

## CLIMBING ASSIGNMENTS

BY JOHN CLEARE

*(Four illustrations: nos. 54-57)*

IT would be untrue to say that I drifted into climbing photography by accident, although one might put it that I happened on photography through climbing. By the time I was fifteen mountaineering was an obsession, all the school holidays were spent in Snowdonia or the Highlands and during term time the nearest approach to the hills was with my water colours or through the photographs of my school-boy companions. I soon collected a comprehensive record of idyllic days on Lliwedd and Tryfan, Rannoch Wall or the Cioch, but the pictures were usually of me and they were rather expensive. My father had brought back some vintage cameras from Germany about the time of the 'air-lift' and eventually I took one of these, to keep up with the Joneses and end my reliance on foreign aid.

Anyway, after several years, divers machinations and (as the head-shrinker would have it), 'the application of external stimuli', I decided to be a professional photographer. I had fondly pictured myself driving from climb to climb in a chauffeured Bentley, shooting a few pictures and having a lovely time. Then I did three years at Art school studying the subject, and realised that the only interest the public had in climbing was in accidents; pictures of climbing were almost impossible to sell, and photographers had other things to do in any case. But I owe a lot to the late Ivor Thomas, my tutor, a brilliant and inspiring Welshman, who, when I would arrive regularly on a Tuesday morning with mashed and bloody hands after a weekend on grit, would wax poetic about 'man's life depending on the jamming of 'is 'and' and forgive me my missed lectures of Monday, providing I had taken some pictures. Third year students spent several summer weeks working on location projects in Gower, but most of my projects seemed to be demonstrating rock moves to Ivor, to film or to make poetry around. Intellectually it was very stimulating but 'ce n'est pas la guerre'.

My first real climbing assignment was a great disappointment. Working with Tony Smythe, himself a journalist, I persuaded the editor of a travel magazine I had been working with to commission a feature on the 'background story of the Eigerwand'. We were to discover the reaction of the Grindelwald locals, we were to interview the police, the guides and the rescue team, and we were to talk with the



*Photo: John Cleare (for B.B.C. Television)*

**KILNSEY CRAG: I. G. McNAUGHT-DAVIS AND B. INGLE ON THE OVERHANG.**

**(No. 54)**

climbers queueing at the bottom of the big black wall, and maybe venture up a little way ourselves . . . just for pictures. In short we were to do an 'inside' story on the mountain as only climbers can.

But no one climbed the Eiger that year, and those who died on it were left on it. When we got home we discovered that the magazine had been bought out in a vast take-over bid and was no longer a travel journal. The new editor was not interested.

My big break came when 'Mac-the-Telly', known in those days as Ian McNaught-Davis, rang me up to ask if I was free to work with the B.B.C. on a climbing programme. The lads were to do a televised ascent of the Kilnsey overhang in Wharfedale, and they wanted a man to hang under the great roof with a portable TV camera. However, after technical reconnaissances they discovered there was actually a sort of ledge under the roof, and one of their camera technicians was foolhardy enough to volunteer to sit on it during the programme. By way of a gesture the B.B.C. suggested I might care to take a few publicity stills instead. I was in on the Television Circus.

The climb was a great success, even though the portable camera under the roof didn't work. The tranquillity of that broadcast is remarkable after the hectic epic that is present day TV climbing. The route was short enough for it to be fully organised and timed, and it actually had been successfully rehearsed. We spent our afternoons dozing away expense-account lunches in the hayfield below the crag, watching the swallows over the river and brewing tea. In the evening the climb began and the dusk marched up the dale and the floodlights came on. I had rigged a fixed rope round the Moseley Band, the horizontal crack line on the original start to the roof pitch, and moving backwards and forwards on the rope I could shoot unseen and yet close enough to make the pictures feel 'involved'. And the shots were unique. Whipplesnaith's *Night Climbers* had nothing on this. Sweating climbers, white limestone and deep blue night.

The laugh came at the end. Certain reactionary elements from Leeds had de-pegged the climb for spite the weekend before the programme. This had meant extra work for everyone and the lads were determined that the considerable money the B.B.C. had spent on new karabiners and pitons was not to be wasted. All of them were off to the Alps the next day in any case, and as transmission ceased so de-pegging started. But it was almost midnight and the engineers were looking forward to their quota of B.B.C. ale at the local hostelry. As Paul Nunn swung out across the roof, so the generators coughed and stopped and he was left to complete the climb in complete darkness. Nevertheless it was an excellent party.

The following winter I spent a weekend with Chris Bonington in the Avon gorge. On the Sunday morning he suggested we go over to

Cheddar. Now I had a sort of vested interest in the gorge; I had my first serious fall there (a badly placed peg, I hasten to add); and I guessed just what it was that interested Chris. At the time the finest line in the Cheddar gorge was Sceptre, a bold route of Hughie Banner's on the great blank 400 ft. wall at the highest point in the gorge. After 160 ft., however, the route wanders off to the right and avoids the fantastic challenge of the jutting upper wall. I knew of numerous attempts on this problem, but the rock was supposed to be dreadfully loose and they had only resulted in a slight straightening of the original Sceptre line.

I had guessed correctly; there was snow on the Mendip and I was not at all keen on the idea, but Chris is a thrustful leader and we were soon pushing our way up virgin rock some 200 ft. up the wall. The rock was poor, but not too dangerous, and the situation really Dolomitic. There was a roof which went easily with one *étrier*, a loose crack and a stance that shook as the pegs went home. A blind crack led up to a fault-line running right across the wall and overhung by a big square-cut roof. We were now over halfway up the blank section and if we could only traverse left along the fault we could reach the base of the great dièdre which cut through the roofs above and which we felt sure was the key to the top. But the traverse was awkward and dusk found Chris poised on a large flake some thirty feet out, both overhung and undercut, and whose only visible means of support was a frozen cobweb. Reluctantly we retreated and traversed easily rightwards along the fault, finding a chimney which eventually led to easy ground near the Sceptre finish. We felt that we had at least cracked the problem.

As we reached our car a figure detached itself from the shadows and said 'Hello, Chris'. It was Ned Kelly, a TV producer with T.W.W. in Bristol. It was a conspiracy, of course, for Ned had been watching our progress all day. The outcome was a further visit two weeks later on a bright, snowy day with an official T.W.W. commission to finish the climb and record it with stills. There were plans to televise the new route, which we called 'Coronation Street', in May.

For the programme we gathered a good team. Chris was to climb the route with Mike Thompson. I was to cover the event with stills, and Rusty Baillie, Tony Greenbank and Mary Stewart were to act as Sherpas. I think the most spectacular part of the programme was the rigging of a scaffolding tower and 250 lb. of TV camera on a wooded ledge accessible only by abseil from the cliff top. We called it the Cemetery; it was a dark and forbidding hollow and the bones of unfortunate cattle stuck through the steep carpet of moss and ivy on which we worked. We rigged a 200 ft. tyrolean traverse right across the gorge to haul up the equipment, and we ourselves used it as a convenient fast descent. I am told there were several cricked necks among the *char-à-banc* parties continually winding down the gorge.

In the meantime the Matterhorn had reared its snowy head. The B.B.C. invited Hamish MacInnes and myself to join the Anglo-Swiss team attempting to make a live TV programme on the mountain to celebrate the centenary of Whymper's ascent. We were to operate radio cameras, light-weight portable TV cameras transmitting their picture by radio instead of cable, and we would climb as two-man teams, myself with my old mate Rusty Baillie and Hamish with Davie Crabb, a hard man from Dundee.

We arrived after several days' training in the Eastern Alps, to find the Hörnli hut rebuilding and the Belvedere a veritable Tower of Babel, overflowing with multi-lingual TV engineers, seething with internal politics and somewhat foetid and smelly into the bargain. We camped in the snow a few hundred yards higher up the mountain.

To cut a long story short, the weather was at first impossible. It snowed every night and each day we ploughed up a little higher on the ridge. There had been plans for a complete rehearsal to be recorded against bad weather a couple of days before the transmission, but the mountain was not yet in condition and there were serious logistical problems. The attempt bogged down at the Solvay with a porters' strike, and the climbers, both the stars and radio camera teams, were left to bring all the gear down by themselves. This amounted to some 80 lb. per man, for in addition to cameras and the two pack-frame loads of electronics that went with each, there were spare batteries, extra cables, replacement valves, walkie-talkie radios, food, emergency bivouac equipment and climbing equipment. The highest point we had transmitted pictures from was the old hut.

There was deep depression that evening—poor Alan Chivers the producer must have been contemplating suicide—when half a dozen assorted British climbers arrived. We knew them all; and after hurried consultation a chap from B.B.C. Artists' Bookings was rushing around with contracts in his hand. At least we were now certain of getting our gear up the hill.

And it went off very well. The programme hung entirely on the two radio cameras, as the large fixed cameras down below could show nothing closer than a distant figure, and the transmission times throughout the day had been scheduled months before with no thought for the problems actually involved on the mountain. Eventually Hamish and I with our support teams leap-frogged up the ridge, each taking alternate transmissions, and selecting photogenic sites as we went to fit the schedule. We would work out the 'stage directions', brief the stars and tune in our equipment. A quick radio count-down and we were 'on'—for half an hour of physical agony, holding the camera steady and trying to make great pictures. But it worked.

We learnt a lot especially about the potentialities of radio cameras.

It was not spectacular television but then it was a dull route on a big and impressive mountain, and I feel it was good use of television as a medium.

And it had its funny side. One incident in particular stands out in my memory. At a Schwarzsee press conference we were quizzed on our best routes. We all came out with honest alpine answers except Davie Crabb who muttered something about the Cuillin winter traverse.

'Und vere is ze Coolin, Meester Krab?' asked a large German reporter.

'In Scotland, mon, God's own countree!'

'But vat do you zink of ze Alps, Meester Krab?'

'Och, mon, I suppose it's guid training for Scottish ice!'

During the winter we laid plans for another TV broadcast. The B.B.C. brass-hats had declared that it must be as spectacular as Kilnsey, and we decided that the obvious choice was a sea-cliff 'gripper'. The choice too seemed obvious—Cornwall. But it was not to be. Air time had been booked over the Easter weekend but the only Outside Broadcast unit free was a Birmingham one. They were scheduled for Aintree on Easter Monday and our broadcast was on Saturday. Union rules state that an O.B. crew may drive 173½ miles per day or something similar. We put a pair of compasses on Birmingham and drew a circle on the map. We could do a climb on the Norfolk coast perhaps . . . or in the Wash. There was the Mersey estuary . . . or . . . well . . . Anglesey? Chris Brasher, Rusty and myself went up to Holyhead on a reconnaissance. We looked at Craig Gogarth, then a largely virgin playground of the future, and rejected it as being invisible except from the sea. Eventually we wandered out to South Stack lighthouse, and it all dropped into place. We wouldn't televise a climb, we would climb a TV programme! And so Red Wall was born: a natural amphitheatre, visible to TV cameras from all angles and easily accessible, but then you must conjure up a climb on the virgin rock in the amphitheatre . . . if you can!

When news of the programme leaked through on the grape-vine, Joe Brown came over from his explorations on Gogarth to have a look at the wall we had chosen. He says that he looked it over and was sure that someone had been joking, for no one in his senses would want to climb that! Since the programme, Joe himself has put up two very hard routes on the wall. It just goes to show!

We planned a composite programme. First transmission would be a series of abseils down a steep rib for 300 ft. to the sea, then a crossing by rubber boat of the 60 ft. zawn to the base of a big isolated buttress. By the second transmission a tyrolean traverse would have been fixed across the zawn and the rest of the party and the radio camera would



*Photo: John Cleare (for THE OBSERVER and B.B.C. Television)*

THE OLD MAN OF HOY: RECONNAISSANCE FOR TELEVISION PROGRAMME. R. BAILLIE ON JUMARS ON THE EAST FACE (APRIL, 1967).

(No. 55)

follow; meanwhile the first team would start work on the final wall. For the last transmission all four climbers would be working up the 200 ft. Red Wall itself above the buttress—mixed free and artificial climbing. We chose a powerful international team: Joe Brown leading Mac-the-Telly on the first rope, then Royal Robbins, the Yosemite tiger, leading Tom Patey on the second. Mac can guarantee an epic struggle and Tom prefers vertical ice to rock, so it looked a well balanced outfit.

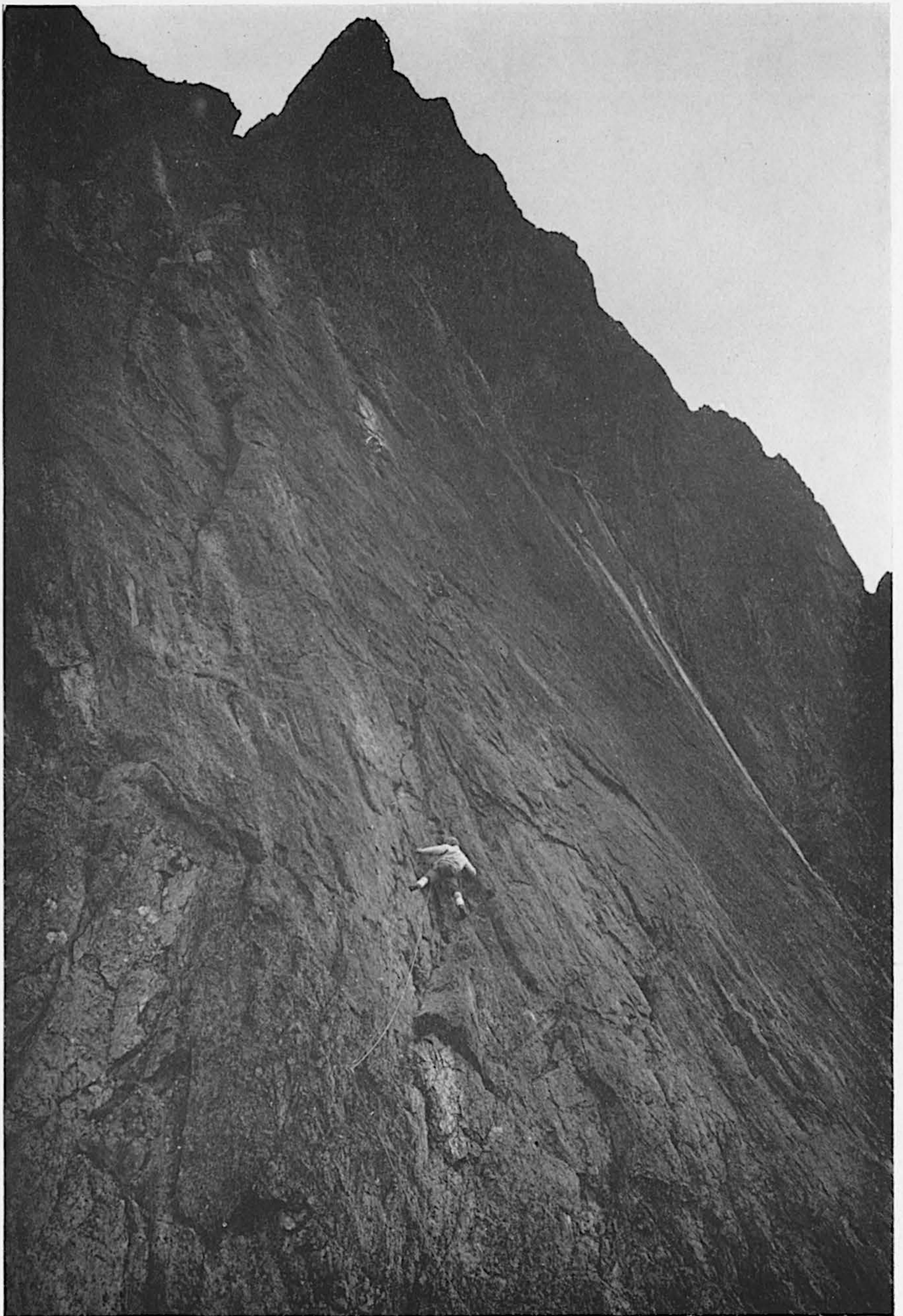
The idea was for the radio cameras, myself and Rusty, to accompany the climbers over their obstacle course. This had its moments. First during the recorded dress rehearsal, when half-way across the tyrolean traverse, actually transmitting pictures of the bouncing rope and my feet swinging seventy ft. above the raging waves, I turned upside down. 40 lb. of electronics on my back was too much for my centre of gravity and I had to be hauled back, very red in the face. The next was during the programme itself when after the first two climbers had descended I had to abseil, transmitting pictures while the second rope abseiled behind me. We had arranged it so that I was to be lowered through a *descendeur* at walking speed, leaving both hands free to operate the camera. In rehearsals this worked well, but on the day walking speed became a run, my feet slipped from under me and I slid all the way down. The camera took a belting from which it never completely recovered. Anyway, it proved good, light-hearted mountaineering, and the recorded tapes were even entered by the B.B.C. in the Cannes O.B. festival.

Next in the television series was, of course, The Old Man of Hoy. More than enough has been written of the climb already; suffice it to say that I think this is what television is all about, and the viewers have now become involved in the action. But the climb has left us with the problem of where do we go from there.

Needless to say very little of my work is television climbing, although climbing broadcasts are among my most interesting assignments, if only because from the planning stage one is 'in' on a big operation which is seen through to completion; and also we have been working in a largely experimental field. The techniques used with radio cameras are still in their infancy, and indeed the whole problem of the live televising of adventure sports is in an early stage of evolution.

I photograph almost everything, but much of my work involves pictorial coverage of big civil engineering projects. It can be very useful to be a climber sometimes, because photographers are not usually able to go as far as the spider-men themselves . . . or even further. My most interesting climbs of this sort have been on the giant suspension bridges, the Severn, the Forth and the Tagus. I have walked over all three rivers on the suspension cables—but there are occupational hazards.





*Photo: John Cleare (for THE OBSERVER)]*

PETER CREW ON THE GREAT WALL, CLOGWYN DU'R ARDDU.

(No. 56)

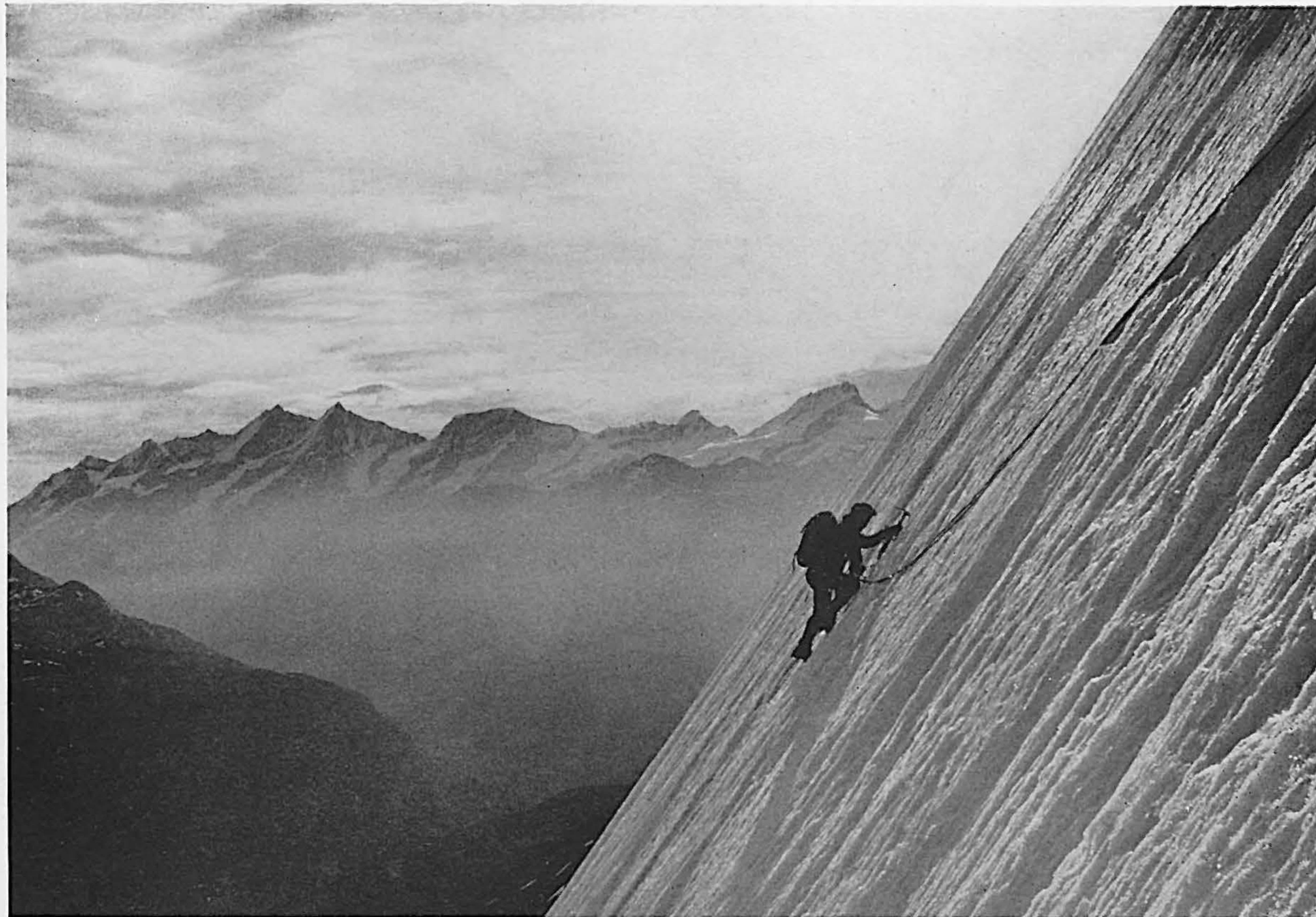
On the Forth I was changing a lens, fumbled and dropped it. It hit the round 18 in. diameter cable at my feet, balanced on the top and rolled off along it. My heart was in my mouth, £80 worth of lens, 400 ft. to fall and deep water. Ten feet along it rolled off the cable. But just there a thin wire guy supported the safety line and it stopped against it—in balance. I tip-toed down and rescued it. A professional must look on pictures as more important than equipment, the camera is only a tool to him, but it takes a lot of hard swallowing to accept the fact.

Other interesting assignments have been in tunnels. The Victoria underground line workings, for instance, are very like the worst kind of pot-hole—mud, steam and sweat. Only the thunder of the mechanical chisels seems different.

Many of my routine climbing assignments are for magazines and newspapers. The first colour supplement piece on climbing ever done was a story for the *Observer* on Peter Crew. I was working very closely with Pete at the time on my Snowdonia book, and when the editor suggested a piece on 'Joe Brown's successor' (not that he has one even now of course) Peter seemed the obvious choice. Al Alvarez was to write the story. But the big problem with any mountaineering assignment is the weather. Al could interview Pete in the pub, but I had two very wet weekends before my dead-line, and two 500-mile round trips to Wales. Eventually Pete soloed the first 50 ft. of Masters' Wall on Cloggy for me—a very stout effort, and repeated M.P.P. on Dinas Mot, one of his own gripping recent discoveries, with Al on the 'blunt end'. So I got my pictures and it made a powerful little feature.

Last year too both in Britain and the Alps the weather was frightful. Together with Hamish MacInnes, Ian Clough and his wife Niki, I spent three weeks sitting in Zermatt for one of the women's magazines waiting for the Matterhorn North face to clear. We had planned to do the first British ladies' ascent of the wall, but despite two attempts—the best of which took us as far as the top of the big ice-ramp—we never reached the top. Stone-fall and rapidly deteriorating weather turned us back. It can be frustrating, this game of photographing climbers; we might just as well have spent a sunny month on the Riviera.

February, 1967, saw me in the Cairngorms working with Tom Patey and journalist Peter Gillman on a story on Scottish ice climbing. Again days of frustration. Constant white-outs cut ten days' shooting time to one day, with two others on which I could use but not reload my cameras. I had worked out a system of pulling a big poly-bag over my head for re-loading in spindrift conditions, but when one is bridged on crampon points across a steep ice-gully it just doesn't work! We managed at last to rig most of the pictures by abseiling into photogenic



*Photo: John Cleare (for WOMEN'S MIRROR)]*

NORTH FACE OF THE MATTERHORN: IAN CLOUGH ON THE GREAT ICE-FIELD.

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places and by other tricks born of desperation, and the story is now scheduled for one of the 'glossies' in November.

An assignment the previous winter did not need good weather. I covered the annual S.C.P.R. Survival Course for one of the colour supplements. This course takes place annually at Glenmore Lodge in the Cairngorms, and its purpose is to teach advanced winter mountain safety to students ranging from mountain rescue team members to Service personnel. It was a highly concentrated course and covered such things as stretcher 'lowers' on iced-up crags, night search operations, radio techniques and avalanche rescue. Needless to say I joined in every exercise, even finding myself instructing on crevasse rescue, and ended up after the two-week course fantastically fit. The final three days we spent on a survival exercise on the Cairngorm high plateau, back-packing long distances by day, bivouacking as best we could by night. It was entertaining to spend the night in a snow-hole with a London bobby, a Liverpool prison warden and a lady physical training instructress.

I mentioned my book, *Rock Climbers in Action in Snowdonia*. This was a good example of the difficulties which publishers can heap upon you. Having been through my library they fondly imagined that I had a complete book hidden there, and we signed a contract in November for publication in the spring. I soon decided to start from scratch and asked Peter Crew and Bas Ingle to co-operate. I spent thirty-three weekends in Wales that year, and the book, completed at last, was in the publisher's hands by October. Through the winter we visited Tremadoc time and again, and by spring the Pass was sometimes in condition; when Rusty Baillie returned from Africa and could spend the odd fine Monday or Friday with me we really made headway. But Cloggy was the big problem. No book on Welsh climbing can be complete without a full chapter on this most awesome of Welsh crags. Every week-end Snowdon was wreathed in cloud and the cliff dripping and dank. The first break-through was when Pete climbed on Great Wall, for me, the second when Rusty, in pouring rain and stockinged feet, climbed the crux pitch of Carpet Slab on a ladder of jammed nuts, removing them as he went, to reach the photogenic series of moves. Above them he abseiled off. Eventually in the early autumn the weather broke fair on Snowdon and I roared up to the Pass three times in one week, between other assignments at home, to join Martin Boysen, Dave Potts and Dave Alcock on Cloggy for a final three climbs, White Slab, Troach and Pinnacle Arête. The only one actually completed was Troach, but we got our pictures—which is what it was all about really!

There are some, especially among the older generation of mountaineers, who frown on professional climbers. Is it degrading the 'sport'

(although many of the younger lads would consider it a 'way of life') to make money from it? Is it 'on' to publicise climbing for personal gain? What of commercial undertakings such as the Eiger Direct?

In this context I must consider myself as a fringe professional and answer, like all mountaineers, that we climb because we enjoy climbing, I for one enjoy taking photographs—otherwise I wouldn't have devoted my life to doing it. If I can do both at the same time, then I've knocked off two summits at one attempt . . . and kept fit into the bargain. Seriously though, in these days of 'adventure sports' and mass public leisure it is better for us to explain our sport to the general public, than for certain sensation-seizing press-men to do it for us. John Public will demand the explanation in any case.