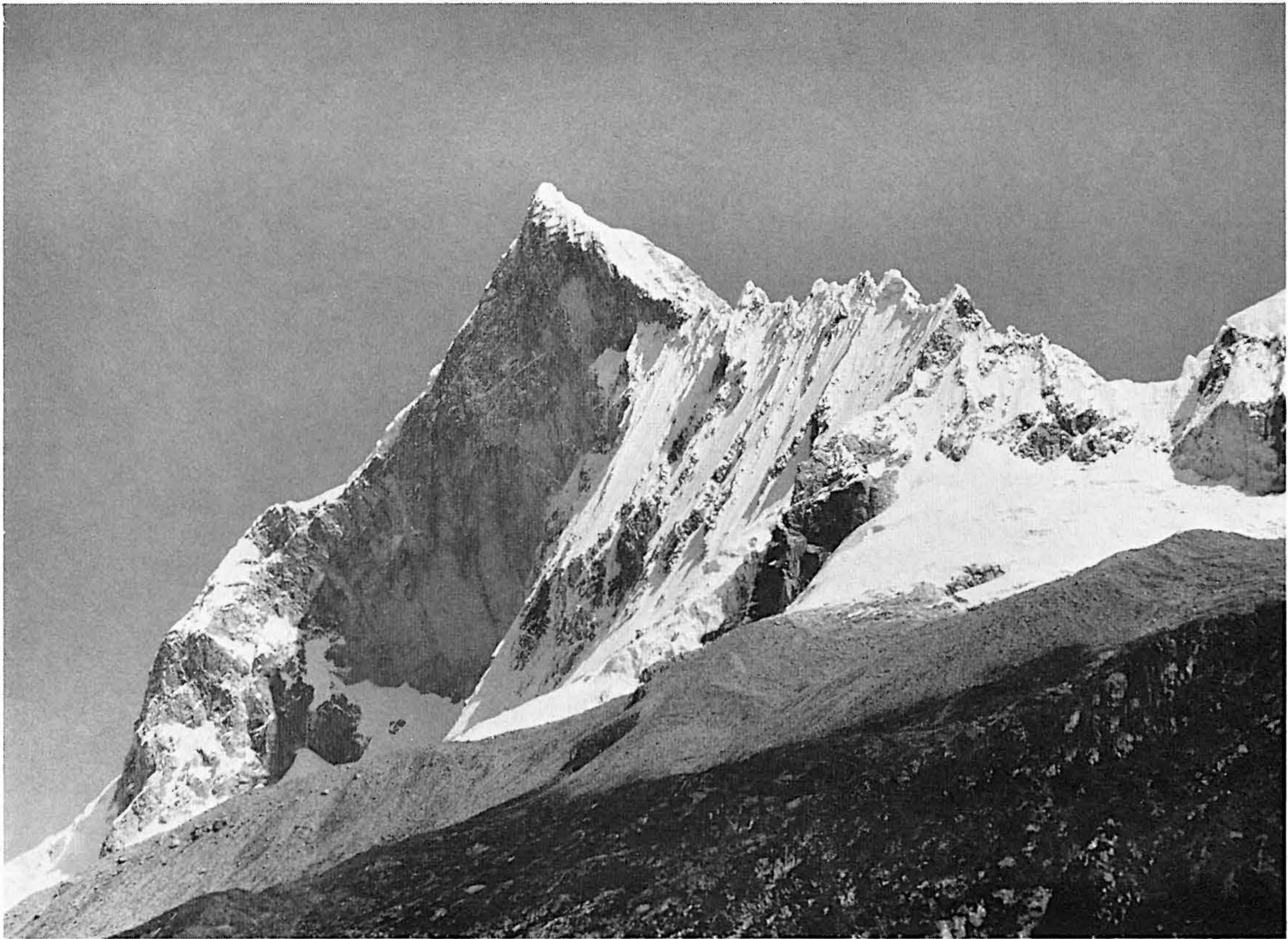


Photo: A. Gregory]

HUANDOY (SOUTH PEAK) FROM BELOW PISCO.

(No. 32)

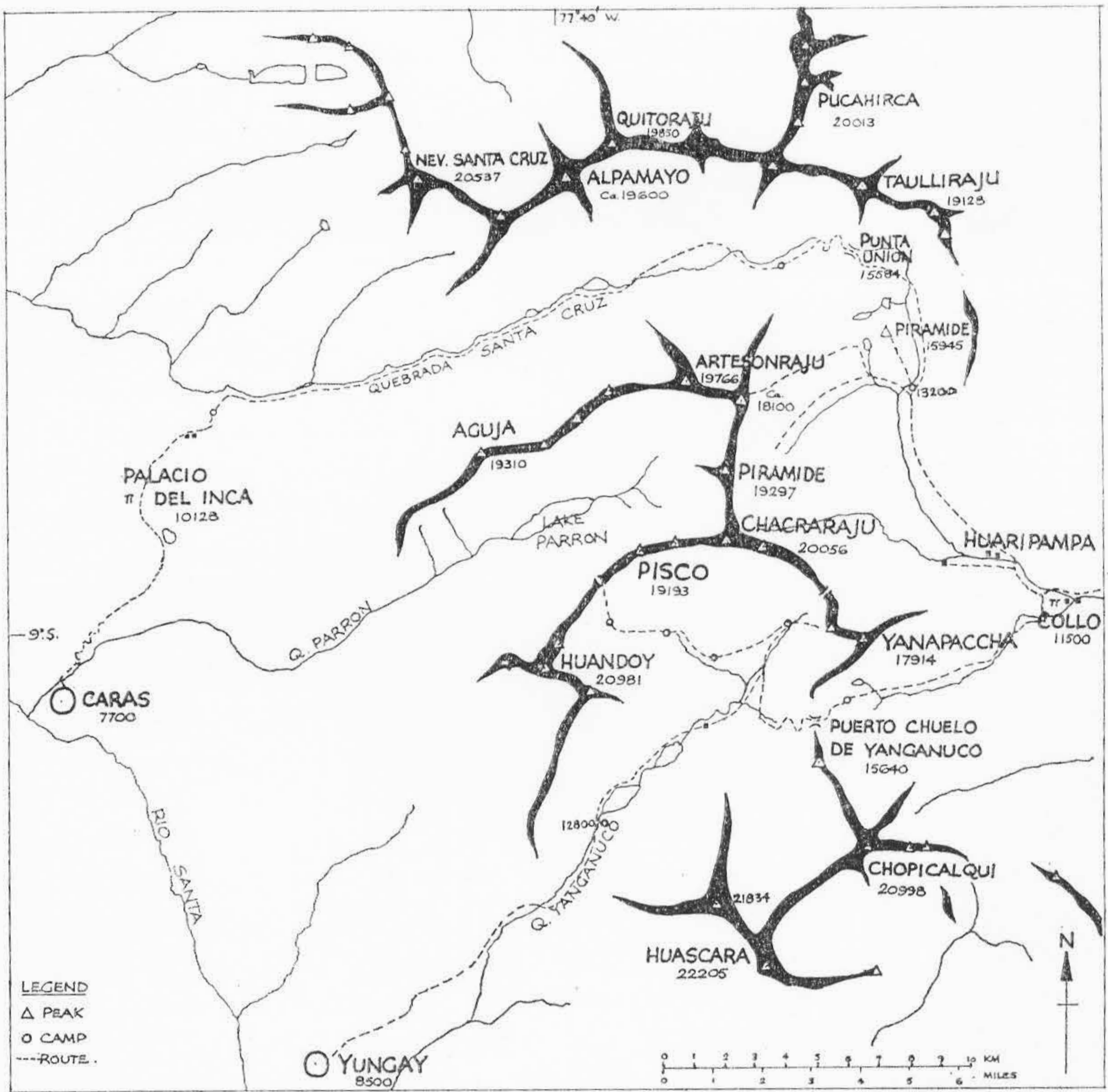
glacier and it was dark before the last of us got in. In our absence the burros had strayed and while Juan spent most of next morning looking for them, all we did was to carry a load down to the valley of flowers, pitch camp and spend the rest of the day ambling up the valley, watching birds and taking photographs. I can remember clearly the roaring fire we had that night, the mahogany faces of the Indians reflecting the flames while, behind them, light lingered on the great dome of Huascaran, remote from the earth like a lunar landscape seen through a telescope.

The following day we crossed the main watershed by the Puerto Chuelo de Yanganuco pass (15,640 ft.) and camped 1,000 ft. below the crest on the eastern side, immediately beneath the steep snow-slopes of Yanapaccha. Without doubt the most impressive sight from the Puerto Chuelo is Chopicalqui (20,998 ft.), a magnificent mountain from whichever side you view it. Below our camp mile after mile of rolling foothills melted away into the blue haze of the Amazon jungle. Strings of burros passed us carrying produce from the eastern foothills to the Yungay market. The drivers, wild and uncouth though they looked, were friendly—some shook hands with us, others proffered their flasks of chicha and, as we continued down the track next morning, we saw many traces of their bivouacs beneath large boulders. Four hours' walk downhill brought us to a group of circular thatched huts surrounded by patches of ripening barley and a mile or two beyond these we camped on a little col near the junction of two valleys.

The hill above our tents dominated the trade routes which, in ancient times, passed along both of these valleys. Much terracing and the ruins of many buildings indicated its importance, while several granite blocks about a yard square and a foot thick on which figures or designs were carved in relief showed that its occupants had considerable artistic ability as well as skill in the use of tools.

In the three days we spent there we uncovered more of these stones, half buried in rubble or overgrown by scrub. They were heavy and our method was to lever up one edge sufficiently to slip a hand underneath to feel if it was carved, but we abandoned this procedure after finding beneath one stone a tarantula whose venomous jaws snapped with fury. Sketches of the carvings, when shown later to archaeologists in Huaras and Lima, created great interest. We were told they dated back to the Chavin civilisation of 2,500 years ago. From this camp we made several trips through the surrounding country—the valleys were fertile, lupins were cropped for their seeds which were eaten, barley, quinoa, oca and maize appeared to grow well, but the people, though hospitable enough, seemed miserably poor. We bought a sheep and one or two eggs which were all they could spare.

Turning north-west we passed up the Huaripampa valley, at first steep and narrow, then opening out with considerable cultivation around



SKETCH-MAP OF THE CORDILLERA BLANCA

[To face p. 92



Photo: A. Gregory]

PUCAHIRCA FROM PUNTA UNION PASS.

the collection of huts which gives the valley its name. These were the last habitations; beyond them the valley had a savage grandeur with walls rising steeply to bare rock peaks, the floor now narrow and boulder strewn, now wide and swampy.

We camped at about 13,200 ft. where a side valley came in from the south-west, the head of which was closed by the two peaks of Chacaraju, whose enormous ice-falls filled its upper reaches. Before light failed we climbed a steep ridge and were rewarded with a splendid view of its spectacular East face.

Early next morning we set off to find some lakes 2,600 ft. above us. When we reached them the steep ridge above beguiled us, and we climbed another 1,000 ft. to see what lay beyond the crest. Greg and Donato were going like rockets; I was slower and persuaded them to push ahead, which they did to some purpose and climbed a virgin snow and rock peak of over 18,000 ft. which sprang from the ridge running north from Chacaraju. I was compensated by a close-up of a condor, eleven foot of wing-span, which flew out of a rock face directly below me.

Continuing our journey up the Huaripampa valley, we passed on our right a giant rock needle, nearly 500 ft. high and seemingly sheer on all sides. It was here that we found the red peony which the Indians call 'Rima Rima' and which they believe helps a backward child to talk if passed across its lips. A snow cone at the head of the valley tempted us, but the weather, hitherto perfect, showed signs of breaking and, as heavy cloud clamped down upon the peak, we abandoned the idea and, after some discussion, decided to push on over the Punta Union pass. This looked a formidable obstacle, a high rock ridge which seemed nearly perpendicular for the final few hundred feet, nor could we see a chink in its armour through which we could lead our laden burros. They had already found the valley heavy going and were far from fresh. But we knew that in ancient times the pass was a recognised trade route and that the Germans, Drs. Kinzl and Borchers, had crossed it with horses in 1932.

In the event it went easily. The burros seemed unworried by the steep slabs and rakes and the top 100 ft. of near-vertical rock was surmounted by a remarkable man-made ramp of ancient origin which zig-zagged up its face to a tiny cleft in the top of the ridge which was here only a few feet wide. In a crack below this crest, at 15,500 ft., flowered a clump of a rare bright red gentian.

All afternoon we had been overshadowed by the South face of Tauliraju (19,128 ft.) whose summit showed from time to time through gaps in the clouds. To me it is the fairest mountain of them all; seemingly impregnable from the south, it has been climbed but once, by way of the North face and North-east ridge.

Through the cleft we dropped quickly down the western side of the



Photo: A. Gregory]

ALPAMAYO FROM THE SOUTH.

main watershed, but the burros had had enough and at about 15,000 ft. we stopped and cleared a camp site.

Once more we were surrounded by mountains of great beauty—behind us Taulliraju, to the north Pucahirca, to the north-west the two peaks of Alpamayo rising from its combe, to the left of it Nevado Santa Cruz, dominating the Quebrada to which it gives its name. Nearer at hand to the south-west Artesonraju dropped its moraines nearly to our camp.

Our journey now led us westwards through an area of swamp where stream crossings were difficult to find. We saw many of the pied wild geese of the Andes, as well as flocks of the plovers, also black and white, which the Indians call 'requirish'. Passing a large lake whose steep rocky shores compelled us to climb high, we at length entered the Quebrada Santa Cruz, a steep-sided valley which rapidly developed into a gorge.

From a few conical huts a dusty track, often overhung by tropical vegetation, dropped endlessly through its narrow confines, debouching at long last on to a shelf of cultivated land high above the Santa valley. Here we camped in the rough stubble of a recently cut patch of maize and beans and, while its owner with his offspring searched diligently between our tents for stray bean pods, his comely wife boiled luscious cobs of maize for our benefit. At 9,000 ft. the fertile countryside looked prosperous enough and the neat farms with pantiled roofs gave to it an air of pastoral peace.

But the urge to dally amidst its gentle charm was unequal to the pull exerted by reports of a place called 'Palacio del Inca' not many miles away on a higher shelf. So we spent the next day climbing steadily, passing through the red adobe village of Santa Cruz and camping on open puna below two low hills. The northern hill was covered with massive terrace walls and the remains of ancient buildings, but the ruin known as 'Palacio del Inca' which lay at its foot was, without doubt, one of the vast storehouses built by the Incas in which the surplus of good years could be kept for use in emergency.

We were tempted to wander along our shelf for a few more days, for the light and colouring were superb, but we had already been on the move for nearly three weeks and we wanted to see something of the Indian villages and markets in the Santa valley before returning to Huaras. And so the following day, after passing a lake whose still waters reflected the peaks beyond, we dropped 3,000 ft. into the thick, warm air of the small market town of Caras.

In the late afternoon the porters left with the burros to walk the forty-five dusty miles to Huaras where Greg and I arranged to meet them in three days' time. It was quite an affectionate parting for we had all enjoyed ourselves immensely and, if our climbs were of no great merit by present-day standards, we had seen a great deal of a little-known and fascinating district.

APPENDIX

MAPS

Cordillera Blanca, 1/200,000, H. Kinzl & E. Schneider, Universitäts-Verlag Wagner, Innsbruck.

Cordillera Blanca, 1/100,000, P. Borchers, Klein & Volbert, Munich.

Anden von Peru, Cordillera Blanca und Huayhuash, 1/300,000. Swiss Institute for Alpine Research, 1952.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cordillera Blanca, H. Kinzl & E. Schneider. Innsbruck, 1950.

Die Weisse Kordillere, P. Borchers. Berlin, 1935.

The Ascent of Alpamayo, G. Kogan & N. Leininger. Harrap, 1954.

Cordillère Blanche, G. Kogan & N. Leininger. B. Arthaud, Paris, 1952.

ARTICLES

A.J. 60.69; 60.280; 66.199.

COSTS IN PERU (1963—75 soles = £1)

Lima to Huaras (by public truck) (260 miles)—approx. 50 soles.

Lima to Huaras (equipment) (per 100 kilos)—50 soles.

Experienced porters (per day)—50 soles.

Arriero (per day)—30/35 soles.

Burros (per day)—30 soles.

We provided porter and arriero with clothing and boots (some new, some used). We loaned them sleeping bags, lilos, ice-axes and crampons.

Films are expensive.

FOOD

Apart from tea, it is not necessary to take food from England. We bought supplies from excellent self-service stores in Lima and from shops in Huaras or Yungay.

On our journey in the mountains we bought:

1 large sheep—190 soles.

Potatoes or Ocas (plentiful and cheap).

Eggs (scarce).

Maize cobs.

It was not necessary to carry fodder for burros, they fended for themselves.

LANGUAGE

Some Spanish is essential.