

Solitude on K2

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IT WAS ON THE SOUTH FACE OF Lhotse that I really got to know Christophe Profit. In October of 1990, we lived together on that forbidding wall during an adventure of the kind we both love: a simple rope-team for days and days without logistical support striving with incertitude towards a summit, a goal with real meaning. What is the purpose of setting out with ten or fifteen climbers on that kind of objective while uncoiling kilometers of fixed rope? Today, when our technology lets us explore space, the conquest of the great walls of our planet is interesting only if done "by fair means."

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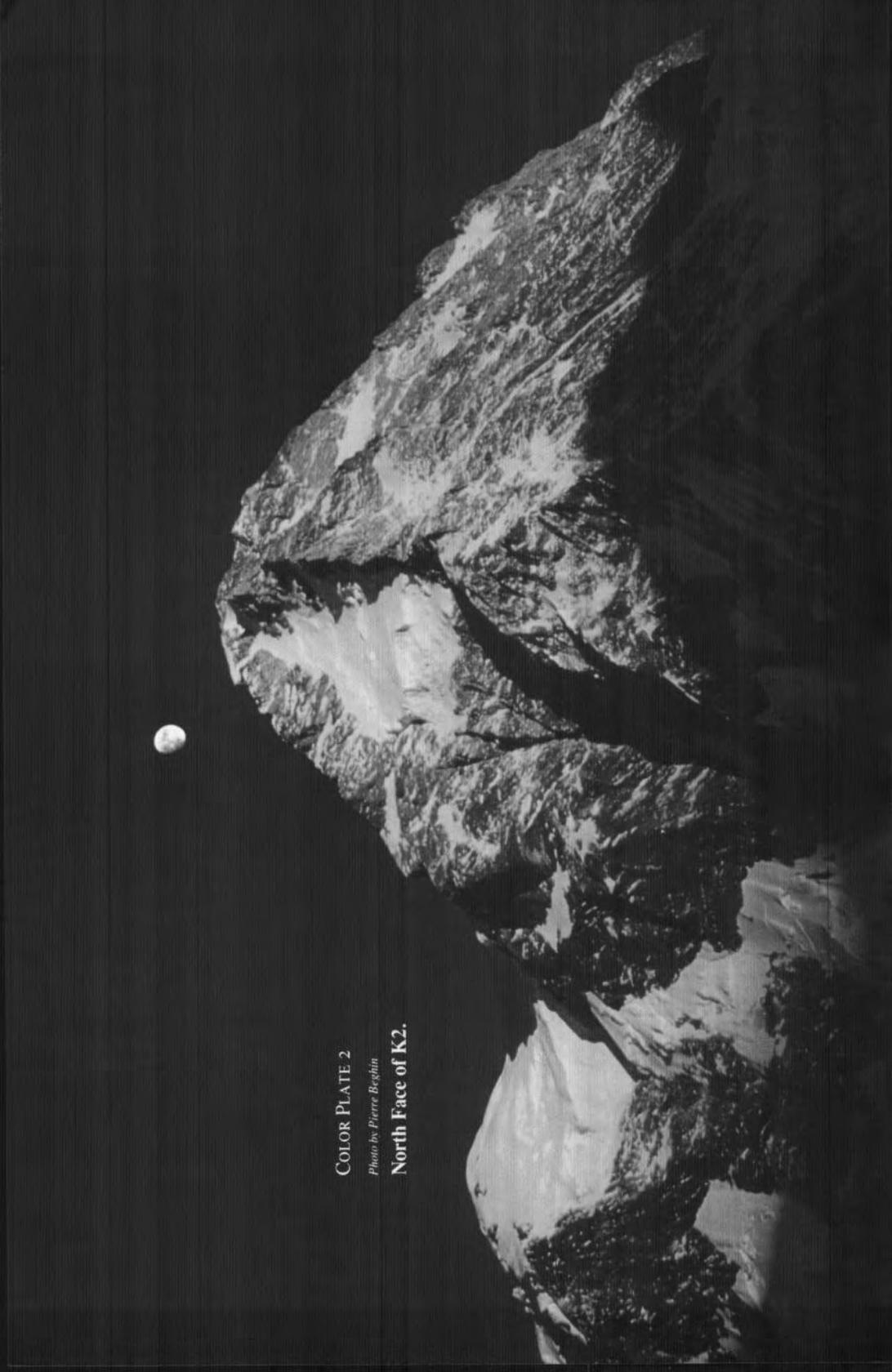
Last June, the two of us were there on the Baltoro Glacier, that loveliest glacial avenue in the world, accompanied by two doctor friends, Alain Perard and Raphael Briot. They were not climbers, but their company might be more than welcome in tight moments.

Most of the expeditions that planned to attempt K2 in 1991 cancelled because of the Gulf War. What a privilege to have the "Mountain of Mountains" to one's self! A real luxury which you dream about in the uproar at Everest Base Camp. Moreover, it is certain that K2 is much more difficult than its "older brother."

At the end of the inevitable period of acclimatization during July, our adventure really began on August 8. In the middle of the night, we left our bivouac tent at 6900 meters on a hump of the northwest ridge of K2. We were anxious to join that point to another at 8611 meters of elevation.

Alas! Towards the west, the glittering stars disappeared. A black hole, more worrying than the night itself, was devouring the sky and advancing over the mountains of the Karakoram. Along the horizon, a still ill-defined storm was unfurling. Suddenly, lightning flashes pierced the darkness over Nanga Parbat, 150 kilometers at our backs. The needle of our altimeter began a crazy climb and let us guess what a terrible barometric depression was digging itself into our region. Without a moment's hesitation, we returned to our shelter.

Just before dawn, the southwest wind struck. With extraordinary violence, it lashed the mountain, enveloped it and whirled furiously along its flanks. We sat in our sleeping bags, completely dressed and even shod and gloved in case we might have to make a precipitous departure. The gusts became so powerful that we feared for our tent. Although solidly guyed to the slope, it threatened to fly



COLOR PLATE 2

Photo by Pierre Beghin

North Face of K2.

off at any instant. The wind squalls became more and more frequent and more and more brutal. The tent swelled and flapped, sounding like gunfire. To counteract the formidable pressure from the outside and to keep from being crushed, we propped ourselves on the windward side of the tent, vaguely in panic, with muscles aching from the cramped position.

At dawn on the second morning, after folding up our tent, we left our camp without the slightest regret. The visibility was so limited that we wandered about for some moments before finding where to descend. While climbing down, I remembered that from the beginning of July we had already made six round trips to 7000 meters. Each time, the weather had blocked us there. The result was a certain lassitude and not an inconsiderable loss of weight. This adventure was turning into a war of attrition. We agreed that we had only until the end of August to set foot on the summit. "We can't spend the winter here!" said Christophe.

On August 14, two days after the new moon, we finally again crossed the 7000 meter barrier. It seemed that the weather had stabilized. A light north wind, a few lazy clouds and a hazy horizon were encouraging signs. In about ten hours we had gained 1000 meters. We climbed simultaneously, mostly with the rope in the bottom of the pack; it took too long to belay. In places the rock was so rotten that it seemed like a vertical scree slope. Towards 7800 meters, the climbing became harder; airier too! From there, our northwest ridge merged into the north spur of K2, the only one that is entirely in Chinese territory. This has been trodden only four times, as evidenced by old ropes rotting, faded by the sun, gnawed by the wind and rockfall and some of them no longer anchored to anything.

Toward noon, we reached a kind of eagle's nest, blown clear of snow. The summit was still very distant, separated from us by slopes overloaded with snow. During the morning, with the gain of altitude our panorama had grown, letting us see to the north the ragged relief of Chinese Tartary.

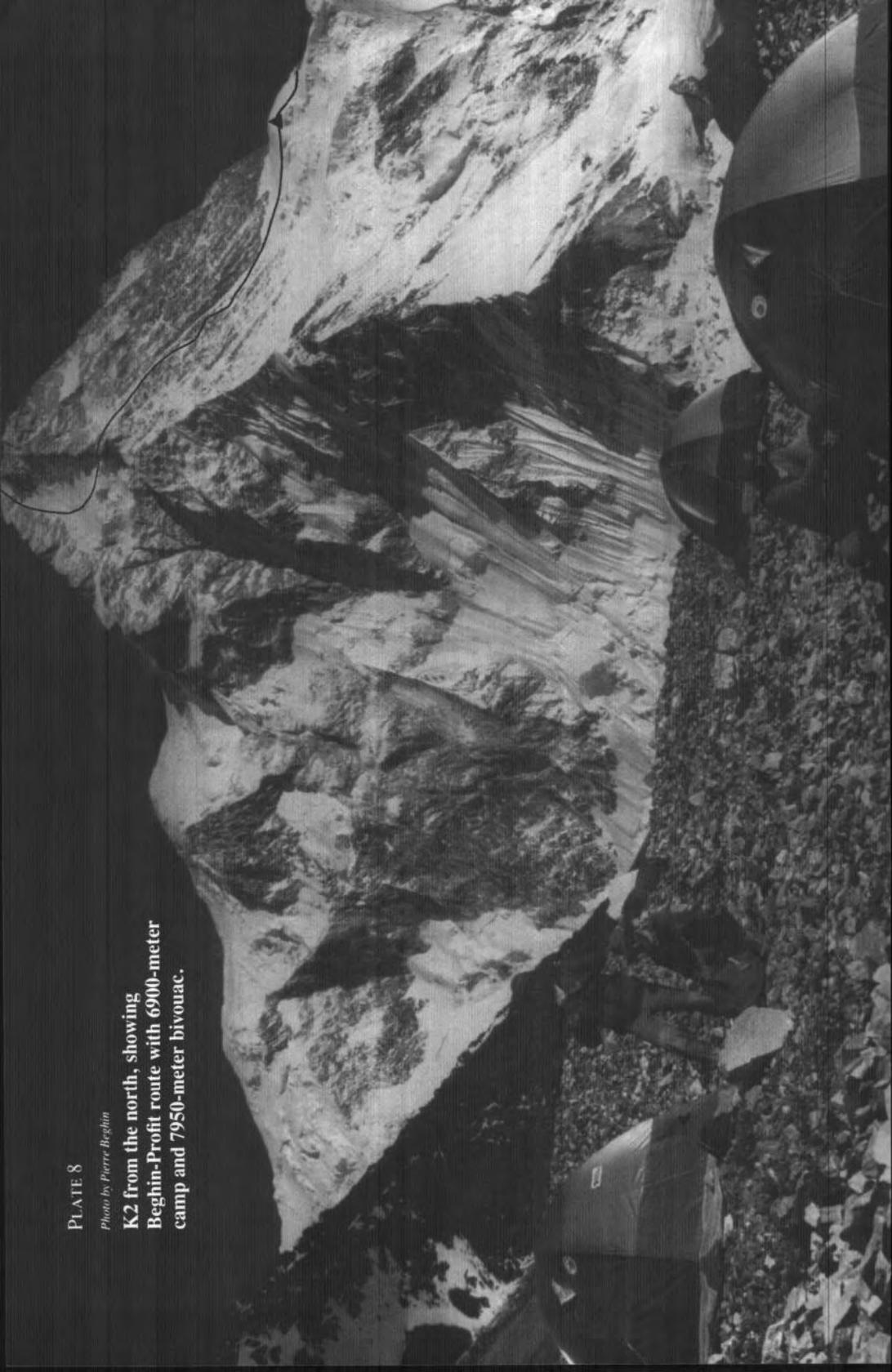
The next morning around seven o'clock, we had a leisurely get-away. We carried little in our rucksacks: a headlamp each, down mittens, extra goggles, a survival blanket and a stove. At 8100 meters we were faced with a long traverse of 200 meters before reaching the right side of the great couloir that stretches up to the summit. Over broad stretches, there was breakable crust, indicating windslab. We had no choice: cross them or kiss K2 goodbye. I went ahead. Each of my steps plunged deeply into the slope and added to the dotted line of my tracks. This exhausted me mentally, fearing that at any moment the whole slope might avalanche. Christophe followed, treading exactly in my tracks, hoping not to dislodge the fragile cover. We spent a crazy amount of time. Towards noon, I crossed the bergschrund that marks the beginning of the couloir, which rose at 50° to 55°.

I headed for the rocks at the edge of the couloir, but the higher I got, the deeper the snow became. I was thigh-deep and had to stop every two paces. Some meters lower, Christophe tried his chances in the center of the couloir, where the ice gleamed in places. He progressed at a good pace, halting only every ten steps. He had found the key. However, after 200 meters, the snow

PLATE 8

Photo by Pierre Beghin

**K2 from the north, showing
Beghin-Profit route with 6900-meter
camp and 7950-meter bivouac.**



improved and the windslab disappeared. At two P.M., we had half the couloir below our feet. But then the situation took a turn for the worse. An icy shadow crept over the slope. Our feet rapidly numbed. A greater worry was that my fingers began to lose their mobility. We hesitated, discouraged. With the risk of frostbite, the summit receded into an improbable future.

I extracted my down mittens and pulled them over my under-gloves. In a few minutes, enough warmth returned to let me continue. At 8500 meters the slope lessened and Christophe plowed a trench in the bottomless snow. Under it lay hard, blue ice, into which our crampons barely bit. Breathless, completely groggy from oxygen lack, I climbed by instinct. Suddenly, I saw Christophe ten meters higher astride a sunny ridge at the top of the couloir. It was six P.M. when I emerged at his side.

From that moment on, we were drawn on toward the summit as by a magnet. That meant that we would go on, come what might. Everything became simple: nothing more existed but that point at 8611 meters, us and immense, painful fatigue. To keep up my morale, I didn't look more than two meters ahead. Suddenly, instead of snow ahead of me, there was dark emptiness, the other slope down K2. It was hard to believe. My watch showed ten minutes to seven. Christophe turned and we fell into each other's arms.

While the powerful shapes of the Karakoram were sinking from sight, drowned in the night, a glimmer of light clung around us. Way below, the Baltoro Glacier wound through a forest of confused mountains. This twilight stage-setting took on a planetary dimension. It was hard to understand. Despite the uncertainty of the descent, I felt a moment of rare bliss. We stood there, oblivious of ourselves. Then the routine tasks: a radio message to Alain and Rafael, the summit photos, the headlamps to put on and the parkas to adjust.

A curious thing happened just then at Concordia on the Baltoro Glacier. French trekkers were admiring K2 in the failing light. Suddenly, they noticed on the summit, ten miles distant, several flashes of light. No! It was not a question of extra-terrestrials from Outer Space. They had seen the flashes of our cameras. Several days later, it was they who announced news of our success to the Pakistani authorities.

Twenty minutes passed. The biting cold—it was -35° —pushed us to flee, to lose altitude fast.

Guided by the flickering of our headlamps, we found the couloir again. We plunged into the black, bottomless hole. Hour added onto hour. No halts, no incidents, no sudden difficulties; we trudged insensible to the cold, fatigue and unconscious of time and space.

In the great traverse, our tracks had completely disappeared. Only a few guiding marks; that was enough. Again, we had to break trail in that deep, treacherous snow. A little before midnight, we crouched before the tent. The buckle had been buckled! For 16 hours we had eaten nothing and drunk almost nothing.

The next morning, seated on the boulder field, I savored the moment. Thanks to our physical condition, we had made only a brief incursion into the

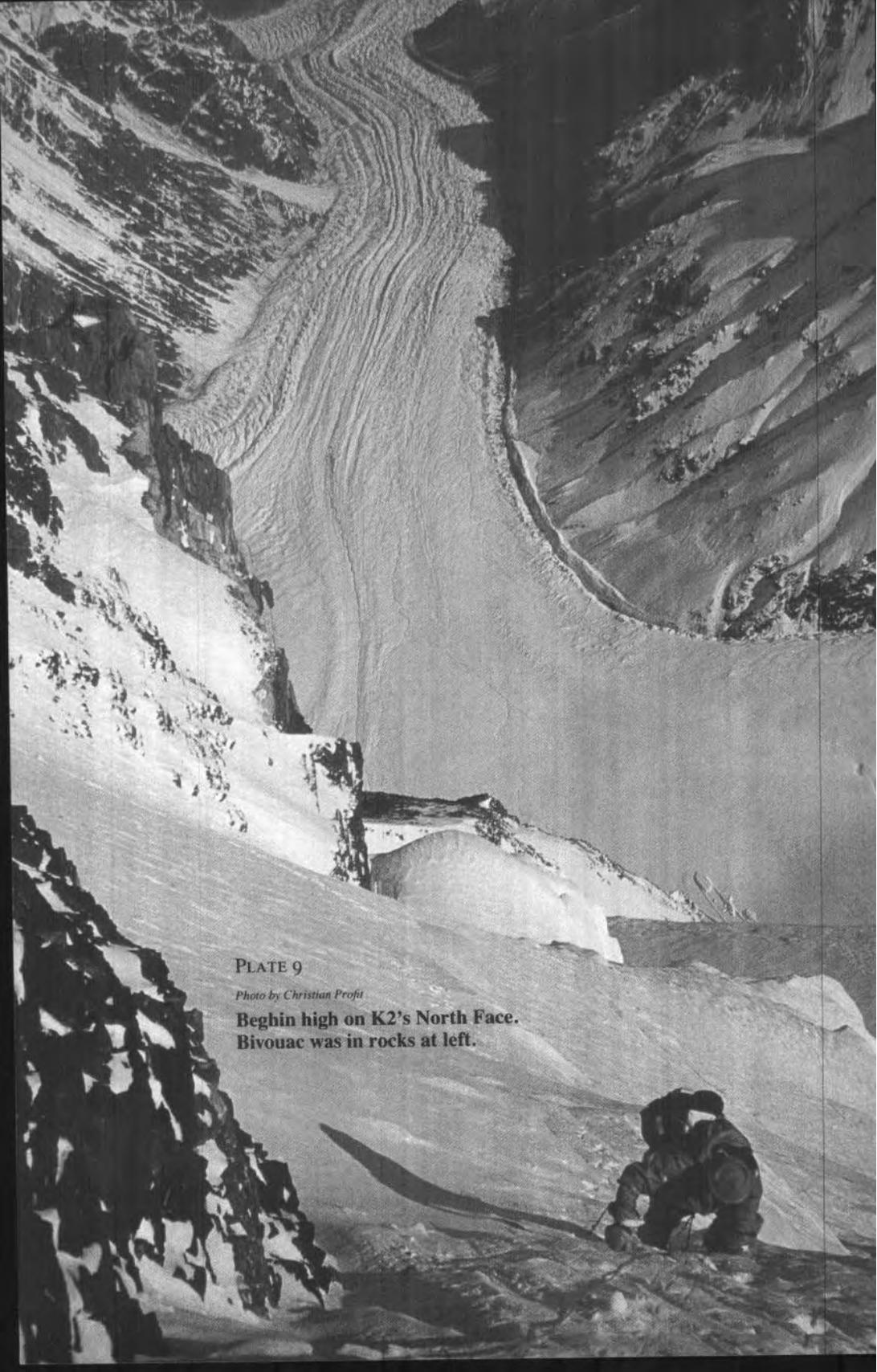


PLATE 9

Photo by Christian Profitt

**Beghin high on K2's North Face.
Bivouac was in rocks at left.**

domain of "rare oxygen." The doors of altitude had not had time to slam upon us. I had an intuition: the mountain gods would let us escape and two days later we would be back in Base Camp. The psychological tension which had grown ever stronger on the slopes of the mountain disappeared as if by magic. The magic of the summit! In its place, I felt again a new spiritual equilibrium, a sort of euphoria. I knew that it would last for some time. Until we were caught up in the daily agitation, back there in France . . . Happily, we shall construct other dreams.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Karakoram, Pakistan.

ASCENT: K2, 8611 meters, 28,250 feet, via the Northwest Ridge and North Face, Summit reached August 15, 1991 (Pierre Beghin, Christophe Profit).

