CAMBRIDGE ON PUMASILLO

By JOHN H. LONGLAND

WHILE all great actresses have to be born in a Green Room trunk, there seems to be no traditional place for the birth of a mountaineering venture. Ours did not see the light on an August ascent of the Finsteraarhorn or on the agenda of an august committee, instead (perhaps new evidence of the depths plumbed by today's undergraduate) our expedition started in a bar—in defence, it was a special bar at the special occasion of the Welsh Dinner of the Climbers' Club. Here two projects were merged and, because of a composition with an educational majority like certain pre-war Everest expeditions, the end result was the 'Cambridge Andean Expedition 1957'—our Dublin member had his 'Peru Users Association' and 'United Universities Organisation' regretfully turned down in spite of their admirable topicality.

Once we had taken our first decision—the usual one to print the notepaper—things ran their normal uneven expeditionary course with ration lists, arguments over tents and boots, shipping and book contracts, and a generous and heartening grant from the Everest Foundation. Certain high-lights stand out from the months that swelled our hopes (and files), such as the letter in which Sir John Hunt consented to be our Patron and greatly helped us in our problem of getting an expedition with an average age of twenty-two taken seriously; the terms in which one of us refused to climb trailing fifty feet of red avalanche cord; or the occasion when, accidentally, we were all in red sweaters or anoraks on a Llanberis cliff and a spectator on the road asked our latest riser, 'I say, who are the team in red up there?'

Late in May we started with Mike Gravina, Harry Carslake, Ronnie Wathen and Kim Meldrum, sailing from Liverpool to the optimistic call of 'See you in Base Camp'. In June, after Tripos, Simon Clark and I followed almost too quickly by air. By then the advance party had grown to five with the addition of Colin Darbyshire of Lima, who had been on a British expedition the previous year and whose perfect Spanish and string of friends along our route were of invaluable help.

Our main objective was Pumasillo in the Cordillera Vilcabamba, at 20,300 ft. claiming some notoriety as probably the highest virgin peak outside Asia, which had been an aim of several parties, including the 1956 British Huagaruncho team. George Band, of this latter party, had suggested the peak to us and generously put his information and

theories at our disposal. The first problem was access for a mule-train, and we learnt that this was impossible from the west or east, while for climbing, the best bet appeared to be the West ridge, which rises from what we later called the 'Basin'. George thought that the Basin drained south and that entry might be possible from that quarter, or perhaps from the north, as he suspected that the Basin was a through valley.

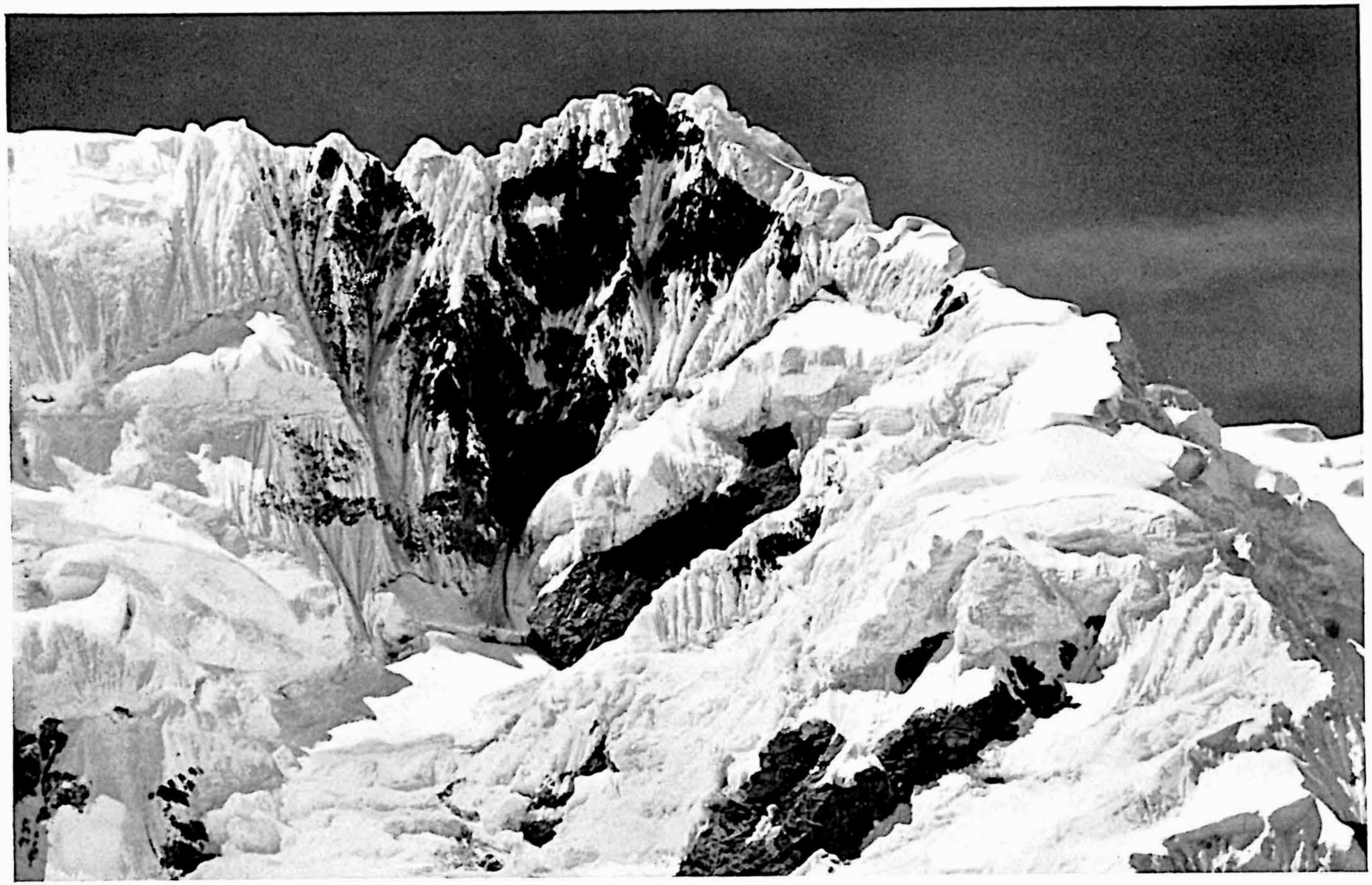
In June the advance party had got all the kit as near as possible, by rail and road, to the village of Santa Maria in the Urubamba valley, and were working on a series of reconnaissances from the head of the Vilcabamba valley, some forty miles west, and probing the defences of the mountain. Simon and I arrived at Santa Maria near the end of the month to find Colin and the kit there, with a contract for twenty-two mules for the next day. Late that evening Ronnie arrived from Huancacalle, at the head of the Vilcabamba, and gave us the latest news. Harry and a sick Mike were a day behind him, and Kim was circling the range to look at the southern approaches, having separated from Mike when low on food so that one of the pair could complete the job and the other return in a long, hungry march to Huancacalle. Kim could be expected down in a few days by a southern valley into the Urubamba. The party had made its first Peruvian *première*, decided that the Basin was impossible for mules from the north and reached its lip from the west, opposite Pumasillo at a point we called George's Col after the British visit of the year before. Huancacalle seemed to be the best base for these operations, and so next day Colin, Simon and I, with the indefatigable Harry retracing his steps after less than an hour's rest, set off through the jungle with the mules. The sweltering track was a strong contrast to that which we knew was coming above, but for the while we followed along through a world of creepers, humming-birds and gaudy parrots. At night we bivouacked beside an Indian's thatch-and-plank hut surrounded by a myriad of strange noises, fascinated by fire-flies and well bitten by enough insects to have given a field-day to any entomologist.

Another day and a half's march brought us to Huancacalle at 10,000 ft., where the jungle had given way to sierra, and sheep and cattle pastures took the place of sugar-fields and banana groves. Rather to our surprise we were met here by Kim, who had been unable to discover a way into the Basin from the south or find a path to take him round the range. I sent down a note to Mike and Ronnie telling them of this, but unfortunately it was stolen and sold to a newspaper and thus failed to avert Kim's reported loss, which caused much anxiety of which we were unaware until a month later.

With all the food and equipment at the village we could now make a recce in force, and decided to try and enter the Basin by George's Col and then find a path out from the inside. With five days' food, and full

climbing and bivouac equipment, the five of us set off up a valley closed by the lip of the Basin, and as the Andean night fell at 6 p.m. with its usual tropical lack of twilight reached ' The Lupins '. This site had been used earlier by a recce party, and two beds of cut lupins and a lake within a few yards made it a good one. Next morning we left when the sun hit us and soon were cramponing up the right side of the glacier leading to the col. A thousand feet took us to a subsidiary ridge of easy angle, where Simon and I, still less than ten days from London (and needing no reminding), were passed by the fitter rope of Kim, Harry and Colin. Happy to be out from under our heavy packs, we lunched on the col at 17,000 ft., gazing at Pumasillo and the West ridge across the way. Only allowed twelve hours of light in the Andes, we roped as a five and set off quickly down the unknown glacier. After one blind-alley in the ice-fall, we found a chute over to the left and night caught us on the snout. In the descent I was very struck by the strength of flimsy crevasse bridges and the impossible steepness at which powder snow was stable (by alpine standards). We bivouacked at the ' Terrace ' on the moraine and on the following morning lay long in our sacks —our eyes glued to the peak in front of us.

From the col the Basin had looked at least 4,000 ft. deep, but as we set off down we suddenly saw an enormous cow below us that would have rivalled the Horse of Troy for size unless the valley was much shallower. In fact we hit the bottom at 15,000 ft., selected a Base Camp site less than 6,000 ft. from the top of our mountain and slept out on wonderfully springy grass. Simon and Kim left downhill to look for a southern exit, and Harry, Colin and I went up to cross the ' North Col ' —if there was no route fit for mules in the south, we were considering carrying kit into the Basin on our own backs from the north and wanted to find the best route. We climbed up the only gentle and smooth glacier that I have seen in Peru, skirted one ice-fall, went jumping and scrambling through another, and eventually reached a col behind a fine peak of 18,700 ft. We attempted to traverse the rim of the Basin to the true North Col but were brought to a halt by the enemy of Andean climbers—south-facing snow. Even the very tall Harry was nearly out of his depth floundering around in a mess of soft, wet snow, and so we went back to try and cross the first col. Harry led off down through a small cornice and onto a steep 200 ft. slope of snow and ice, and while I was belaying Colin the whole crest of the ridge gave a heart-rending groan, but luckily nothing more. Two pitches of step-cutting, the angle eased, and we raced gaily down the glacier arguing about ways off it. At the snout it became very broken, but after several false leads I found a nasty exit at the left edge menaced by stone-fall—once more we took off crampons in the dark and found water and flat ground on the cold moraine.



PUMASILLO: WEST FACE AND (*right*) THE RIDGE CLIMBED.

[*To face p.* 14.

In the morning we returned to Huancacalle and in the evening were joined by Kim and Simon, who had found a path from the Basin to the main pass over the range (one valley west of ' The Lupins ') and described the route as ' difficult, but justifiable ' for mules. Ronnie and Mike at this stage were looking for Kim, but rejoined us on July 7, having also solved the problem of the Basin in their search, and for the first time all seven of us were together. We contracted mules for the 13th and spent our time repacking, working out loads in 75-lb. pairs and making great friends with the village. Also, some of us visited some almost unknown Inca ruins close by and might easily have been diverted to looking for the Lost City if there had not been a view of snowy peaks from our house to remind us of our official purpose in the area.

Mike, Harry and Ronnie left to explore the country east of Pumasillo and enter the Basin by the true North Col, and the next day the rest of us left with a dozen mules for the southern route. Normally we outpaced our mules with little trouble, but with good packs we got sadly left behind going up the Inca road towards the ancient pass of Choquetacarpo and lost them in the clouds of a rainstorm. Damp, tired and cross, we decided that the mules could not get over the pass that day and found ourselves a deserted hut for the night, where we spent an uncomfortable time watching the rain, calling the place Old Trafford. The mules had the food; we, only ten eggs and a few oranges and no cooking equipment; roasting eggs, thinking ourselves resourceful, we must have done something wrong for we had two formidable explosions.

An early start took us over the pass. The rain had been snow at 15,000 ft., and we found our mules, and the food, marvellously on the other side. Simon heroically volunteered to go on with them at once while Kim and I stayed with Colin, who was far from well. Actually we were well out of it, and Simon had the thankless task of persuading our muleteer, Cesar, that his beasts could easily make the journey, even if it was their worst ever and he would not have come if he had known the route. It was a wonderful piece of route-finding. From the pass down the Inca road into jungle; up past the Peons Hut (burnt down by two of us) to cross the Peons Col; down into the forty-minute valley and up to Clark's Col; down to the Huts and swing north through the gorge into the Basin and Base Camp. Simon and his mules met the northern party on the 15th and we straggled in the next day to find order rising out of chaos to make Base Camp—promptly named PYG.

This marked the end of a phase of our work. Behind us were the days when a Vibram print on a path was a thrill that led to great speculation as to which of us had passed that way and when; we had finished with hasty notes found tucked into Inca walls; and for the first time we were using tents instead of Indian huts or, more usually, happy bivouacs

wherever we happened to run out of daylight. Now things could (and had) to be done on a more orderly basis, and being without porters we were no longer dependent on the vagaries of Indian helpers.

PYG lay in a little sheltered, but unfortunately shady, alp enclosed by the horse-shoe moraine of the West glacier, which rises to run into the base of the West ridge. Where moraine and ridge meet, there is a little terrace and then a steep rock buttress, which we planned to by-pass through the ice-fall of the glacier, on the left. The day after our arrival at PYG a party left up the moraine and carried a camp to the foot of the buttress, while Mike and Simon went into the ice-fall and succeeded in regaining the ridge above the buttress at about 17,000 ft. Being up the hill and round the corner from PYG this camp was called PYP (16,200 ft.), and after losing a day in a snowstorm Kim and I became first residents on July 19, while above us Harry and Ronnie pushed the route up another thousand feet, put up Camp 1 at 18,100 ft. and descended to PYG.

Next day we were off early with the sun, gained the ice through a heap of debris from some leaning séracs and threaded our way up a series of gangways and walls. Soon we reached a large crevasse, Simon's Horror, descended onto an icy bridge and climbed out over what had been a small overhang—later this place was given our first alloy stave and handline. We traversed diagonally right and celebrated the ridge with a cigarette. Above came a steepish arête and Harry's Horror, a cornice that he had outflanked by an exposed traverse right. We put in an ice-piton, but later the cornice was cut away and given a fixed rope. Here the route left the ridge again for the ice-fall and we zig-zagged about until suddenly in a little hollow we came on the lonely green Meade that was Camp 1. Behind it rose the probable crux of the climb, the ' Bulge ', where a vertically-sided dome of snow sat astride the steep and horribly corniced ridge.

We had several theories on how to climb the Bulge. The obvious one was to climb the ridge and take the dome direct or turn it on one side. Alternatively, on our, north, side of the ridge a set of steep ice flutings formed the flank of the ridge and the longest of these led to the junction of ridge and dome. Using several pitons, Kim and I climbed a vertical wall behind the tent onto the ridge and Kim made about thirty feet up it. This was ample to convince us that the ridge, though climbable, was not going to be possible for laden men establishing Camp 2. We also saw that the dome was not turnable on the far (right) side, reserved our judgment on the direct route, and put our money on a gangway to the left from the top of the flutings, which looked straightforward, but dangerously menaced by wind-slab on the dome.

Next day we planned to try this, but I woke up with a splitting headache and double vision—probably due to a surfeit of photography

with snow-goggles off—and we had to descend, as we knew that the others were coming up and we would be short of tents. Low down in the ice-fall, just as we were gathering ourselves up from careless, very safe, but independent spills down a snow groove, we met the whole expedition, including a recovered Colin, coming up with heavy loads. Caching his sack, Colin came back down with us, giving us welcome breaks for his filming as we went. In the evening from PYP we watched the tiny figures of Mike and Simon climb the fluting to the foot of the dome. As the sun sank and sent us scrambling for our duvets, we howled unintelligible greetings back and forth over two and a half thousand feet, thinking wrongly that the Bulge was solved.

In the morning Kim and Colin loaded to Camp 2 while I went down to PYG to find Harry's camera and fetch some cine film for Colin. Back at PYP I saw four little dots go up the fluting and spend most of the day on the next 20 ft. Uncomfortably late, a yellow pair of wind-proof trousers (Mike) scurried over the dome and in the sunset two dots started quickly to descend the fluting—just how quickly I learnt later. This meant that the way to Camp 2 was open, with, presumably, Mike and Simon making an attempt for the top tomorrow, and so clearly our place was in support at Camp 1.

We rose early at PYP and as we sorted out loads were well rewarded by a glimpse of two little dots moving quickly up the ridge some thousand feet above the Bulge (and thus only five hundred from the top) at the point where we thought that a line of séracs would force a party off to the left to the South face—here easing off a bit but still with bad snow, we feared. As we watched, they left the ridge for the other side and I came back from a rather dreamy world with a jolt to pick up my load. The weather was continuing in a fine spell and I was glad for the summit pair, though for my own part I cursed it as we sweated up through the ice-fall. At Camp 1 we met Ronnie and Harry immobilised by the former having sprained an ankle in a slide down the fluting. Caught by fast-fading light, the pair had decided to descend unroped rather than retrieve a jammed abseil rope. Night had come down rather too quickly for Ronnie as he forgot to remove his goggles and in the darkness he had slipped from a step and gone down close on 300 ft., including the formidable bergschrund.

At this stage a decision on logistics had to be taken, as food was low. We had enough for three more days high on the mountain, which was just enough for two more assaults if the weather held; irrespective of the result of the first, we planned for two more assaults as we had a watchword of ' all to the top '. We had a little food at PYP, but for continued work on the peak a trip to PYG would be required. Harry was for going down at once for supplies, but after hearing of the difficulty of the section between us and Camp 2 I wanted to keep the

party intact for support and was prepared to take a chance on the weather. Also, with Ronnie out of action for a day or two, we reshuffled climbing parties and I joined Harry to make the second assault.

At sunset (July 23) the gathering suspense was broken by the red windproof suit that meant Simon atop the Bulge to shout news of success. Communications were necessarily bad, but in response to our jubilant congratulations we made out a ' . . . bloody fantastic . . .' and went to bed in a state of high excitement.

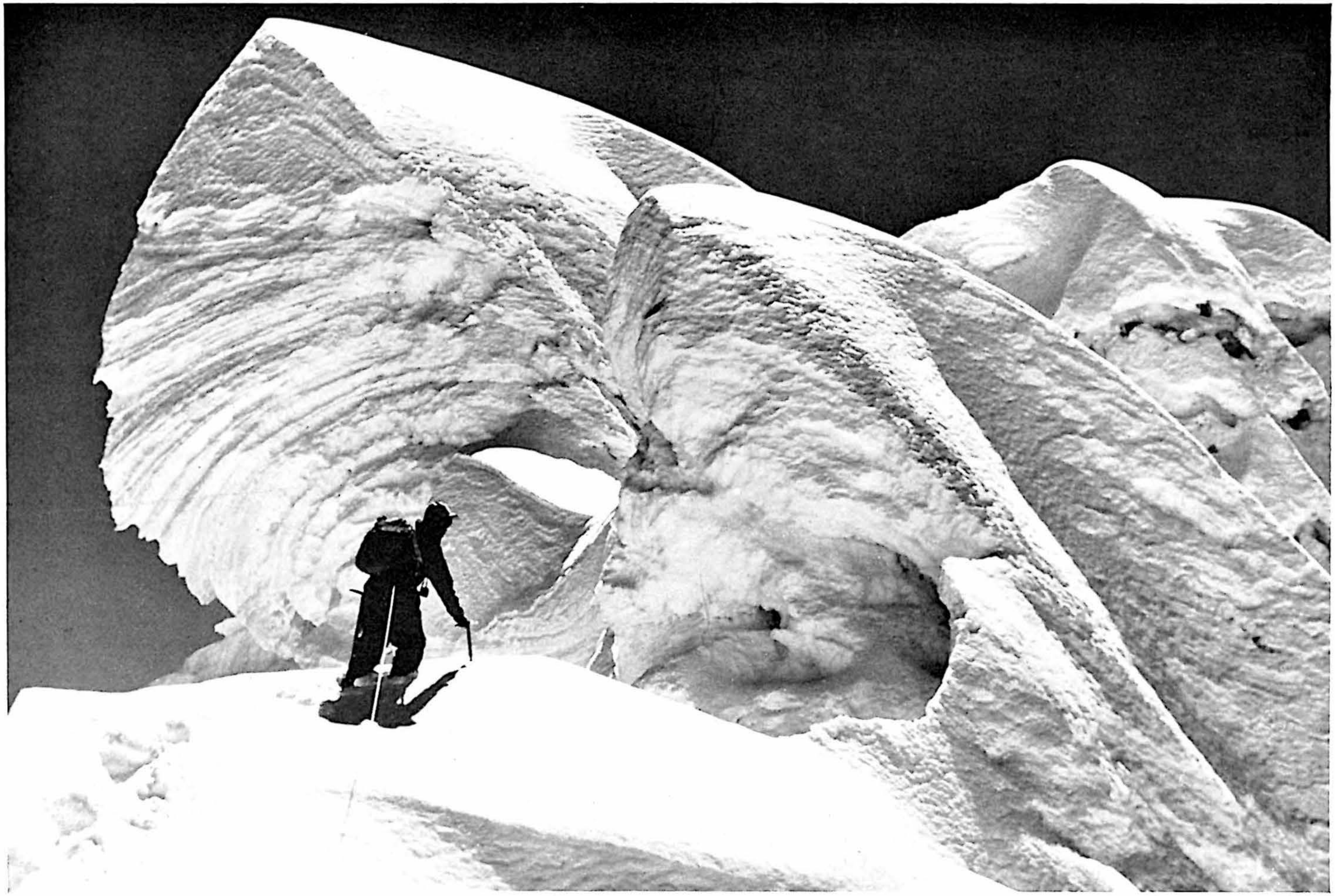
Next day Harry and I led off, to be followed by Kim and Colin with staves and hemp ropes, intending to ease the route by opening the gangway round the dome. However, as I stepped round from the bridge over the schrund into the fluting, I found that the reportedly gigantic steps had vanished after two days of sun. There was nothing for it but to start from the beginning again. I cut up for 80 ft. of the 50-degree ice, found a piton and cut a stance. Harry came up and through, cutting 100 ft. up a rib of snow—of course, all the debris hit me, and I have a theory that when chunks of hard snow begin to actually whistle in the air it is my turn. Just as I was about to stop complaining and issue an ultimatum, Harry reached a ledge, put in a piton and I came up. As I neared him the beaming, dirty face of Mike appeared at the top of the groove. He fixed the top of the dangling abseil rope, Harry made the 20 ft. to its end and we came up quickly with a hand-rail. Scrapping the gangway plan, we sent up to Mike on the rope a stave and 200 ft. of hemp (with one of those tangles that climbers have but do not advertise). He passed these on to Simon above the dome, to fix permanently. Soon Simon descended and all four of us were together at the top of the fluting. Harry went on up the fixed rope and then I had my turn on Simon's magnificent lead of two days before.

The fluting was capped by a leaning sérac on the ridge, and he had climbed an overhanging ice chimney between this and the base of the dome. The climbing had been artificial and the place was festooned with pitons, each daintily dangling an étrier—small wonder this pitch had taken the best part of a day to climb. To the clatter of pitons being placed below for fixed ropes, I cross-questioned the pair on the summit climb, perched precariously with Simon on the back of the flimsy sérac. Then with a cry from Harry and a ' Good Luck ' from below, I went on up. As a lead, the dome ranks with the overhang below it. First a traverse along a finger of undercut snow leads into the vertical wall of the dome. Why the finger stays there is a glaciologist's puzzle, but how a wall can consist of vertical porridge-like snow and not slide, let alone with a climber on it, seems a greater mystery. Still it did not move, and I floundered up the trough up which Simon had originally swum trying to outpace the downward flow as he went. At 150 ft. the

angle eases back and I found Harry proudly adding to the security of the 3-ft. stave by standing on it. Five minutes higher; and there was the yellow tent on the backbone of the ridge, unsheltered but unmenaced. The weather was still good and we had a glorious sunset, but for the first time a strong wind got up on the mountain.

A good night's sleep ended at dawn. In the intense cold of the Andes a start before the sun is falsely heroic and the climber has to make do with a twelve-hour day—the tropical latitude means a long night and no saving twilight for miscalculators. After the argument that Harry and I always have about the necessity of breakfast—this time I could not fret for long as he had his porridge raw and forwent cooking anything except drinks—we were off up the ridge. Initially, from the 18,900 ft. of Camp 2 it is straightforward, borne out by the fact that we did the first thousand feet in under the hour. Then we left the ridge for the face on the right and traversed below a wall of a pock-marked mixture of ice and slush, until we found a steepish shallow groove. In the shade now, and foolishly gloveless, I bridged and wallowed up for 60 ft. to find a piton and marks of abseil lines. My fingers were alarmingly white and insensitive, and it was some time before I could mark the piton with a short bit of red sisal avalanche line—we had taken the beastly stuff after all, but even I concede that it was useful for tying up boxes and marking snow with a red stain. Above the wall we climbed along and up a series of shelves until, a very few hundred feet below the summit, a steep slope took us onto the South ridge, the backbone of the massif.

I gingerly peered over the knife-edge and could look straight down for over 4,000 ft. of East face—my sympathy went out to the 1956 North American party that had come from this side; below us now, but over the Andean publicity-level of 6,000 m., was their peak of Lasunayoc. Our route lay in the other direction where the first pair had left a trail of devastation behind them. Blades of snow had been felled like trees to leave narrow, airy walks, cornices sculpted, and towers of snow and ice had had their tops lopped off. Never have I seen such cornices as we steeple-chased along. At one point I was tip-toeing over a cornice and, looking right, could see the left-hand face through a series of cracks and holes—though I hasten to excuse this apparent lack of caution with the stability of Andean snow formations and the fact that to traverse below the holes would have meant cutting hand and footholds. After about 300 ft. of this we came to an enormous 'Egg' of a cornice some 20 ft. thick, balanced on the narrow arête, which we had thought to be the summit of the peak. I followed the steep, deeply etched trail up the soft Egg, and on top Harry and I were doing all the proper things with lemonade and Kendal Mint cake at the traditional hour of 11.15 a.m.



PUMASILLO: 'THE EGG', SEEN ALONG THE SUMMIT RIDGE. (S. G. M. CLARK IN FOREGROUND.)

Beyond the Egg was another precarious cornice, followed by a 30-ft. drop into a steep-sided gap before a 60-ft. rocky pinnacle that was the summit of Pumasillo. After sunning ourselves, eating, and for my part using all the camera ploys that I know, for about an hour, Harry gathered his will-power and made the remark that I had been dreading about climbing the damn thing. Reluctantly I agreed and we climbed onto the ultimate cornice and fiddled with the rope on 5 ft. of snow and then an awful lot of space below us. Using Harry's axe, like him, large of its kind, as a belay, I more or less abseiled into the gap and then climbed up the only rocks of the ascent—making all the noise that a second man fears as my crampons scraped on their holds. Even at this stage we got our money's worth in the form of a small enough, but formidable at 20,300 ft., overhang. Ten feet of a pointed cone of snow and I was on the finest and most gratifying summit that I have ever been lucky enough to reach. A quick cigarette; photographs; a string of flags; and that was that.

I scurried back to the gap, cursed my way hand over hand up the rope and belayed Harry as he frightened me with his scrapings; posed; and, like me, paused only to collect some ' Summit Rock '. Then we were off, tired now and doubly careful, making good time as we knew the third party would be at Camp 2 and we would have to reach Camp 1 for the night. We were met with welcome drinks, and then we were off down again after wishing them ' Good luck ' and, unkindly, ' Good-night '; they were three in a two-man tent. At the ice-stave we unroped for uncomplicated speed as we had very little light left in hand, and quickly went down the fixed ropes, now continuous for 800 ft. to below the bergschrund.

Next day, as Harry and I descended and Mike and Simon came up again in support, our success was completed when the third rope of Ronnie, Kim and Colin reached the top and came safely back. Then came a general evacuation of the mountain, leaving only a few pitons and a lot of excusable rubbish. Sunday, July 28, Peru's big fiesta in honour of their Declaration of Independence, though we did not remember until later, found us busily hunting and cooking at PYG for a victory feast. We shot some local squirrel-tail rabbits and cooked them successfully to the pressure-cooker recipe book's jugged hare; curried sardines, and concocted a weird but potent fruit-cup.

Before separating to climb one more mountain and map and explore the range, we had a week of inactivity recovering from the climb (and the banquet), writing letters and articles, and cabled the news to our Patron in words that try to sum up the whole exploit:

' All up, all down, all well. Pumasillo.'