PERU, 1964

By MALCOLM SLESSER

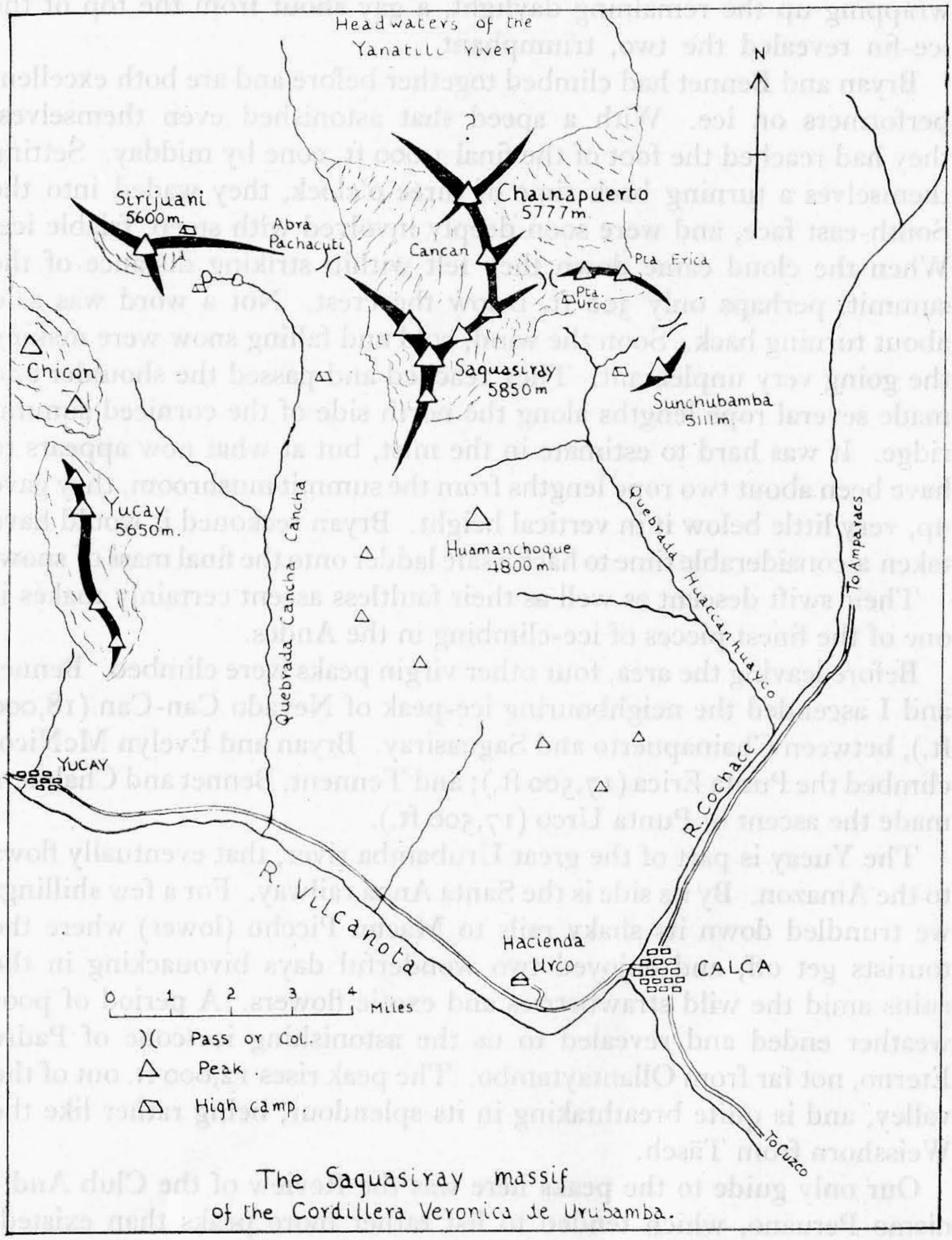
(*Two illustrations: nos. 67, 68*)

When no less a mountaineer than René Dittert writes to say that 'içi la carte est très fausse,' and encloses a sketch-map indicating a couple of untouched mountain ranges, the urge for action becomes intolerable. I had long wished to climb in Peru, for it seemed to me that it had all the virtues of Switzerland, though higher, and was free from oppressive cleanliness and order. And so it turned out. Through the unlikely combination of the military and the Evangelical Union of South America, we found ourselves on July 7, 1964, in the mission house at the Hacienda Urco, by Calca, in the fabulous and justly sacred valley of the Yucay. On the advance party was Ken Bryan who had deployed his red beard, soft voice and case of Chivas Regal, each in their appropriate place, to this good end. Behind us now rose the little trodden flanks of the Cordillera Veronica de Urubamba, and the hint of more behind that.

Hitherto this has been the preserve of Italian mountaineers. One of Dittert's blanks had been bitten into the previous year by Fulvio Ratti's party, who had climbed the handsome ice-corniced Saguasiray (19,300 ft.) and sadly lost a man on the tricky descent. But they sent us pictures of two beauties, Sirijuani and Chainapuerto. Sirijuani fell to four men by two routes on the same day (Ken Bryan and Rob Brooks, South-east face, N. Tennent and R. Chalmers, North-east ridge), and gave a hint of excellent climbing to come. Of the peaks further east there was reported no sign. But nearby Chainapuerto (18,990 ft.) was a model Alpamayo which offered little hope from the west and north. Anderson and I arrived from the U.K. in time for the sweaty clamber up the Huaccanhuayco valley past the prickly bushes with their hanging clusters of scarlet *tuntu* flowers, sacred to the Incas, to a homelike corrie below a rim of virgin ice-peaks. Beyond, we hoped, lay the final cone of Chainapuerto. And so it did. Above Camp I at 15,000 ft. rose an ice-fin, leading to gracious snow-slopes and a breathtakingly beautiful snow col. Northwards, beyond a mile of turbulent glacier-basin, rose our mountain, even more impressive than from the other side. The last 1,000 ft. rose as a fifty degree corniced ridge till it abutted onto the East ridge, and then for 200 ft. or so it rose gently in mushroom cornices to the highest point of snow. Where the rock of the mountain was, no one could say.

It looked magnificently unassailable, and other possibilities were

mooted. We had a week's food at our corrie base, having regarded the excursion as a reconnaissance. Meanwhile we probed and filmed. On the fourth day Ken Bryan and Don Bennet set forth to penetrate its



The Saquasiray massif
of the Cordillera Veronica de Urubamba.

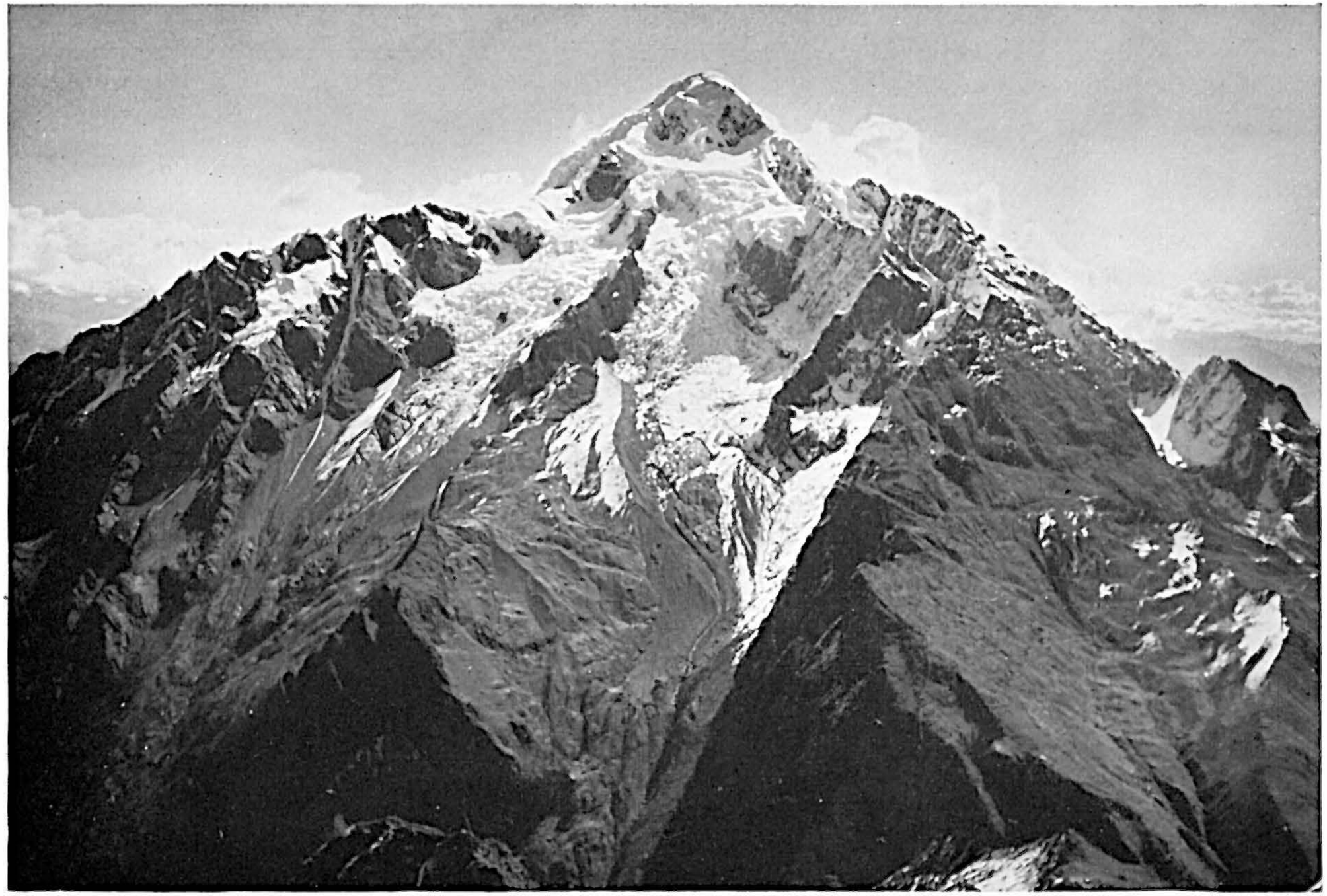
upper ice-fields and seek a way round the chin-fat rolls of curling ice and intervening cornices, while from the col Chalmers filmed and Tennent held his tail. They moved with astonishing speed, making only two errors of route judgement and, three and a half hours before darkness, were still climbing when the cloud enveloped them. When



Expedition photo]

CORDILLERA VERONICA DE URUBAMBA. *Left to Right*: A SPUR OF SAGUASIRAY, NEVADO CAN-CAN, CHAINAPUERTO (18,990 FT.)

(No. 67)



Expedition photo]

CORDILLERA VERONICA DE URUBAMBA. EL PADRE ETERNO (20,000 FT.) FROM HUACRATANCA. THE TOP 2,000 FT. OF THE WEST RIDGE IS THE LEFT PROFILE. THE EAST RIDGE, WHICH WAS ATTEMPTED, IS THE RIGHT PROFILE, WITH CAMP I TO THE LEFT OF THE BROAD COULOIR ON THE RIGHT.

(No. 68)

I met Tennent at Camp I he saw no prospect of success, and we greatly feared that they would be benighted. The remaining daylight hours (we could not see the peak from Camp I) were spent preparing to help them down on the morrow. But just as the swift Andean dusk was wrapping up the remaining daylight, a gay shout from the top of the ice-fin revealed the two, triumphant.

Bryan and Bennet had climbed together before and are both excellent performers on ice. With a speed that astonished even themselves, they had reached the foot of the final 1,000 ft. cone by midday. Setting themselves a turning back time of three o'clock, they waded into the South-east face, and were soon deeply involved with steep, friable ice. When the cloud came down they felt within striking distance of the summit, perhaps only 300 ft. below the crest. Not a word was said about turning back. Soon the wind, cold and falling snow were making the going very unpleasant. They reached and passed the shoulder and made several rope lengths along the north side of the corniced summit ridge. It was hard to estimate in the mist, but at what now appears to have been about two rope lengths from the summit mushroom, they gave up, very little below it in vertical height. Bryan reckoned it would have taken a considerable time to hack a safe ladder onto the final mass of snow.

Their swift descent as well as their faultless ascent certainly makes it one of the finest pieces of ice-climbing in the Andes.

Before leaving the area, four other virgin peaks were climbed. Bennet and I ascended the neighbouring ice-peak of Nevado Can-Can (18,000 ft.), between Chainapuerto and Saguasiray. Bryan and Evelyn McNicol climbed the Punta Erica (17,500 ft.); and Tennent, Bennet and Chalmers made the ascent of Punta Urco (17,500 ft.).

The Yucay is part of the great Urubamba river, that eventually flows to the Amazon. By its side is the Santa Anna railway. For a few shillings we trundled down its shaky rails to Machu Picchu (lower) where the tourists get off, and enjoyed two wonderful days bivouacking in the ruins amid the wild strawberries and exotic flowers. A period of poor weather ended and revealed to us the astonishing ice-cone of Padre Eterno, not far from Ollantaytambo. The peak rises 12,000 ft. out of the valley, and is quite breathtaking in its splendour, being rather like the Weisshorn from Täsch.

Our only guide to the peaks here was the Review of the Club Andinismo Peruano, which tended to list rather more peaks than existed, partly owing to the claim by an early Italian expedition to separate names for related points on certain summit ridges, and partly to subsequent expeditions giving new names to already climbed summits. For Veronica read Marconi, for Padre Eterno, Veronica. Helancoma we never found, nor saw, and it must surely be one of the many others. But at the time of our visit this had not been unravelled, and the inhabitants assured us of

the virginity of Padre Eterno (20,000 ft.), pronounced us heroes when we said we were going to climb it, and offered the free loan of burros, an unheard of gesture in these parts.

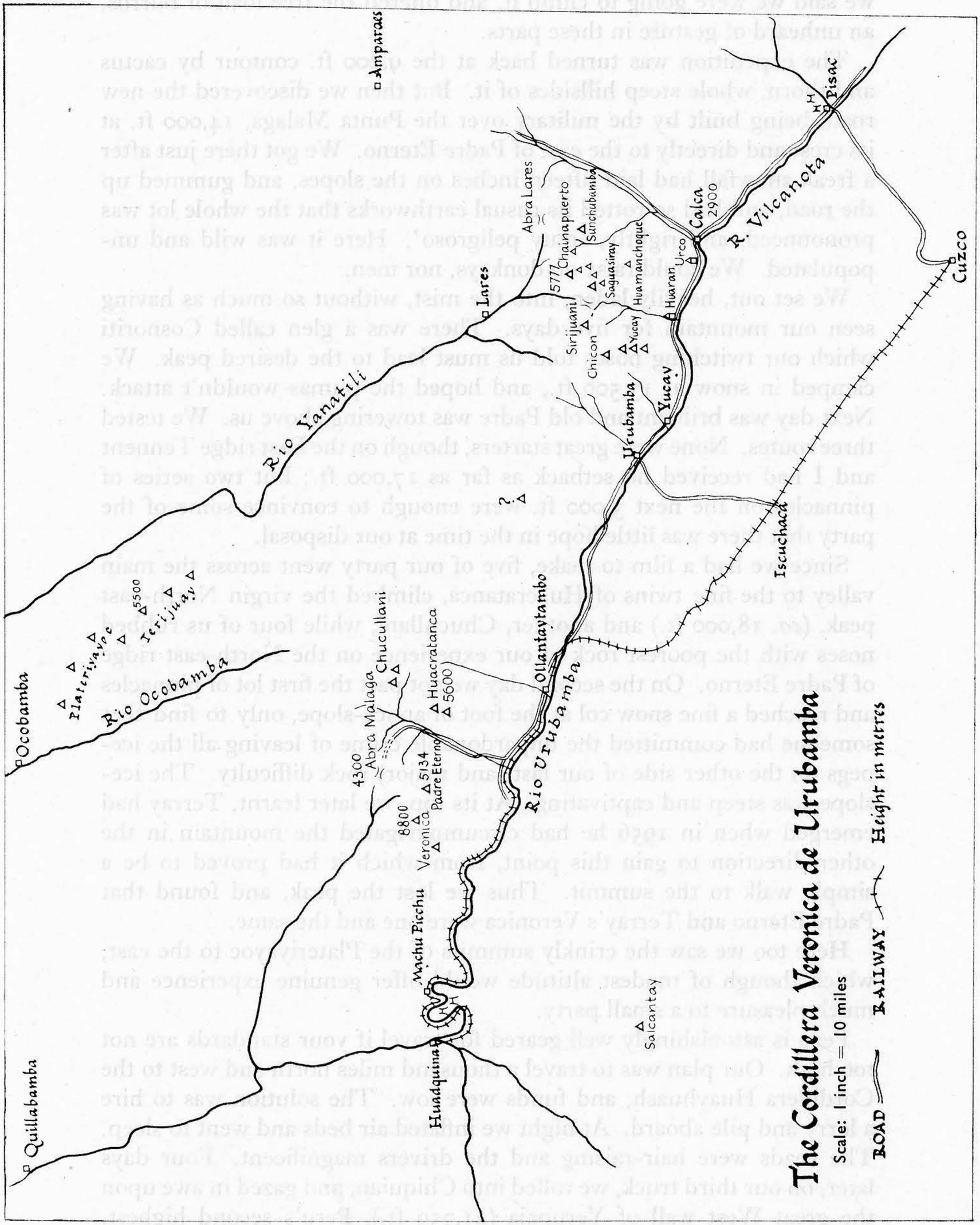
The expedition was turned back at the 9,000 ft. contour by cactus and thorn, whole steep hillsides of it. But then we discovered the new road, being built by the military over the Punta Malaga, 14,000 ft. at its crest and directly to the east of Padre Eterno. We got there just after a freak snowfall had laid fifteen inches on the slopes, and gummed up the road, and had so rotted its casual earthworks that the whole lot was pronounced, and rightly, 'muy peligroso'. Here it was wild and unpopulated. We could raise no donkeys, nor men.

We set out, heavily laden, into the mist, without so much as having seen our mountain for five days. There was a glen called Cosnoriti which our twitching noses told us must lead to the desired peak. We camped in snow at 13,500 ft., and hoped the pumas wouldn't attack. Next day was brilliant and old Padre was towering above us. We tested three routes. None were great starters, though on the East ridge Tennent and I had received no setback as far as 17,000 ft.; but two series of pinnacles on the next 3,000 ft. were enough to convince some of the party that there was little hope in the time at our disposal.

Since we had a film to make, five of our party went across the main valley to the fine twins of Huacratanca, climbed the virgin North-east peak, (*ca.* 18,000 ft.) and another, Chucullani, while four of us rubbed noses with the poorest rock of our experience on the North-east ridge of Padre Eterno. On the second day we got past the first lot of pinnacles and reached a fine snow col at the foot of an ice-slope, only to find that someone had committed the unpardonable crime of leaving all the ice-pegs on the other side of our last (and major) rock difficulty. The ice-slope was steep and captivating. At its top, we later learnt, Terray had emerged when in 1956 he had circumnavigated the mountain in the other direction to gain this point, from which it had proved to be a simple walk to the summit. Thus we lost the peak, and found that Padre Eterno and Terray's Veronica were one and the same.

Here too we saw the crinkly summits of the Plateriyayoc to the east, which though of modest altitude would offer genuine experience and much pleasure to a small party.

Peru is astonishingly well geared for travel if your standards are not too high. Our plan was to travel a thousand miles north and west to the Cordillera Huayhuash, and funds were low. The solution was to hire a lorry and pile aboard. At night we inflated air beds and went to sleep. The roads were hair-raising and the drivers magnificent. Four days later, on our third truck, we rolled into Chiquian, and gazed in awe upon the great West wall of Yerupaja (21,759 ft.), Peru's second highest, and most beautiful, mountain.


Amparaes
Pisac
Calca
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R. Vilcanota
Cuzco
Abra Lares
Chainapuerto
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Huaran
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Chicon
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Iscuchaca
Ocobamba
Plateriyayoc
5500
Terijuay
Rio Ocobamba
Chucullani
Huacratanca
5600
Ollantaytambo
Rio Urubamba
Abra Malaga
4300
5134
Padre Eterno
8800
Veronica
Machu Picchu
Huadquina
Salcantay
Quillabamba
The Cordillera Veronica de Urubamba
Scale: 1 inch = 10 miles
ROAD
RAILWAY
Height in metres

This peak had attracted my attention because, though it had been climbed by two Americans, Harrah and Maxwell in 1951, in spite of many attempts no one had climbed it since. No doubt the Americans had been lucky and brilliant, but few mountains, even Everest, have enjoyed this sort of immunity. Moreover, the East face, the ultimate source of the Amazon, is very fine, and from Professor Kinzl's photograph looked safe and feasible. We were fit and in form, and it looked like the ideal morsel to round off an expedition.

We put up, voluntarily, in the gaol, and many a happy evening ensued, during which the captain of police and his men would serenade us, or, since our Rob Brooks is a fabulous guitar player, he would entertain Chiquian in the town plaza beneath the old corrugated iron bandstand. This amity stood us in good stead when hagglings commenced about the price of the sixteen burros we required. Charges had been grossly inflated by the Italian expedition of 1964 which had made the first complete ascent of Tsacra Grande (18,942 ft.). But we were late, the last expedition of the year, and our price was good, if not lordly. We were taken on and in three days were transported the fifty-five miles to Caruacocha, the zircon blue lake at the foot of Yerupaja.

At once it rained. Coming at the end of the season, we had taken a calculated risk, and for a while it looked as if it might pay off. The mountain was wonderfully dry, the rock heavily exposed and the ice and snow crisp and easy to cut. But day after day the wet, warm winds came in from the jungle to lay fresh snow and soften the existing stuff till a slope of over forty-five degrees was positively hazardous. The North-east buttress was to have been our route, but no safe way for laden climbers could be found to its base. However, much fun was had in seeking routes and fixing ropes.

We were pushed further and further east in a clockwise spiral of the mountain, till, by August 25 we had taken up a stance (Camp II) below the peak of Yerupaja West (18,600 ft.), and sought a way to Yerupaja over its top. Our searchings led us finally to a steep little glacier that was abruptly terminated by an overhanging rock band of compact black limestone at 18,000 ft. Brooks led this artificially, and just before dark on the second last day of August we stood upon the final easy ice-slope to the summit of Yerupaja West. But the mountain wasn't having any. My axe snapped. The party was already short of a crampon. We descended to Camp II and in the next days' rain we saw that Yerupaja had nothing for us this year. We wish the Swiss, presently tackling this route, better fortune.[1]

[1] According to the July issue of the *S.A.C. Bulletin*, four Swiss climbers made the first ascent of the South summit of Yerupaja (6,515 m.) on June 22, 1965.—EDITOR.