

Gimmer Crag in the Lake District. The flawless quality of the rock, the fine situation of the mountain and the encouraging morning sun combined to make this route the ideal of rock-climbing perfection.

On the summit of Les Bans our reward was complete, for our panorama encompassed all the five routes of our 10 days in the district. We could follow in detail every route I have described in this paper, save only the descent of the snowy N. face of Les Ecrins. We spent on the summit a glorious hour and a quarter in retrospection.

The ordinary way off Les Bans by the E. ridge is a delightful climb on nearly as perfect rock as the buttress we had climbed. We came quickly down on to the snowy crest of the Col de la Pilatte, and regained our faint tracks of ascent on the glacier. We were back at the hut in  $2\frac{1}{4}$  hours from the summit and in La Bérarde, for the last time, soon after lunch.

As we drove down to Grenoble in the evening, there came the most satisfying finish to a climbing season, for black clouds rolled up the valleys and thunder was all around in the foothills. We left the Alps feeling that the summer was ended.

Illustrations by B. R. Goodfellow :—

No. 2 represents La Meije ; on the great tower of the W. arête.

No. 3 represents Les Ecrins ; on the ' Clocher ' arête of the Dôme de Neige : S. arête of Pic Lory.

No. 4 represents L'Ailefroide ; E. peak from point 3908 m.

No. 5 represents L'Ailefroide ; W. peak (summit) from Central peak.

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## THE PICOS DE EUROPA, 1933.

By G. F. ABERCROMBIE.

(Read before the Alpine Club, February 6, 1934.)

THE Picos, which I have the honour to attempt to describe to you to-night, though much neglected by British climbers, have from time immemorial arrested the attention of every passing traveller. George Borrow,<sup>1</sup> for instance, almost certainly refers to them, ' an immense range of mountains, which rose up like huge ramparts at about a league's distance from the sea,' and Richard Ford<sup>2</sup> knew them by

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bible in Spain.* 1843.

<sup>2</sup> *A Handbook for Travellers in Spain.* 1845.

name, 'the Peñas de Europa, a glorious snow-capped chain, but,' he adds, 'ague and fever lurk in this bosom of beauty.' They were explored and mapped—the only maps available—by the Comte de Saint Saud,<sup>3</sup> who finally published in 1922 a monograph which has become a classic; more recently the Spaniards have been busy revising and correcting, so that the *Journal of the S.E.A. Peñalara*<sup>4</sup> is full of accurate information, admirably illustrated by drawings and photographs. I can find no references in English mountaineering literature between Ormsby's<sup>5</sup> original essay in 1872 and Mr. Elmslie's<sup>6</sup> rediscovery of them in 1927, and I know of only five other visits by members of this Club—namely, Mr. W. P. Haskett-Smith, Mr. D. W. Freshfield in 1912, M. Paul Montandon in 1930, Dr. W. R. Rickmers<sup>7</sup> in 1925, and Mr. A. W. Andrews a couple of months before us in 1933. Yet here they are, a wonderful mass of limestone peaks, between 8000 and 9000 ft. high, packed into an area not greater than that of the English lake district, just half-way along the northern sea-board of Spain, two days' journey from London.

They are divided by natural boundaries into three groups: a western, culminating in the Peña Santa de Castilla, 2586 m., much of which is now a National Park, of which a good account was published<sup>8</sup> in 1932 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce; an eastern, perhaps less interesting because once the scene of mining activities, but containing also a famous valley, the Liébana; and a central, which has the two highest peaks, the Torre de Cerredo, 2642 m., and the Torre de Llambrion, 2639 m., in addition to the incomparable Naranjo, 2516 m.

It was with this central group in mind that Dr. J. W. Cope and I, both members of the St. Bartholomew's Hospital Alpine Club, left London at 10 A.M. on July 25, 1933. I may add that there were no photographers on the station platform, that not a single member of the Daily Press offered us a fat cheque for our story, and that the objective of our expedition has not yet been submitted to a marvellously inaccurate survey from the

<sup>3</sup> *Monographie des Picos de Europa*. 1922.

<sup>4</sup> *Peñalara*, xxii, 229, pp. 1 *et seq.*, 1933; xxii, 235, pp. 181 *et seq.*, 1933.

<sup>5</sup> *A.J.* 6, 66–72.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 39, 287–90; 43, 396–7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 44, 216–37.

<sup>8</sup> *Guías de los Sitios Naturales de Interés Nacional*. No. 2, *El Parque Nacional de la Montaña de Covadonga*. Madrid. 1932.



*Photo, J. W. Cope.]*

THE ROAD TO BULNES.

*[To face p. 64.*



*Photo, J. W. Cope.]*

THE EASTERN WALL OF THE CANAL DE CELADA.

air. At 9 o'clock next morning we arrived at San Sebastian, changed into a single-line electric train stopping at every station, and reached Bilbao at 1 P.M. We left at 2.10 P.M. in a steam train, crowded to capacity, and endured it in the heat wave for another four hours to Santander. Here, being too late in the day for any other means of conveyance, we secured a taxi for the remaining 115 kilometres to Arenas de Cabrales, a little village at the foot of the northern slopes, and arrived at 10.30 P.M. at the Fonda de Los Picos de Europa. This, the local *rendez-vous* for everyone after working hours, consists of an hotel above and a good-sized general store and café below, in which are to be found all mountaineering requisites, such as rope-soled shoes and umbrellas, and a considerable variety of food and drink. It is quite clear that there is no need whatever to buy provisions before arriving at Arenas, and I should like to put it upon record that we were welcomed with the utmost kindness, that our bill, headed 'Los Ingleses,' was very moderate, and that upon our return every English-speaking inhabitant of the village was introduced to us. Indeed, had we been distinguished ambassadors we could not have been received more cordially. We did, however, fall into an error of deportment once, due to an unthinking conclusion that, if a bath has a plug, it necessarily has a waste pipe, and it was not until a loud cry arose downstairs that we observed much of the bath water on the floor and the remainder in the kitchen.

Next day, having assembled eight days' food, cooking utensils, sleeping-bags, tent, cameras, field-glasses, and what not, we hired a mule and a muleteer to guide us to the one and only refuge hut and, crossing the Rio Cares, set off at 10 A.M. along the road to Poncebos. The lovely woods, full of beautiful Spanish chestnut trees, were soon left behind and we entered the narrow gorge scenery so typical of this part of the country. The road ends at a power station, but a good path continues southwards to Bulnes, the last village, notable for its tiny church and for the fact that a mule goes no farther. At lunch, while we were being instructed in the technique of drinking from a Spanish wine-skin, the victualling officer suddenly announced that he had forgotten to provide any bread, but we were able to buy a vast loaf for three pesetas.

Some local guidance is most valuable here, for many parallel ridges fall into the head of the valley, and accordingly our boy, shouldering a part of our load, led the way through the village to the pretty little waterfall and pool which mark the beginning of

the Canal de Camburero. Gradually the mist enveloped us ; about 4.30 a mistake cost us an hour, then a sharp storm soaked us and when we finally reached the Refuge at 6 p.m., the key was not available. Some shepherds, who all the summer tend a large flock of sheep and goats and a few cows, conducted us to a stone hut, about 10 ft. by 6 ft., adjoining that in which they live themselves, and this became our headquarters for the next eight days. These people were very good to us, being always willing to sell milk or to lend an old oil-can to hold water, the shortage of which is something to be carefully considered, for when we arrived every available can was employed to catch the water streaming from the eaves. Some 200 yards beyond these huts is a tiny spring, which functions well after heavy rain to fill a pool 2 ft. square and 6 inches deep. There is another pool of much the same size about a quarter of a mile lower down.

On the morning of July 28 the mist was still so dense that we could see nothing of our surroundings, and as the position of the Refuge is not marked on the map, and conversation in Basque is not our strong point, we had very little notion where we were. However, about 10 o'clock we went out for a short stroll and, leaving the water-hole on our left, tackled the short, steep, boulder-filled gully straight ahead. This gives a genuine climb, but higher up the gully widens, and there is a great variety of route. Visibility being limited to 25 or 30 yards, we began to build small cairns at short intervals, and so pushed on for about 5 hours, when we found ourselves groping about on rather steep and smooth slabs with a great overhang above. The sun appeared for a few moments, but though we were near the sky-line, we were not able to identify any features. We retraced our steps easily, demolishing the cairns.

Next morning, July 29, we awoke at 5 A.M. to find the day glorious, and a short rush to the left brought the Naranjo into full view. We were now able to appreciate that the huts are placed on a subsidiary ridge between a small side valley on the right and the main sweep of the Canal de Camburero. Having rearranged our rucksacks to contain sleeping-bags and three days' food, we began at 9.15 to make our way slowly forward between the Naranjo and the Neverón. Our objective was the Collada de Arenizas alta. Lizards green and grey, or black and gold, a ptarmigan and her chicks, the golden eagle swaying above the ridge, seemed to bear us company. Suddenly we arrived upon the edge of an abrupt wall and looked down into a bowl, wide and deep. All around us on the rim crouched

and glared fantastic rock-shapes, grey and yellow and brick-red, as still and voiceless as though we had surprised them at some guilty secret. No sigh of the wind, no echo of falling water floated to us from this wildly desert place. The sun scorches it, but by some miracle life still exists, for twenty tiny varied flowers are at our feet, and strange and gorgeous butterflies flicker aimlessly across the snow. Enormous bastions from the Neverón cost us a deal of time, in an attempt to traverse too high to our right, and it was not till 6 o'clock that we finished the long grind from the lower valley to the Collada alta. In the Hoyo de Cerredo were many chamois, and the cloud effects along the coast-line were very beautiful. We were fortunate to find within a few yards of the snow-drift which forms the southern summit of the Col, a good trickle of water, and after supper, choosing a suitable place sheltered from the wind, we removed the larger stones, turfed the floor and settled down comfortably.

We slept well enough, rose soon after seven, breakfasted, packed up, and drank as much water as possible, before crossing the Col, whose northern boundary is a fine-looking unnamed rock mass. The Torre de Cerredo, now opposite,<sup>9</sup> is an unimposing mountain from this aspect, and the only question to be decided—one which constantly recurs in this district—is whether to go right down to the bottom of the Hoyo or whether to attempt a traverse. We compromised by descending some 200 ft., then traversing to the left and working up to the Col between the Torre Coello and the Torre Bermeja. Leaving our sacks here, we rounded the intervening mass and by easy rocks or short snow slopes made upward to the ill-defined central gully, which forms the ordinary route of ascent of the Cerredo. It is not a difficult climb, but the footholds of the top step are small and the general angle near the summit ridge is steep. In the cairn at the southern end is a book, placed there in 1932 by the Sociedad Española de Alpinismo, in which the S.E.A. Peñalara greets all mountaineers and wishes them good health and good luck. There we remained from 1.45 until nearly 4 o'clock, in wonderfully warm sunshine, studying the map and enjoying a view which combines so many remarkable features. At 8668 ft. the wild flowers and the butterflies are still with us. Due S. is the Llambrion with, at its foot, small glaciers. Rugged mountains with intervening circular depressions, or Hoyos, are scattered in wild profusion. Across the Hoyo de

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<sup>9</sup> See illustration, *A.J.* 39, facing 288.

Cerrodo to the N.E. lie the Sierra del Albo, and N.W., but closer at hand, is the Pico de los Cabrones<sup>10</sup> with its truly astonishing array of pinnacles and an eastern face as smooth as a shield. Due W. is the Peña Santa, marvellously graceful in silhouette. A huge arc of the horizon is occupied by the sea, and a white blanket of woolly cloud extended over a great part of the coast 20 miles away. The Hoyo Grande, thousands of feet below, straight, narrow, and enclosed by high jagged walls, over which the golden fingers of the sun slanted down into a scarcely perceptible haze, might well have been the nave of some superb cathedral.

We returned the way we had come, and resolved upon a direct descent into the Hoyo Grande. Easy slopes of scree led us down and away to the right until, immediately beneath a brick-red overhang below the summit of the Cerredo, they poured smoothly into a funnel, to fall for what seemed a hideous distance over slabs so highly polished that we dared not venture on them in our nailed boots. Farther to the right were perpendicular cliffs, but happily a traverse was possible to the left, and then about 300 ft. of smooth but moderate rock remained to be negotiated. We drank our fill from a snow-drift and changed our boots for rubbers. On the left of the slabs a very thin gully showed itself, by following which and using the rope we were down in 25 minutes. There was still a deal of dodging and traversing to be done before we escaped from the lowest tier of cliffs, to find the essential patch of snow about 8.30 p.m. In the deep shadows which now held us, we missed the little bag containing all the bread and sugar, and retired to rest in still deeper gloom.

Next day we started at 7.45 A.M. to make our way to the foot of a beautiful little needle, not unlike the Dent du Requin, which terminates the long northern ridge of the Llambrion and fills most elegantly the lower grassy section of the Hoyo Grande. Here we dumped our sacks and moved across to the upper section, which contains the central of the three small glaciers at the base of the Llambrion group. The Torre Pedro Pidal,<sup>11</sup> with its long black terraced battlements, and the deep gash between the Tiro Tirso and the Llambrion were in full view. Our route lay largely over patches of snow, with an occasional stretch of flat rock, in which were many fossils. Suddenly four chamois cantered past our front a few yards

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<sup>10</sup> See illustration, *A.J.* 39, facing 289.

<sup>11</sup> See illustration, *A.J.* 44, facing 230.



*Photo, G. F. Abercrombie.]*

TORRE DE CERREDO FROM THE SOUTH.



*Photo, G. F. Abercrombie.]*

A LITTLE PINNACLE IN THE HOYO GRANDE.

*[To face p. 68.]*



*Photo, J. W. Cope.]*

PEÑA SANTA DE CASTILLA FROM TORRE DE CERREDO.



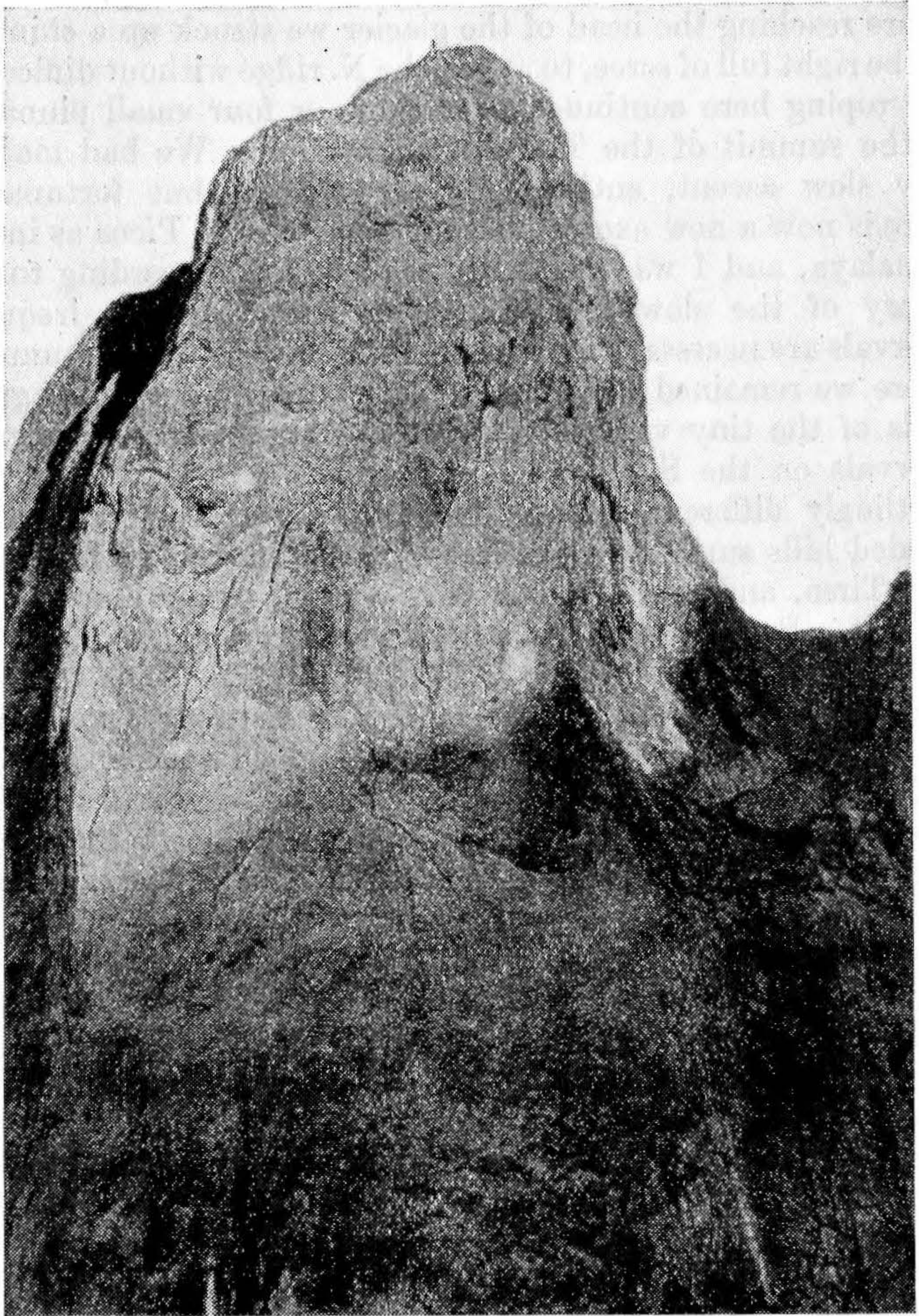
*Photo, G. F. Abercrombie.]*

TORRE DE LLAMBRION FROM TORRE DE CERREDO.

away. Our snapshot was a complete miss, but later we got a rather distant photograph of two of these beautiful creatures bounding down hard snow slopes at full gallop. Shortly before reaching the head of the glacier we struck up a chimney on the right full of scree, to attain the N. ridge without difficulty, and roping here continued over three or four small pinnacles to the summit of the Torre de Llambrion. We had made a very slow ascent, entirely for my benefit, but fortunately there is now a new excuse, as convenient in the Picos as in the Himalaya, and I was careful to explain that according to the theory of the slow approach, long halts at very frequent intervals are necessary for acclimatization. From this summit, where we remained  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours, we looked down upon the green fields of the tiny villages, which occur at more or less regular intervals on the S. side, and we were able to appreciate how startlingly different are the Picos from the lower and more wooded hills surrounding them. Immediately opposite is the Tiro Tirso, and there is obviously a grand ridge climb to its summit. Beyond this and stretching away to the N.E. are the tumbled masses of the Oriellos, the Peña Vieja and the Naranjo. We lunched, I remember it distinctly, upon raw lemons and what appeared to be raw blood sausage, and at 2.15 went back a few feet to drop over the edge into a yellow twisting chimney, which gave an easier descent to the glacier than we had expected. Going quickly over the snowfield and allowing ourselves only 15 minutes to slake a prodigious thirst at a tiny trickle, we reached our sacks in  $1\frac{3}{4}$  hours. We started again at 4, gained the top of the Col baja in just under an hour and at 6.15 the rim of the Gargantada, between the Neverón and the Naranjo. This time we entered so deeply into the labyrinth of scree and slab and boulder that I feared we should never get out. At 7 P.M. we found a pool one foot square, the first source since the Col alta. The evening mists rose and writhed about us, during the last hour's dark struggle, and we were thoroughly agreed that we never wished to set foot in the Canal de Camburero again, that to-morrow should be an off-day, and that afterwards we would go down to the Puente de la Jaya to try to get through to Cain.

This was one of Mr. Elmslie's expeditions, and he has most kindly lent me many of his photographs to show to-night. I ought perhaps to say a word or two about the Refuge, described in such glowing terms, both by him in 1927, and by Dr. Rickmers in 1925. That was indeed the age of plenty—comfortable beds, a pleasant caretaker, soup, macaroni, eggs, wine and cider. All

that remains of these luxuries are some dozens of empty bottles. The place is going to rack and ruin, and the only amenity still



NARANJO FROM THE W.

available, as far as I could see, is the provision of certain vessels.

On the morning of August 1 doubts assailed us, for we foresaw that upon our return home we should surely be asked what luck we had had on that perishing great thing beginning with 'N.' We therefore decided to devote the off-day to it.

and started at 11.10, armed with two pitons, a small hammer and rubber shoes. Is it not astonishing that up to now no one has attempted the girdle traverse of the Naranjo? <sup>12</sup> Why this mountain should be called 'Orange Tree,' which I believe is the meaning of the name, is not easy to understand, unless it be that when seen from a distance with the sun shining upon it, it is somewhat of that colour. An equally appropriate name would be 'El Barrigón' (pot-belly). This, at least, would aptly describe the western precipice, which can hardly be less than 1500 ft. in height, with a colossal bulge in its lower third. We had already seen enough to make us avoid the shortest side, and so crossing the Camburero low down and taking the wide scree gully, the Canal de Celada—or hidden valley—marked by chamois-hunters' butts, we climbed round and up until we reached the comparatively flat shoulder, which projects from the N.E. face of the mountain proper. The obvious route from below is now to traverse the slabs to the right to enter one of the gullies leading, as far as one can judge, comparatively easily to the summit. This, in fact, was the route taken on the first ascent,<sup>13</sup> but is now little used. The slabs are repulsive.<sup>14</sup> Looking at the N.E. face more closely, we saw a broad Y-shaped buttress applied to the slabs, and made several false starts at its left-hand edge. Descending 20 yards to the left, we found at 3.30 P.M. a shallow rift, offering an easy upward passage for 60 feet or so. Here there was a good stance and a belay. The next 80-ft. step impressed me as being decidedly severe, and ended in a slight opening, where there was a good stance but no belay. The cleft now disappeared and a long stride round a bulge to the right had to be made on outwardly sloping footholds to a ledge a foot wide, which held a little vegetation. Here with care it was possible to sit. This ledge continued upwards to the right, and just as it vanished, the leader was able to get under cover between the slabs and the left-hand branch or limb of the Y-shaped buttress, a jammed stone providing a good belay. Twenty feet higher was another jammed stone, behind which the rope might be threaded, and 40 feet higher still another resting-place. Further than this I did not go, but Cope continued up a chimney back and foot, and thought the next tier of slabs no harder than those already climbed, but it was

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<sup>12</sup> See illustration, *A.J.* 44, facing 235.

<sup>13</sup> *Bulletin Pyrénéen*, No. 56, pp. 73–84; No. 65, 281–7.

<sup>14</sup> See illustration, *A.J.* 39, facing 287.

obvious that we were not going to get up that day, and we were just a little doubtful whether we should get down without using a piton. At 5.30 then, having climbed about 300 feet, or perhaps a little less, in 2 hours, we retired in good order, arriving at the foot of the climb at 7 p.m. We cached the rope, pitons, hammer and rubbers, and got back to the hut at 9.40 p.m. Again the sea was covered by an upper sea of white cloud, which flowed into the valleys, leaving the peaks of the Sierra de Main cut off as islands. Not the least remarkable effect was the shadow of the Naranjo, cast by a silvery moon upon a bank of vapour at our feet.

Next day we rested until 5.30 p.m., and then went up again to the Canal de Celada with our sleeping-bags to bivouac beneath a convenient boulder. I am well aware that it is not considered correct to describe a half-finished climb; the proper course is to say nothing about it, to give evasive replies to questions and to return, it may be years later, to complete the assault in secret and in triumph. If upon this occasion I depart from traditional usage, I may at least urge in my defence the precedent furnished at the last two meetings of this Club.

In the morning we had some difficulty in melting the snow collected in our hats overnight, but we breakfasted at 6, and were on the north-eastern shoulder at 8.30. We descended to the right, but could not see any reasonable traverse across the great slabs, the detail of which is so remarkable. They are astonishingly rough in texture, but without a 'Thank God' hold anywhere; seamed with slender gullies 3 to 4 ins. wide, down which must pour in bad weather ten thousand tiny streamlets, they offer to the climber only the merest toe-scrapes, the most exiguous finger-holds for lift or balance. One might perhaps sprint up a few feet in any direction, but I personally would not care to try, for every mortal thing slopes outward, and the higher one mounts, the steeper becomes the angle, slanting up to heaven in a glorious hyperbola. We therefore returned to our original point of attack, and starting at 9 o'clock reached the top of Cope's chimney in 1 hr. 20 mins. We were now upon the top of the left limb of the Y, and the next step was a very steep and very smooth slab of 80 feet. From a good stance with a belay at the top, Cope ran out nearly as much rope again on a similar slab, but could make no further progress and was compelled to return for the same reason as Noah's dove, which, you remember, 'found no rest for the sole of her foot.' We roped down the 80-ft. slab and descending to

the right into the fork of the Y, climbed the right-hand limb, an easy passage, but could get no further thence in any direction. We were therefore forced to return to ground by our original route, getting down at 4 o'clock. My rubbers were literally cut to pieces, and were abandoned on the spot in a small cairn.

Thereafter we walked round to the southern face of the mountain, which looks perhaps a little more feasible, and by which the ascent is nowadays usually made. Up to the present there have been about forty successful ascents,<sup>15</sup> and there has been a fatal accident to a man climbing alone. Some of the shepherds have been up, but the only guide recognized by the S.E.A. Peñalara, and who holds their *carnet*, is Alfonso Martinez of Camarmeña. The guide's fee—and it is considered the most difficult ascent of the district—is 100 pesetas. Much of this information was given us by Don José del Prado, who most kindly called upon us in our stone hut upon our return. He made a successful ascent<sup>15</sup> the next day with a companion and the guide, and wrote to me afterwards that it was something of a 'first-class *varappe*.'

We must all have felt what Darwin expresses so neatly, that 'it is the fate of most voyagers, no sooner to discover what is most interesting in any locality, than they are hurried from it.' Such was our fate, to be accepted with the keenest regret. All our food being finished, and water having become extremely scarce, we went down to Bulnes on August 4, hoping against hope that we should be able to find a mule there; but we were out of luck, and had to hump all our gear down to Arenas ourselves. I need not describe the weariness of that day; it was much relieved at the *fonda* in Poncebos, and finally banished by the enormous meal soon provided at Arenas.

There are many other points of interest about these mountains upon which there is now no time to speak. Great snow and ice climbs are, of course, conspicuously absent, and it is probable that there remain only some minor summits or small pinnacles still unascended. But if anyone who delights in cloud form wishes to explore a new country, and day after day to have a whole mountain range to himself, he cannot do better than visit the Picos.

[For a fuller Bibliography, etc., see 'A.J.' 39, 290; 44, 236-7.]

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<sup>15</sup> *Peñalara*, xxii, 238, p. 266, 1933; 237, p. 247, 1933.