EIGERWAND, 1962

By IAN CLOUGH

We arrived, panting and sweating, at a low, shallow cave with a sandy floor. It would be dark in an hour and we could both lie here comfortably so we settled ourselves in to bivouack below the Difficult Crack. The sudden decision, the rushing round trying to borrow money for the fare, the early morning train drawing out of Chamonix Station, all seemed a long way away now. The wall had looked black and dry as the train had rounded the last bend to Grindelwald and we had known that the journey had been worth while; conditions were very favourable. I remembered the girl in the bookshop, where we had copied the description from the back of Heinrich Harrer's book, trying to dissuade us with stories of the most recent fatalities, the look in the blacksmith's eyes as he had sharpened our claws, the bloodstains on the lower rocks where the fall of a solitary Austrian climber had been halted, the moments of doubt and indecision. But we were here now, on the Eiger's North Wall, happy and confident, with four days of fine weather ahead if the Zürich forecasters were correct.

Two small figures had been scurrying up the wall behind us. Like ourselves they wore crash helmets and carried bulging rucksacks on their backs. Now the first climbed the old fixed rope to the ledge near us. He introduced himself as an Austrian—Moderegger. Then his companion arrived: 'Hello'—we were surprised to hear English—'I'm Tom Carruthers'. We talked for a while. Tom's Scottish friends hadn't wanted to come on the wall and he had met the Austrian at Alpiglen, the little mountain hotel at the foot of the wall. 'What has he done?' we asked cautiously. 'He's been in the Caucasus,' Tom replied. I pictured Moderegger on a Caucasian coach tour. We didn't like it: a chance companion, experience doubtful, barely able to make themselves understood! It seemed foolhardy in the extreme. Still, they weren't our responsibility. We agreed that, should we all move at the same speed, it would be pleasant to have company, it would be a mutual morale booster against the frightening, cruel vastness of this notorious wall. The other pair went to bivouack round the corner. We cooked and ate a huge meal. Our sacks were too heavy, they must have weighed forty pounds but felt like eighty as we had staggered up the thousand feet of scree and broken walls that evening,

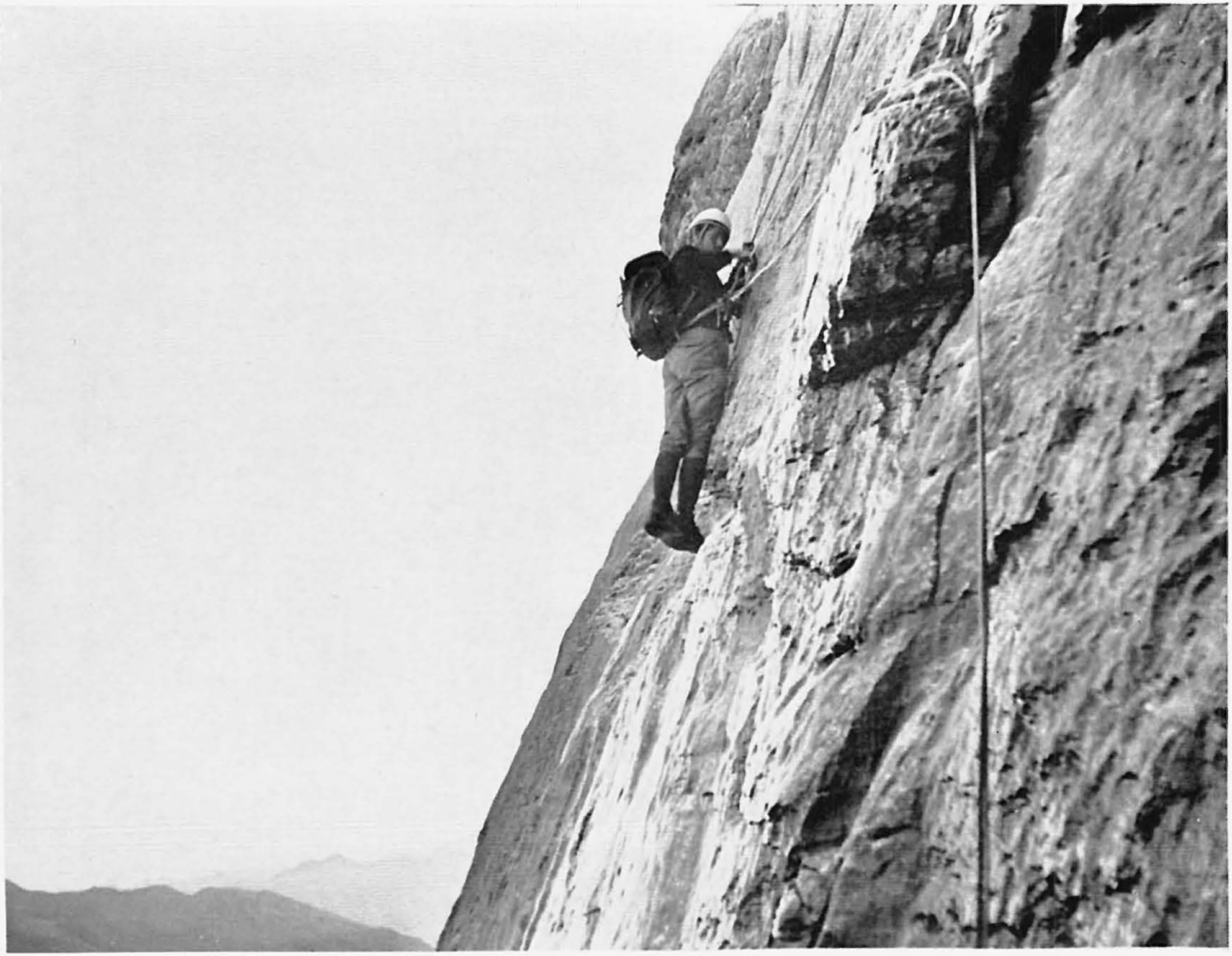

Photo: Ian Clough]

EIGERWAND: BONINGTON ON THE HINTERSTOISSER TRAVERSE

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but now they were much lighter. We dressed in our down clothing and were soon asleep on our little sandy ledge, reassured that we were well nailed on. It was already a long way down.

Chris was shaking me. He was impatient to get away for it was late —5 a.m.! A hasty breakfast, then away. Carruthers and the Austrian were just behind us as we scurried up the Difficult Crack but they didn't keep up with us. We moved quickly together, along a fault of ledges and easy pitches below a great yellow overhanging wall, to the Hinterstoisser. There were several ropes across this rubicon of the old days and we were soon over the traverse, past the overhang of the Swallow's Nest bivouac, and climbing up what should have been the First Ice-field. But the ice had receded and we were able to climb the rock beside it. We reached a steep step, the Ice Hose. Now we really began to appreciate just how good conditions were, for the Hose was a straightforward rock climb. Above us, bands of rock were showing bare beneath the Second Ice-field. Using these, connecting them by little verglassed ribs sticking up out of the ice, we trended leftwards until we were under the great, glassy, smooth sweep of the main part of the Second Ice-field. 'Whatever happens here, don't look up', Chris called, drawing on the experience of his previous attempts on the wall with Don Whillans. Over a thousand feet above us, above a great vertical wall, was the mouth of the White Spider which usually belches forth debris from the upper part of the face. We were now entering the most dangerous area on the face; the zone of heaviest bombardment. I tried to make myself as small a target as possible, receding into my crash helmet as a frightened tortoise does into his shell. But the Ogre was frozen into stillness this morning. Not a stone fell.

There was no snow overlying the ice and crampons tended to scart off the tough surface. We decided to go directly up the ice-field to its upper lip. If we went diagonally across, as one normally does, we would have to cut countless steps in the hard blue ice. It would take hours and the mountain's artillery might have opened up before we were clear. By going straight up we could use our crampons to better advantage. We moved off; crampons crashing, pick and dagger thrashing, only a quarter of an inch into the ice; teetering in precarious balance until a great bucket was beaten out and a security spike hammered in. We kept pitches short because our straining calves tired quickly and also because it was safer. One couldn't hope to hold a long fall. Using ice-pegs and screws for belays, cutting small nicks to rest on between quick staccato crampon moves, leading alternately, we proceeded rapidly and in comparative safety. But security on ice is only make-believe, and nerves as well as muscles were taut as we stabbed our way upwards. The angle wasn't that steep, about the same as a house roof, but the way the smooth giant of the slope plunged

Photo: Ian Clough]

EIGERWAND: SECOND ICE-FIELD

Photo: Ian Clough]

APPROACHING THE UPPER EDGE OF THE SECOND ICE-FIELD

away beneath us to the meadows was awe-inspiring. It was a relief to be nearing the upper rim.

As I stood in the bucket step, protecting Chris's advance, I was able to look around me for the first time that day. From the foot of the wall a great dark pyramid, the shadow of the Eiger, reached out across the meadows to the tourist hotel of Kleine Scheidegg. The rubber-necks and pressmen would be enjoying their breakfasts. Later they would come to peer through the telescopes, to enjoy the free entertainment. Were we actors in some drama, gladiators in the arena? A long, low, plaintive note rang clear over the meadows and echoed across the wall. An alpenhorn. The old man whose daily task it was to play it for the benefit of the tourists was in position on his hillock. At first the sound was comforting, but as the day wore on, its repetitiveness became wearisome and irritating.

The upper rim went easily, sometimes providing a gangway to walk along, at other times giving a sharp edge for the hands. We tried to leave the ice-field too early but, quickly realising our error, abseiled back and continued the long traverse. A steep little rock buttress took us up onto the flank of the Flatiron, the ridge which separates the Second and Third Ice-fields. We were high on the face now, going well. It wouldn't be long before we were clear of stonefall danger, before we reached the safety of the Ramp.

Down below us was a ledge cut from the ice, scattered with equipment. It was a grim reminder that the Eiger was not always in such a benevolent mood as it was this morning. For Chris particularly, it conjured up bitter memories . . . memories of the tragedy of the previous month when the Ogre had claimed his first British victim: the sickening sight of a body falling; the hours of cutting across an ice-field which, with a hail of stones falling, seemed more like a battleground; the weary, semi-delirious fellow countryman they had nursed back down the wall as the stones fell and the storm broke. It was an experience that he and Don Whillans would never forget.

Morbid thoughts were quickly dismissed; one's whole being had to be concentrated on the present. We reached the crest of the Flatiron and scrambled up to the overhang of the Death Bivouac. Glancing back over the Second Ice-field we saw two black dots, Tom Carruthers and Moderegger, hardly moving, at the foot of the ice-field and inching their way *diagonally* across it. We were worried by their mistake but they were too far away for us to shout advice and we had yet to get ourselves out of the danger zone.

The Third Ice-field is the steepest and has to be crossed more or less horizontally to the start of the Ramp, a steep gangway which provides the only break in a 500-ft. leaning yellow wall. We slashed big steps and at one point saved time by making a long tension traverse from an

ice-peg. The Ramp itself gave steep climbing reminiscent of the Dolomites. The rock was comparatively sound. We were glad, for this was technically the most difficult part of the climb. We enjoyed being on rock again. This didn't seem at all like the ferocious Eigerwand we had read about, it was just another great climb. But, on some of the stances were tattered remnants of polythene, occasionally a rusty can; some of our predecessors had had a hard time.

Wispy clouds, which had slowly been forming down at the base of the wall, drifted up over the face like a shroud, hiding us from the prying telescopes and baffling the sound of the alpenhorn.

We arrived at the Waterfall Pitch where the Ramp steepens to a shallow corner chimney. This is often, as its name implies, the most unpleasant pitch on the climb—icy water gushing down one's neck and sleeves makes a poor prelude to a bivouac. Today there was no water pouring down the corner, but a thin veneer of verglas covered all the holds. It gave one of the hardest pitches on the climb; inch upwards, scratch the ice from the next tiny hold; inch, balance, scratch, reach carefully and clip into a rusty old peg. Once or twice a foot would skid off its slippery wrinkle giving a tense moment for the second man but the leader was too absorbed in the next move to worry. After another section of clean, dry rock we came to the Ice Bulge. It was a short chimney with verglas on one wall and thick, bulging, blue ice on the other. We climbed it back-and-foot. Now we were in a funnel of ice which led up to an amphitheatre of steep buttresses which lost themselves in the mist. It was cold. Another rope move from an ice-peg saved time and laborious step-cutting and landed us on a gentle rock rib beside the ice-funnel. We climbed upwards, wondering where the start of the Traverse of the Gods was. We must be near it now. Then we heard muffled voices. The mists thinned for an instant and we saw, on the precipitous skyline on our right, a horizontal step. On it we could distinguish two small figures. We cut steps across the upper edge of the amphitheatre, traversed a crumbling ledge and by a steep crack gained the ledge on the arête.

Sitting there were two grinning Swiss. They introduced themselves as Jenny and Hauser. Although it was now only five o'clock they were going to bivouack as one of them had been hit by a stone, but they didn't need any assistance. They were going slowly; they had spent the previous night, their second bivouac, in the Ramp. We decided to press on since we still felt quite fresh and there were a few hours of daylight remaining. With luck we might even make the summit that night.

The Traverse of the Gods, a series of broad but outward sloping scree-covered ledges, was almost clear of snow and we followed it easily towards the centre of the face, towards the White Spider. As we

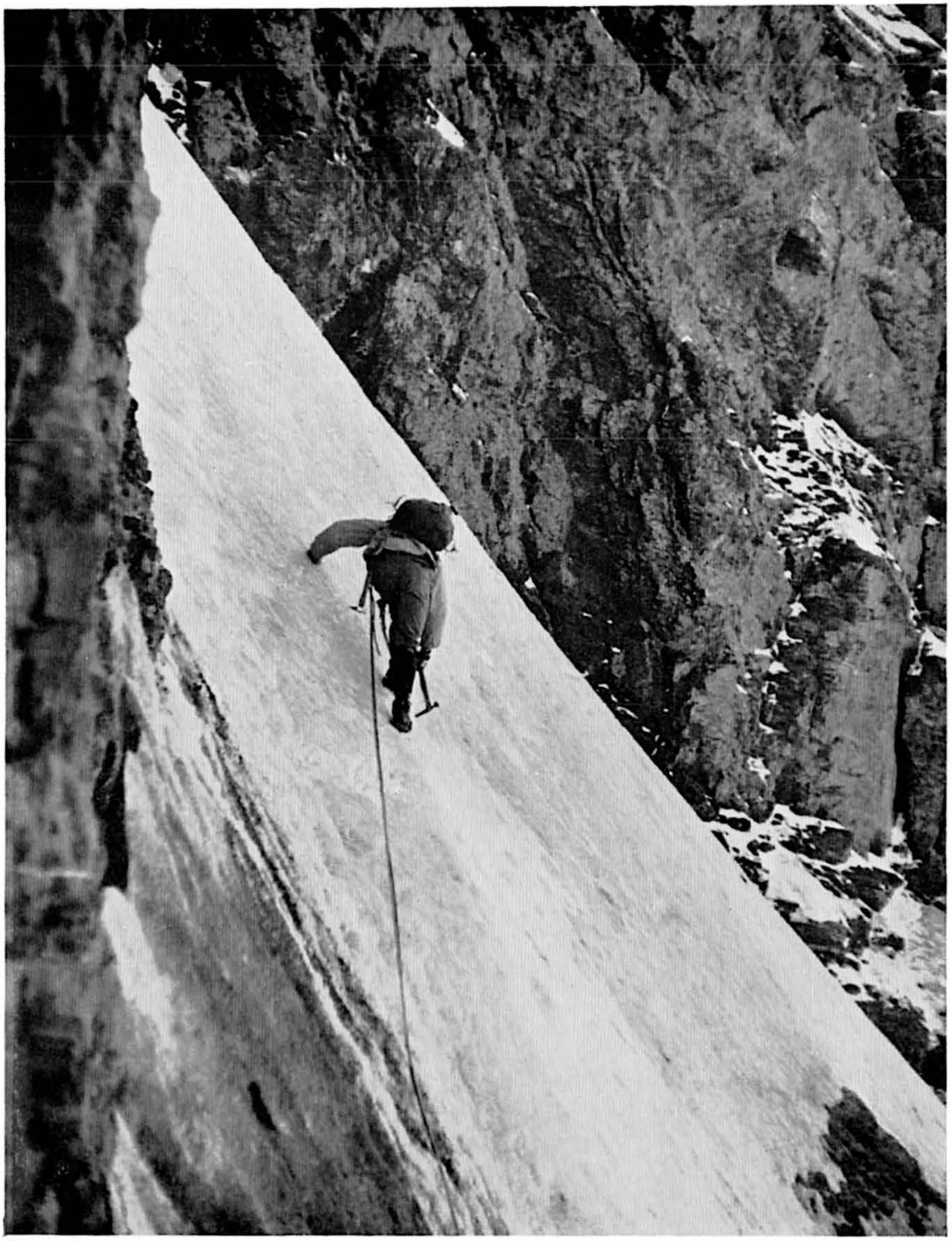

Photo: Ian Clough]

EIGERWAND: MOVING ON TO THE SPIDER

moved along, the veil of mists fell away from the face and the huge walls rearing up around us, plunging away below, glowed pink in the late afternoon sun. We looked out over the billowing clouds which still filled the valleys. We felt elated standing on that splendid belvedere, isolated from the world; it was truly a situation worthy of the Gods.

At the end of the ledge system we were confronted with a broad ice-gully leading up into another huge overhung rock amphitheatre. Chris had begun to cut the first steps towards the little ice-rib in the middle of the Spider when, suddenly, there was a tremendous crashing and roaring and an avalanche of rocks came thundering down the gully and screamed out into the void below. The sunshine which we were enjoying was loosening rocks from their icy clasps. Chris came back quickly and we looked at each other, shaken: 'It'll probably freeze tonight. Let's bivvy here'.

We sat on our ledge and watched the sun slowly sink below the cloud horizon. It was a cold night. We slept for a few hours, then sat talking and brewing hot beverages until it became light. Stiff and clumsy at first, but soon warming up with the strenuous work of cutting steps, we climbed the Spider. Jenny and Hauser, following up our steps, were just behind us as we reached the top of the ice-basin. The entrance to the Exit Cracks was a narrow gully of frozen rubble. The gully continued upwards until it became lost in a forest of overhangs. We consulted our description and decided that we had to climb a steep ice-filled chimney on the left. Chris climbed it slowly. It was vertical and fearfully loose, only the ice keeping the holds in place. It was by far the hardest pitch we had encountered. I followed with a struggle and we pulled the leading Swiss up to the stance to join us. I had run out half the rope again before I realised that we were directly above the Spider. Surely we should be going over to the left? There now seemed to be a way round the overhangs at the top of the gully line. We were annoyed at loosing so much time as we abseiled back into the gully. It didn't help much when we had to teach one of the Swiss how to abseil and we weren't particularly sympathetic when he excused himself by saying he had only been climbing a year! But later, at Kleine Scheidegg, we were amused when we were told of the sensation we had created at the telescopes. Apparently there was tremendous excitement when it was announced, by an 'authority' on the climb, that the British party were attempting a new Direct Finish!

The gully line, the Exit Cracks, became easier and easier as we climbed upwards. Soon there was no snow or ice. We marvelled that these were the same Cracks that had presented such great difficulties to men like Hermann Buhl. But, on the Eiger, conditions can mean everything. We were lucky to have it so easy. We took off the

ropes and soloed up to the final ice-field. Hard ice again; on with the ropes. We were on the summit in the early afternoon and our happiness was so complete that we ran most of the way down the easy West flank. In less than two hours we were at Kleine Scheidegg. Jenny and Hauser reached the summit at about the same time as we entered the hotel.

In the hotel the joy of our success was taken from us. We were told that two bodies had been sighted near the foot of the wall that morning. Did we know who they were? It came like a vicious blow. We felt shattered, sick with pity. Tom Carruthers and his Austrian partner were dead.

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As we had hoped, Chris Bonington and I had had a smooth, uneventful climb in perfect weather and conditions. For a few days the cruel Ogre had been in a benevolent mood . . . yet, even so, two people, one a Briton, had fallen to their deaths. Only a month earlier another Briton had been killed and his companion was fortunate to be rescued.

From the facts we picked up later, it seems reasonable to assume that either Carruthers or the Austrian was hit by a stone. Observers at Kleine Scheidegg informed us that we had taken two hours to cross the Second Ice-field. Mists had hidden the second pair before they were half-way across but, on average, it was estimated that they would have taken *eight* hours! This would probably have put them on the Flat-iron, the most dangerous position on the face (since it is directly under the Spider), at the worst time of the day. Tom Carruthers' watch had stopped at 5.15—about the same time that we encountered the stones coming down the Spider.

The previous British accident happened in virtually the same place and the events leading up to it followed a very similar pattern. Brian Nally and Barry Brewster took most of the day to get from their bivouac (the Swallow's Nest) to the end of the Second Ice-field where the accident occurred. Brewster was hit by a falling stone.

The cause of both accidents was the same. It wasn't just bad luck. Both parties were slow, mainly on account of errors in route-finding and judgement. Neither of these parties had sufficient all-round experience of big mountains to justify an attempt on the Eiger. They were victims of the atmosphere of hysteria which has grown up round the wall.

The Eiger is a great climb. Vast and complex, probably a more rigorous test of judgement and skill than any other European climb, it is, for the alpinist, a logical progression—almost a sort of finishing school. But, situated as it is, overlooking the tourist hotel of Kleine Scheidegg—where pressmen can sit in comfort watching progress—it

is also an arena, a circus. By publicity, it has been blown up out of all proportion; for some people it has become the only climb in the Alps, a place to make a name for oneself. Each year more and more young men of every nationality, blinded by publicity, make their premature attempts on the wall. Some get up, but the roll of honour is long.