The North America Wall

ROYAL ROBBINS

THE SIERRA NEVADA, a slice of the earth's crust 400 miles long and a hundred wide, was tilted upward along a fault line on its eastern edge. No cataclysm, this tilting took millions of years. When the range had attained nearly its present height, the Pleistocene epoch began, and with it a series of ice ages. During these periods of polar supremacy, glaciers flowed from the High Sierra toward the Pacific. In their ponderous descent they gouged a series of U-shaped canyons in the Sierra's western flank. Of these chasms, the one surpassing all others in sublime beauty is named after an indigenous Indian tribe: Yosemite Valley. If ever there existed an Eden, surely it was here. It is called "the Incomparable Valley," for the grace of the waterfalls, each with a distinctive personality; the diversified rock forms; the grand forests; the verdant meadows; and the moody, meandering Merced River.

Nothing contributes more to Yosemite's preeminent grandeur than a 3000-foot white monolith standing at the gate to the Valley: El Capitan. "The Capitan" it indeed is, for it commands the attention and respect of everyone entering Yosemite. Its light igneous rock is called El Capitan granite. From the south to the west buttress, four great routes lie on this fine, hospitable granite. But the southeast face is different, for the granite is displaced in the center of that wall by brittle black diorite. This diorite forms a crude map of the North American continent, whence the name, "North America Wall."

Because of its grim aspect, this dark wall was left untouched while the more obvious and esthetic lines on the southwest face were climbed. But the inevitable attraction of a great unclimbed wall finally prevailed and in October of 1963, Glenn Denny and I made several probes, reaching a high point of 600 feet. The aid-climbing was unusually difficult. Promising cracks proved barely usable. On the third pitch nearly every piton was tied off short.

In May, 1964 Tom Frost joined us in a major reconnaissance. He was a happy addition to our little team for reasons besides climbing talents, for Tom has a large reservoir of that most important ingredient in alpinism: spirit. And despite his record in championship sailboat racing and

his almost unrivalled list of great rock climbs, Tom is brazenly modest. This modestly combined with talent and cheerfulness make him an excellent climbing companion. On our reconnaissance Tom led the infamous third pitch in a way that made me wonder if it was as hard as I had originally found it.

In three days we climbed half the wall, reaching Big Sur Ledge, 1200 feet above the ground. Here the main problems would begin, but we had a good ledge to work from. On the fourth day, we rappelled to the ground, the lower four rappels being to and from anchors in a blank wall. As I prepared the last rappel, two tiny frogs crept from a crack and cavorted happily on my anchor pitons.

We planned to return in the autumn for an all-out effort to reach the summit, but left no fixed ropes. The era of siege climbing via fixed ropes is past in Yosemite. This era was inaugurated by Warren Harding on the south buttress of El Capitan. After this historic ascent, the siege technique was perhaps misused. At any rate, its passing is symbolized by the first ascent of the south face of Yosemite's Mount Watkins, done in one fine effort of five suffocatingly hot days. Harding was a member of the team. Likewise, we wished to do the North America Wall in as classical a style as possible. Siege climbing makes success certain, thus depriving alpinism of one of its most important elements: adventure. What fun is there in a game when the odds are a hundred to one in your favor?

We half expected (and half-hoped) others would do the climb before we returned. But when Tom and I arrived back in Yosemite the wall stood sombre and still virgin — waiting. In mid-October the Sierra was still in the grip of an Indian summer. The Merced had lost its earlier vitality and become a trickle amid sand dunes. The evanescent Yosemite Falls, stupendous in June, had disappeared. The oaks and maples were slow to don their fall clothing; and each afternoon haze crept up the western foothills and filled the Valley — a rare occurrence in a normal autumn. I received a letter from Glenn Denny saying he could not come. This was a great loss. We had already invited Chuck Pratt. Luckily, Yvon Chouinard was in the Valley. We persuaded him to join us.

We all felt similarly about the climb — it was not an appealing wall. It did not have the elegance or majesty of the southwest face. The treacherous dark rock, the difficulty of retreat due to great overhangs and long traverses, the absence of a natural route, and finally the apparent necessity for many bolts rendered us not happily enthusiastic about the venture. A large part of our individual selves did not want to attempt this face. But another part was lured on by the challenge of the greatest unclimbed rock wall in North America. Perhaps it would be a greater adventure for its

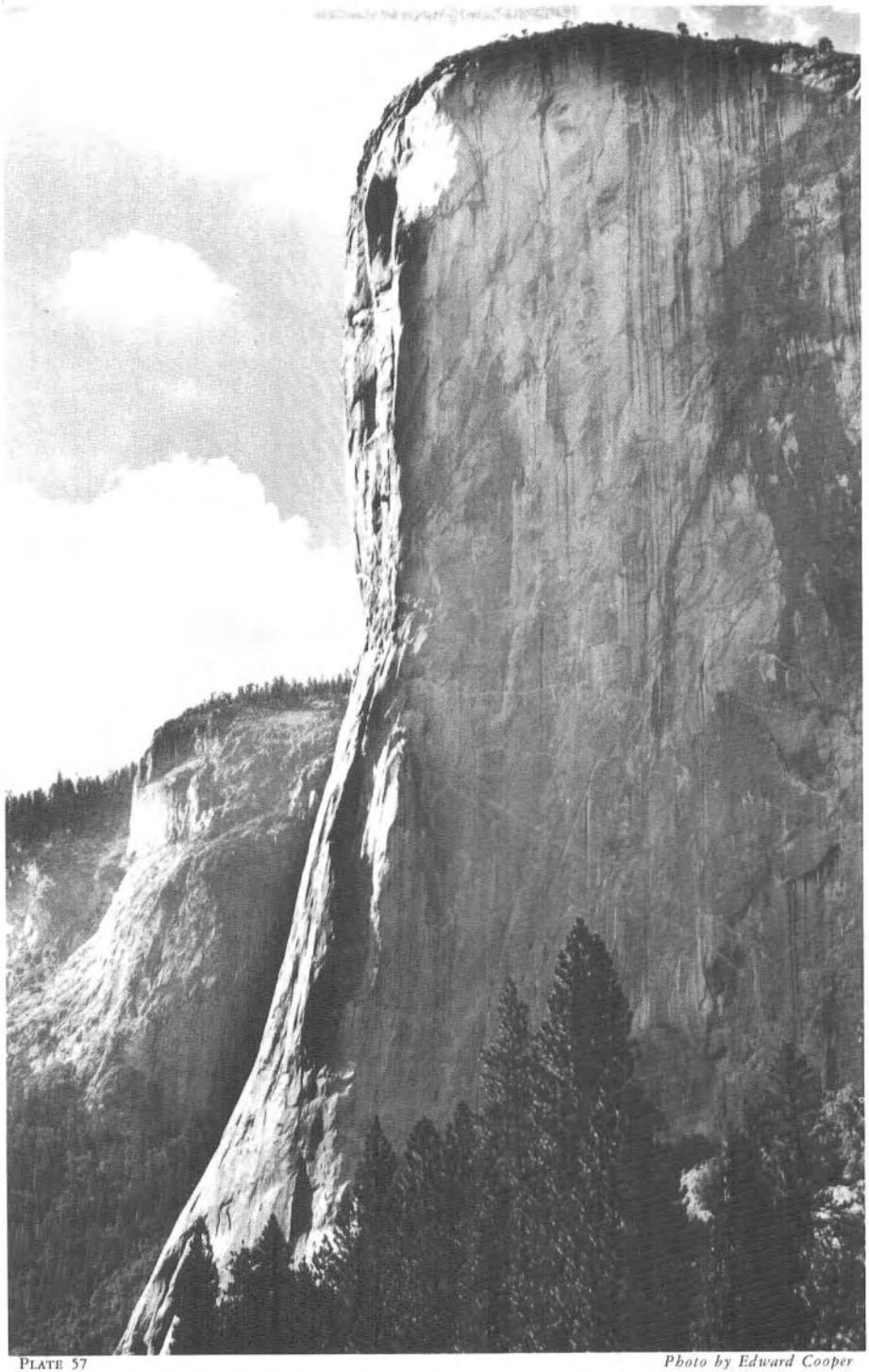


PLATE 57 *Photo by Edward Cooper*

EL CAPITAN, showing North America Wall on the right.

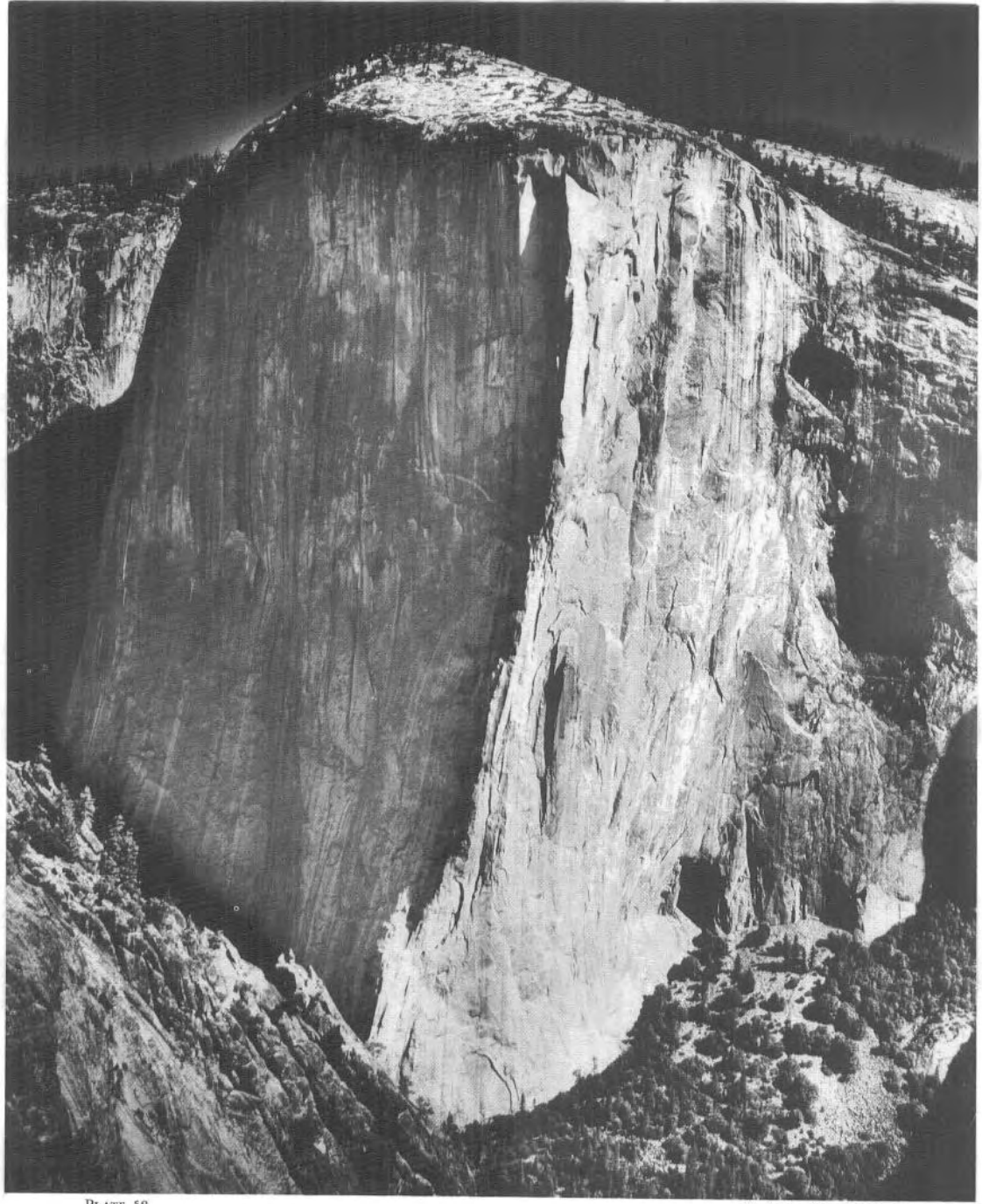


PLATE 58

Photo by Edward Cooper

EL CAPITAN. North America Wall appears on the right.

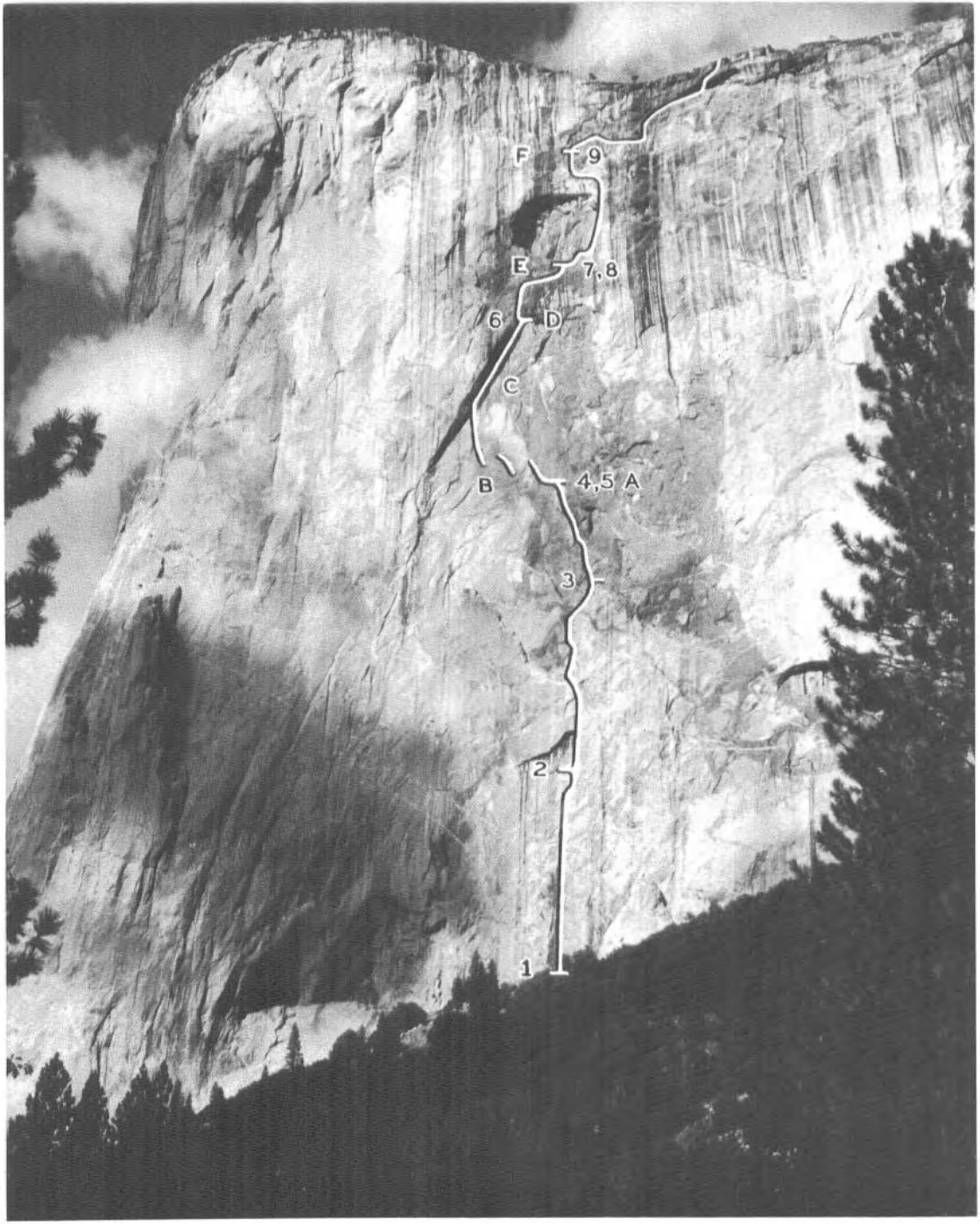


PLATE 59

Photo by Thomas Frost

NORTH AMERICA WALL. Numbers indicate bivouacs. A=Big Sur Ledge; B=Traverse; C=Black Dihedral; D=Black Cave; E=Cyclop's Eye; F=Igloo.

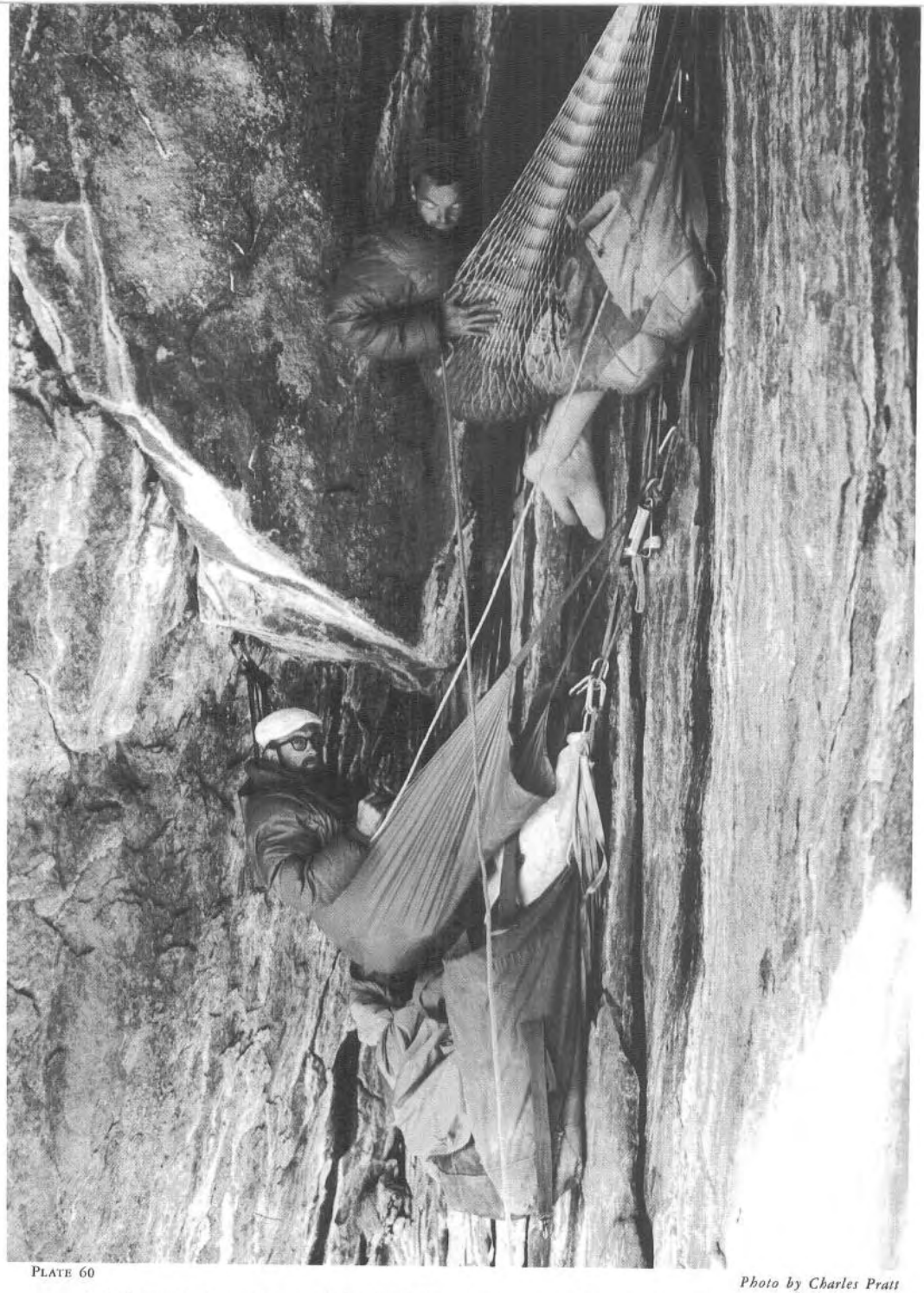


PLATE 60

Photo by Charles Pratt

Life in the tenement house of the Black Cave. From top to bottom: Tom Frost, Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard.

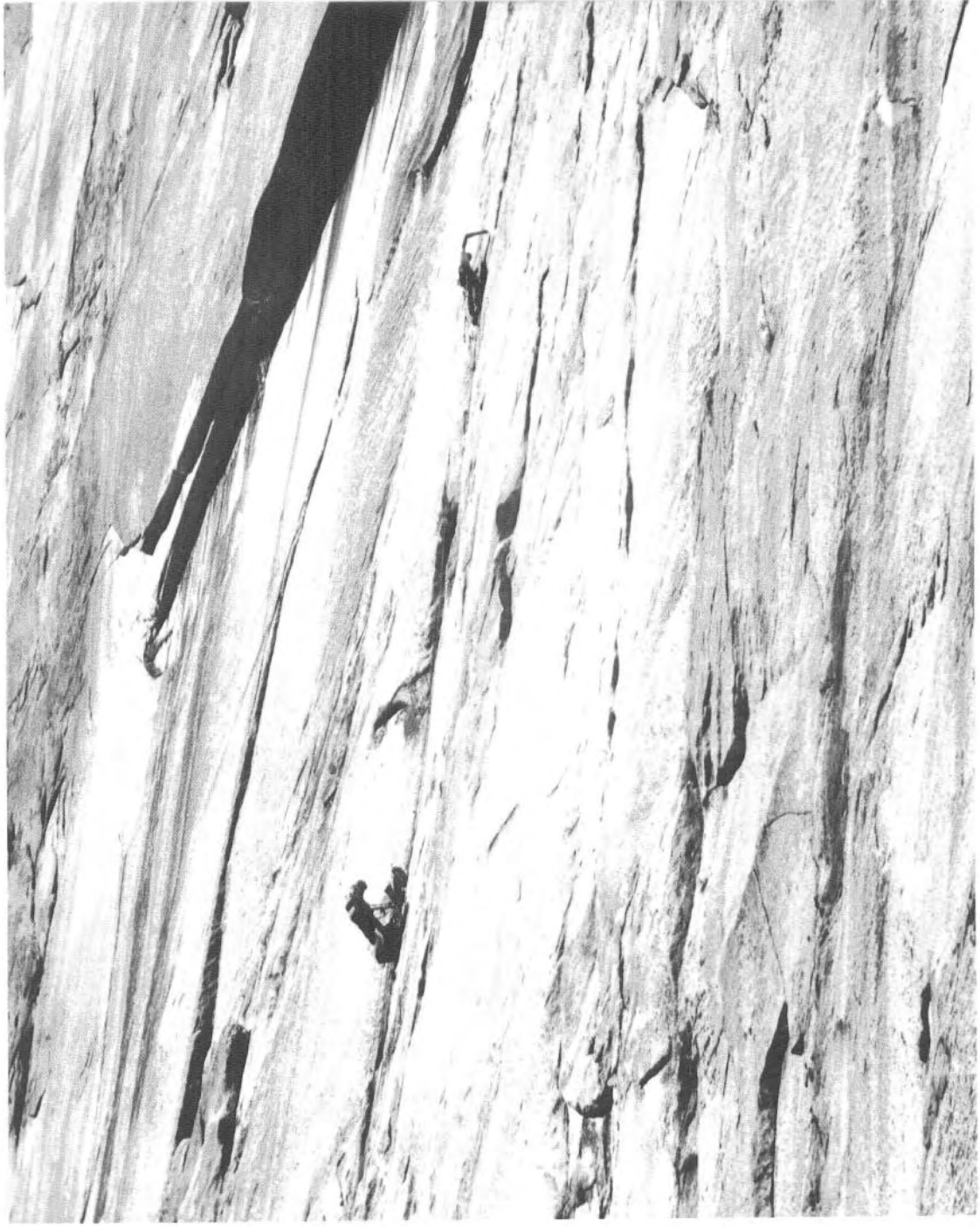


PLATE 61

Photo by Thomas Frost

On the fourth pitch of the North America Wall.

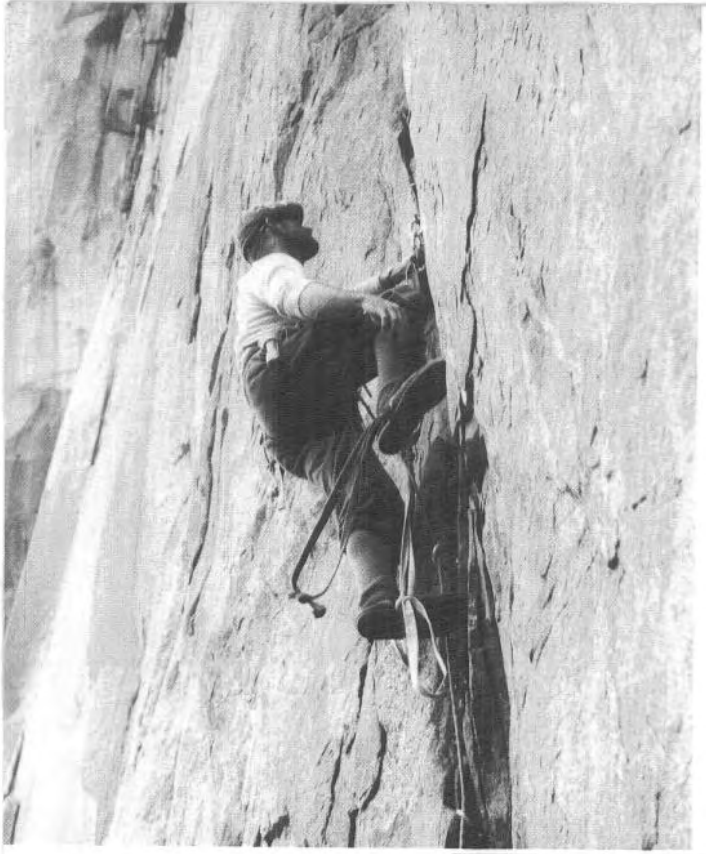


PLATE 62 *Photos by Thomas Frost*

The 150-foot traverse to the Black Dihedral begins in diorite above the Big Sur Ledge.

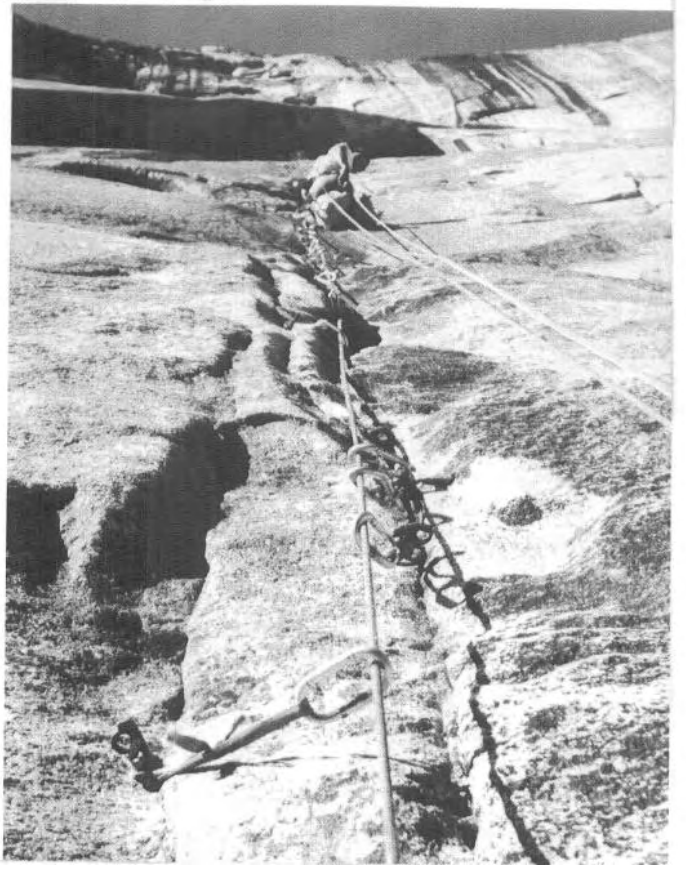


PLATE 63

The first of many A5 pitches: the third pitch of the North America Wall.

PLATE 64

Photo by Edward Cooper

MOUNT WATKINS, Yosemite.

PLATE 65

Photo by Thomas Frost

Yvon Chouinard leading the difficult pendulum pitch on the first day on Mount Watkins.

ogreish appearance. But Chouinard forecast our doom. His previous bad luck on El Capitan had convinced him a black cloud hung over him.

We waited for the heat to abate. The southeast face is peculiarly a heat problem. Its concavity creates an oven sheltered from westerly breezes by the south buttress. Dwindling time forced us to start. In mid-afternoon of October 22, with sweat oozing from every pore, we carried supplies to the base of the wall. Tom and Yvon climbed the first pitch and left a rope on it. We then passed the night at the foot of the face. Yvon hardly slept.

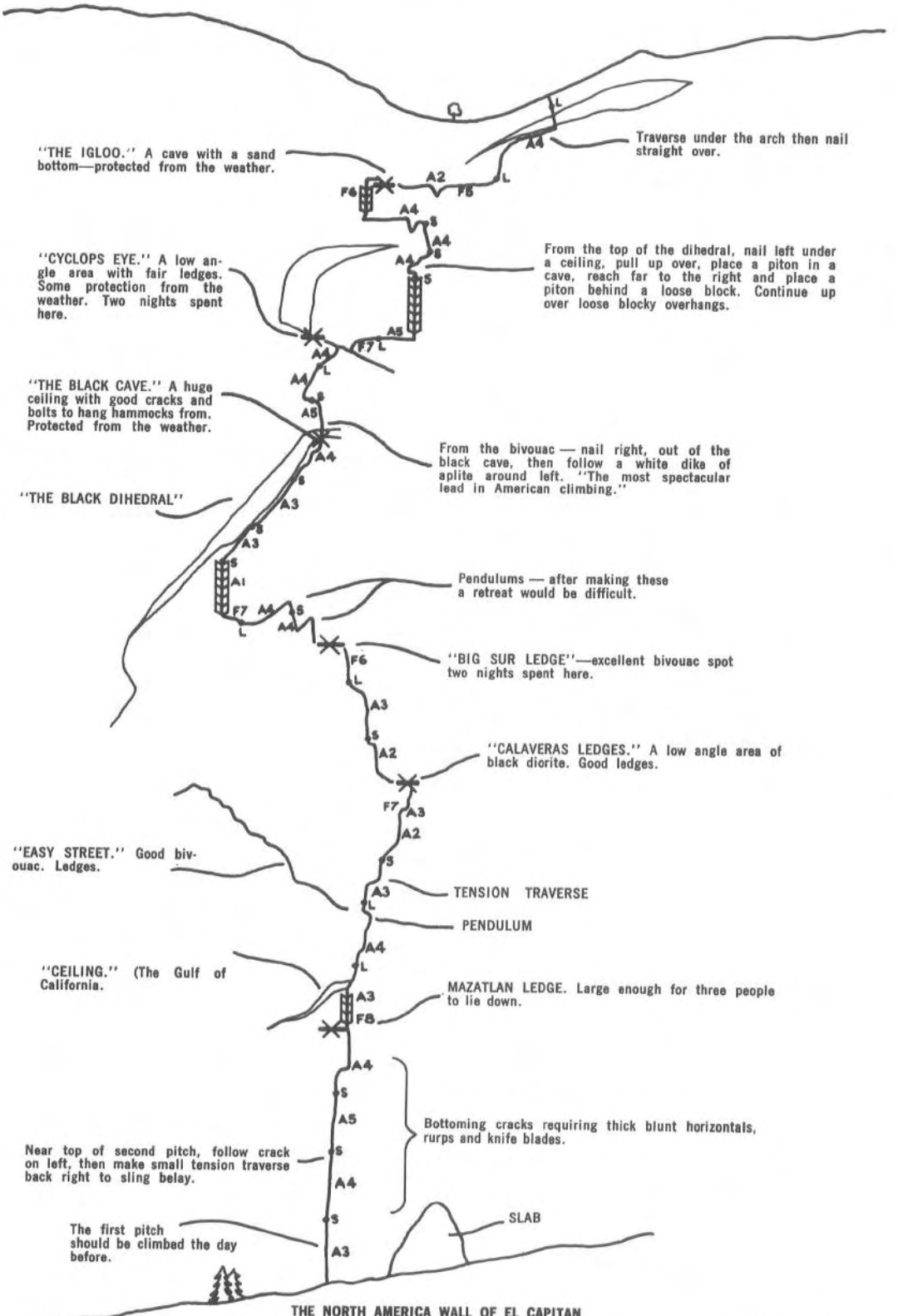
Next morning, with the sun beating upon us, we climbed upward. As Tom led the second pitch, a tiny horn supporting an aid sling broke, causing a fall. His piton held and he passed the difficulty with a skyhook (a variously-sized hook used to support an aid sling from flakes, nubbins, and tiny ledges). Chouinard varified my opinion of the third pitch. He called it the hardest aid pitch of his experience. A short fall was held by a rurp (a tiny, slightly wedge-shaped piton, normally used only for aid).

Meanwhile, Chuck and I were hauling the party's 200 pounds of food, water and equipment. The heat was withering. Our 60 quarts of water, which gave us each one and a half quarts per day, would not be enough if this persisted.

We passed the night on long, narrow Mazatlan Ledge, 500 feet up. Next morning the circles around Yvon's eyes told of another sleepless night. After Chuck led past the cavernous overhang known as the Gulf of California, I pitoned and climbed familiar bolts (we had previously placed 19) to "Easy Street," a large broken ledge at 700 feet. We doggedly climbed without enthusiasm in the fierce heat, unconsciously saving ourselves for the forbidding problems above.

Arriving at our previous high point late on the fourth day, Tom continued, reaching a spot halfway across the 150-foot "Borderline Traverse." This involved a unique maneuver. Through a carabiner attached to a bolt sixty feet above, we lowered Tom to a point almost level with us, but thirty feet away. With a separate rope to his waist we pulled him toward us. When we had him tight as a stretched rubber band we let go, and he pendulumed far away. After several attempts he reached a flake otherwise inaccessible. He then proceeded upward by chipping the edge of the rickety flake and hanging aid slings on the small horns thus created. Finally a blank wall forced the reluctant placing of a bolt, and Tom returned to our ledge, happy with his fine work. Yvon began to sleep well.

On the fifth day Chuck and I completed the traverse across the light-colored granite and climbed 200 feet up the Black Dihedral, thus returning to the diorite and its consequent problems of pitonage and loose blocks.


"THE IGLOO." A cave with a sand bottom—protected from the weather.
Traverse under the arch then nail straight over.
"CYCLOPS EYE." A low angle area with fair ledges. Some protection from the weather. Two nights spent here.
From the top of the dihedral, nail left under a ceiling, pull up over, place a piton in a cave, reach far to the right and place a piton behind a loose block. Continue up over loose blocky overhangs.
"THE BLACK CAVE." A huge ceiling with good cracks and bolts to hang hammocks from. Protected from the weather.
From the bivouac — nail right, out of the black cave, then follow a white dike of aplite around left. "The most spectacular lead in American climbing."
"THE BLACK DIHEDRAL"
Pendulums — after making these a retreat would be difficult.
"BIG SUR LEDGE"—excellent bivouac spot two nights spent here.
"CALAVERAS LEDGES." A low angle area of black diorite. Good ledges.
"EASY STREET." Good bivouac. Ledges.
TENSION TRAVERSE
PENDULUM
"CEILING." (The Gulf of California.
MAZATLAN LEDGE. Large enough for three people to lie down.
Bottoming cracks requiring thick blunt horizontals, rurps and knife blades.
Near top of second pitch, follow crack on left, then make small tension traverse back right to sling belay.
The first pitch should be climbed the day before.
SLAB
THE NORTH AMERICA WALL OF EL CAPITAN
Round dots ● are belay points. S — means sling belay. L — means a ledge belay — not large enough to bivouac on unless otherwise indicated. Bars — are ledges large enough for a bivouac. Crosses ✕ are the bivouacs of the first ascent. — indicates a dihedral. Belay and rappel anchors are established on the first half of the wall.

The return to Big Sur Ledge was made after dark. This night climbing, forced by short days, was to be a familiar pattern throughout the climb.

The tension we were all feeling was broken occasionally by gales of near hysterical laughter and jocose badinage:

"Hey, Yvon."

"Yeah, Chuck?"

"Say, you remember your nightmares, and I'll remember mine, and each morning we'll trade. OK?"

These two make a remarkable pair. They are both short, but Yvon is shorter. This gives Pratt the opportunity to take out his frustrations on someone smaller than he, and he rides poor Yvon mercilessly.

But what was Yvon doing on a nightmare-inducing wall like this? If there was ever anyone who has an eye for elegant routes on esthetic walls it is he. A poetic soul, Chouinard really rather disdains the analytical mind, for he hates to see beautiful things ripped and torn. He has the kind of mind which would make a good artist, but a poor chess player. Maddeningly creative, Chouinard has invented more techniques and devices in climbing than anyone I know. And here he was, stuck on the least esthetic great wall in the Valley with three El Capitan veterans; this would be his first El Capitan climb.

Pratt, on the other hand, had already climbed three great routes on El Capitan, though never one like this. Chuck's fantastic native talents and unassuming demeanor make him the finest of climbing companions; while his infinite patience and sense of humor make him an excellent teacher and guide. He enjoys severe climbs and easy ones, and will repeat a route many times if he likes it. Like Jack London and Thomas Wolfe, Pratt is an incorrigible romantic and suffers from the anguish which is a corollary of that *Weltanschauung*. Perhaps Chuck loves climbing partly because rock walls, unlike humans, are without malice.

The heat wave broke on the sixth day. We reluctantly left our cozy ledge and crossed the traverse to our high point. The section above was ugly. Overhanging to the right 400 feet, the Black Dihedral was a rotten mess. Dropped here by the leader were many rocks and huge balls of mud and grass. Luckily, these objects fell harmlessly far out to the side of us below. Chuck and I, doing the hauling that day, sometimes had to let ourselves out as much as fifty feet in order to prusik straight up to the end of a pitch. After dark, we reached the Black Cave, an alcove with no bottom. Here we spent several hours stringing our hammocks and getting settled. By flashlight Tom observed large centipedes crawling on the wall above.

At dawn, casually glancing over the sides of our hammocks, we were

astonished at the tremendous exposure. The ground was 1600 feet straight below. Suspended over space, we hung one above another, like laundry between tenement flats. Oppressive is the word for the Black Cave. We felt we had climbed into a *cul de sac*. As we breakfasted on salami, cheese, and a mixture of candies and nuts, cirro-stratus began to cover the sky. My wife Elizabeth, through our tiny two-way radio, told us a storm was forecast.

Chuck led the overhang. He pitoned up one side of it and followed a horizontal dike of aplite around the top. Fascinated, we watched the lower part of Chuck's body move sideways thirty feet across our line of vision. Pitonage was very difficult, and Chuck's hauling line hung far out from the wall. When all cracks stopped, he ended the pitch and belayed in slings, thus finishing the most spectacular lead in American climbing.

I followed and was forced to leave two pitons because of awkward reaches.

"Man, that was really a fantastic lead. What exposure! Congratulations!"

"Thanks, Dad."

"I certainly don't want to go back down that overhang."

"Me neither. Looks like we might just reach the Cyclop's Eye, if we go like hell."

We all started pushing as fast as safety would allow, for fear of a bivouac on a blank wall in a rainstorm. We climbed onward, searching, always searching. Searching for handholds and footholds, for piton cracks and the right piton. And searching ourselves for the necessary human qualities to make this climb possible. Searching for adventure, searching for ourselves, searching for situations which would call forth our total resources. For some it is a search for courage. Perhaps if we can learn to face the dangers of the mountains with equanimity, we can also learn to face with a calm spirit the chilling spector of inevitable death.

Rain had begun before we reached the shelter of the Cyclop's Eye, well after dark. The Eye is a great hole in the rock, 200 feet high and 30 feet deep. We would be sheltered from the rain as long as the air was still. That evening, we were serenaded through our radio by our good friend Mort Hempel, singing rare and beautiful folk songs. As leaves are wafted by a breeze, so our spirits soared upward on the exquisite melodies of Mort's art.

The rain ceased next morning, but clouds persisted. The forecast was a three-day storm. We had already begun to ration food, so it would be a close contest.

Yvon led. He moved with cat-like grace which belied the difficulty of

the free climbing up the loose flakes and shattered black rock. Then Tom nailed horizontally forty feet in a lead of exceptional severity. Late in the day Yvon led to the top of the Eye. This was the sort of pitch one never wants to do again, as it involved placing large angle pitons straight up between loose, overhanging blocks. The return to the bivouac ledge after dark was an exhaustingly slow and hazardous process.

While Chuck and I had been preparing the bivouac at dusk, menacing clouds, like sharks of various sizes racing after their prey, scudded toward us on a strong south wind. That night, the edge of a great storm moved east over California. Throughout central and northern California southerly gales swept the land, and the dry earth soaked up the downpours. As the storm rose to pass the Sierra, the rain turned to snow at 7000 feet. There we sat, in the furious, inky night, lashed by wind and rain, tiny mites tied to a great rock. Yet the rock itself was dwarfed by the majestic whirlpool of air moving out of the Pacific, and this same storm was just a small blotch on the earth's surface. The earth in turn would be a mere dot on the sun, and there are suns many thousands of times larger than that fiery orb giving us life. Mankind is truly insignificant. Man's fate, indeed, is to have to swallow these truths and still live on. If one could only find meaning to make these hard truths of insignificance and omnipresent death acceptable. Where to find this meaning? Again the search . . . and we climb on.

The storm abated in the morning and through the mist we perceived the Sierra had donned its winter coat of white. We were sodden. Tom especially had had a bad night. The previous day's climbing had been tough and Tom, always a big eater, was suffering from the stringent diet.

The new forecast was encouraging. The storm, instead of continuing eastward through California, had taken a northeastern tack and spared us several days of rain or snow. We climbed on through light showers that day, flabbergasted at the continuing challenges. A climb with such unrelenting difficulties was a new experience to us.

Above the Cyclop's Eye I hand-traversed left from Chuck's hanging belay. Then my friend lowered me from a sling on a horn and I reached around a corner and started nailing upward beneath a curving arch. The crack was stubborn, accepting pitons grudgingly. I moved upward on rurps, knifeblades, and the tips of angles, slipping on the moss-covered rock, while ice water ran down arms and legs. At the top of the arch a sling through a hole in a flake and then a skyhook got me on my way hand-traversing left again. After twenty feet I was forced to stop and hurriedly place a piton. I then nailed straight left another twenty feet. The exposure was terrifying. At the end of the traverse I got a knifeblade

piton behind a dubious flake. A skyhook on a tiny ledge got me five feet higher. Standing for twenty minutes in short slings I drilled a hole and placed a bolt, a poor one for it chipped away the rotten diorite. It was our 38th and last bolt. One hundred feet higher I reached the "Igloo," a sandy-floored cave 300 feet below the top. One of the hardest leads of my experience, it was just another pitch on this wall.

Next morning, nature smiled. The eastern sun, with beams of warmth, cut the crisp clean air, while the white panorama of the High Sierra, "the gentle wilderness," stretched from northeast to southeast, a deep blue sky arching above. Half Dome, as ever, stood sublime, a new cap of white on its bald head. We felt joyous to be greeted by such a magnificent morning. The beauty, the expectation of certain success, and the sun's heat made our blood race. All around us the exquisite splendor of these friendly mountains added to our elation. As John Harlin has said, "such beauty . . . turns satisfaction to pure joy."

Six hours later we had overcome the last problems and shook hands on top, happy as pagans.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Yosemite Valley, California.

FIRST ASCENT: North America (southeast) Wall of El Capitan, October 22 to 31, 1964 by Yvon Chouinard, Thomas Frost, Charles Pratt, Royal Robbins.