

THE ANNAPURNA HIMAL AND SOUTH SIDE OF EVEREST

BY H. W. TILMAN

The substance of a paper read at the Alpine Club on March 6, 1951

BEFORE leaving Katmandu in 1949 I asked H.H. the Maharajah for permission to visit the Annapurna region which, according to the map, is the most mountainous of a mountainous country. The Himalayan Committee then sent a formal application to which a favourable reply came rather late. It was the end of February before I could begin collecting a party, ordering stores, and with difficulty securing passages for April. My notion was to take a small party which would wander unobtrusively, collecting plants and birds, battering rocks, amending the existing map, but attempting no great peaks; but the Himalayan Committee preferred a larger party in order to begin building up a nucleus of climbers with Himalayan experience such as existed before the war.

The five who accepted were Col. D. G. Lowndes, botanist; Maj. J. O. M. Roberts, a Gurkha officer with experience of the Himalaya including Masherbrum (1938); R. C. Evans; J. H. Emlyn Jones; and W. P. Packard, a New Zealand Rhodes Scholar. The last four were to climb but Packard had also a scientific role. I had hoped to survey the North-west corner of our area which is very sketchily mapped, but the only light photo-theodolite in England was earmarked for the late J. W. Thornley's party to the Karakoram, so that, instead of surveying, Packard was to enquire into land utilisation and soil erosion which is his particular study. Owing to their remoteness Himalayan villages are not likely to reap any benefit from this enquiry, but perhaps on that account it will be more gratifying to our world planners.

The ship carrying three of the party was impiously billed to sail on Good Friday, so I was not surprised when a defect arose and delayed her for a week. Nor was this the only rub. Travelling across India in late April is hot, but these three, joined at Bombay by Col. Lowndes, found it hotter than usual by reason of their carriage and some of our kit going up in flames. Which meant more delay, and it was not until May 10, ten days later than we hoped, that we left Katmandu with four Sherpas and fifty local coolies.

At the end of ten days' marching we had actually lost height, dropping to 2,000 ft., and thirteen days out, at Thonje, where the Marsyandi valley bends westwards behind the Annapurna range, the height was still only 6,000 ft. Like many other Nepal rivers the Marsyandi rises north of the Himalaya (but not north of the Ladakh range) and cuts through by a deep gorge. Below Thonje the valley is flanked on the east by a great southerly spur on which lie Himal Chuli (25,801 ft.), another

25,000 ft. peak, and Manaslu (26,658 ft.). We had already enjoyed some frightening glimpses of these three but before writing them off we halted the caravan at Thonje for four days while we went up the Dudh Khola to have a closer look at Manaslu from the north. The summit lay well back, but even before that had become sufficiently manifest to calm a hot dispute as to its whereabouts, my interest in it had died; for the north ridge led airily over a 25,000 ft. bump, dropped 1,000 ft., and then climbed pretty steeply to a vast summit plateau at the remotest extremity of which the summit stood. The beauty and, no doubt, the difficulty of this route formed a powerful magnet for our Alpinist, and it might have attracted me too had the mountain been only half as high. Anyway I was loth to pit an untried party against so great a mountain, and yet hoped to find one high enough to test our powers but easy enough to offer some hope of success. We therefore left the peaks on this great spur for better men and sought an objective on the Annapurna Himal which offered several great and glittering prizes. For this range consists of a ridge over 25 miles long with Annapurna I (26,492 ft.) at the east end, Annapurna II (26,041 ft.) 20 miles to the west, with two 24,000 ft. peaks in between and odd peaks of 22,000 and 23,000 ft. in attendance on the two giants. Here's riches. Nor is that all; for on a spur to the south lies Machha Pochare 22,958 ft. while north of the Marsyandi are several high peaks, and north again is the Ladakh range on the Tibet border.

Upon rounding the corner at Thonje and drawing under the lee of the Annapurna massif we noticed a change. Mindful of our dank experiences in the Langtang in 1949 I rejoiced to see the deciduous forest draped in moss and lichen give place to pine and juniper set on sparse slopes of bare earth. Terraced and irrigated fields of wheat confirmed that the monsoon rain on this side of the range was light. The appearance of this semi-desert did not please our botanist who had come prepared to be wet but happy among a wealth of flowers. But above 14,000 ft., where, during the monsoon, constant cloud lay, he found them in ample variety.

We put our base in a pine-set glade on the north side of the valley close to the group of villages comprising Manangbhot. We had in view A. II and part of the ridge east of it, but of A. I, which the French, though we were unaware of it, were then climbing, we could see nothing. Subsequent glimpses showed this peak to be sharp and inaccessible from the Manang side—a view which French reports confirm.

Our height and that of Manang village was about 11,500 ft. The villages are Tibetan in appearance—a huddle of flat-roofed stone houses, mani walls, and chortens. In looks and speech the people are Tibetan but they are an unusual Himalayan community. They are traders who spend the winter months in places like Delhi and Calcutta and as far afield as Rangoon and Singapore. They are familiar with train, boat, and even air travel, and with the pale-face and some of his less admirable traits. They speak Hindustani larded with American, wear wrist-watches and Army boots without laces, and carry discarded



MANASLU FROM NORTH. 26,658 FEET.

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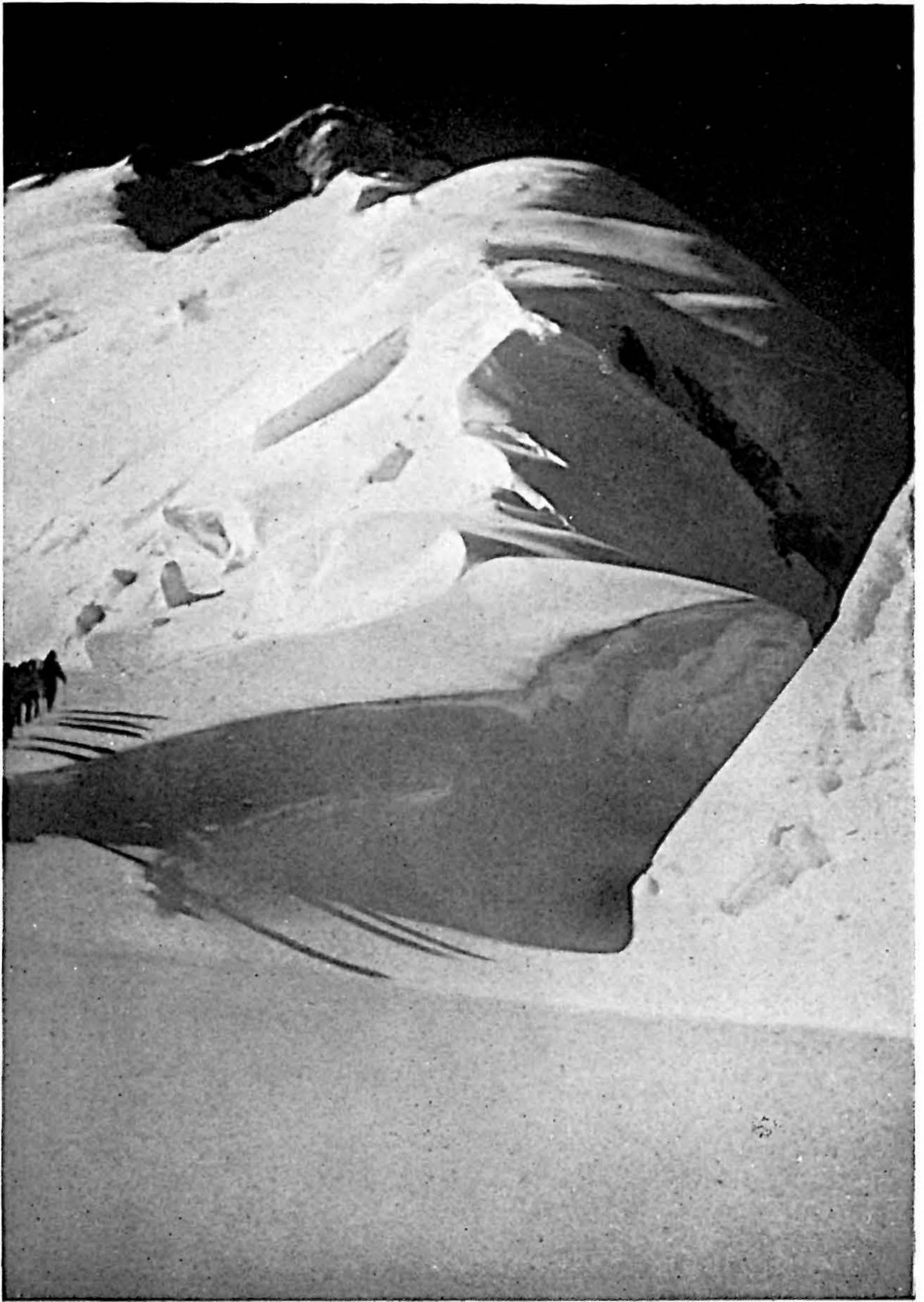
haversacks and water-bottles. One of them whom we attempted to photograph retorted by whipping out a camera himself. On the whole they were not pleased to see us and I was not delighted with them. The traveller in remote parts expects, indeed wishes, to find the natives unsophisticated enough to regard him with the respect which he seldom receives at home, but at Manang he will be disappointed. Apart from that they were not eager to sell us food or transport. Our money was little inducement; for their winter trading ventures seemed to be lucrative enough for them to devote the summer to drinking beer and raksi. Thrice happy mortals. On these forays into civilisation their stock in trade consists of musk pods, medicinal herbs, skins, and, I imagine, a great deal of impudence.

After prolonged scrutiny we took for our objective Annapurna IV (24,688 ft.) which stands on the ridge nearly two miles west of A. II. Sufficiently lofty in my opinion, but it had the advantage that if the party proved unexpectedly strong it would be possible to carry a camp along the ridge to the foot of the final pyramid of A. II.

On June 7, after some relaying of loads we set up Camp I at 18,000 ft. on a patch of scree. Above this a thousand feet of moderately steep snow led to an ice step which we had viewed with misgiving. It proved to be about 80 ft. high and cost us two days to hack out a staircase and to fix ropes. Upon striking the first blow in this battle I broke my second axe. I had already broken a brand new one cutting a step in a little icy gully on the way to Camp I. On the wall crampons for once proved worth their weight. While we worked on this the Sherpas carried, and on the 11th we hauled the loads up and occupied Camp II on a good snow shelf just above. Three times in four days Emlyn Jones had climbed to the foot of the step and each time had come near to collapse, so that finally he had to go down.

Two more days of relaying saw us established in Camp III at about 21,000 ft. on the main ridge. For this part of the route, which was long and winding, and where for the descent of the steepest part it was well to hit off the right place, we planted willow wands. So far the snow had been hard and the weather not more unkind than usual, but on the 14th a mass of cloud filled the valley to a height of 20,000 ft., betokening the onset of the monsoon current. A reconnaissance of the ridge ahead showed it to be less easy than had appeared from below. For once my judgment proved correct; by taking what looked like the hard way we struck out a very good line. As we gained height the aspect of the last thousand feet of A. II became more daunting, and A. IV, which once had been spoken of as a consolation prize, now figured as a very desirable first.

Next day we carried to Camp IV in a snug hollow just below the ridge at 22,500 ft. I left the others there and went back with the Sherpas, ostensibly to safeguard them, in reality because I felt extremely weak. A smart blizzard obliterated our upward tracks and I had to rest often by the way. Evans and Packard, particularly the former, were at this time going very strong.



ON WAY TO CAMP IV. ANNAPURNA IV AT BACK.

Snow in the night and dense mist at dawn seemed to promise me a day in bed, but the Sherpas started packing so I had to put a bold face on it. Happily one or two of them were capable of kicking steps as well as carrying loads, so that all I had to do—and it was enough—was to plod behind. Like wise men the occupants of Camp IV lay at earth.

Evans and Packard made their first attempt next day, the 17th. After $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours' climbing when they were well below the final shoulder, which is about 24,000 ft., they turned back on account of threatening weather—a threat which was amply fulfilled by a storm which raged until evening. However, they were satisfied that the summit could be reached from this camp.

In order to allow ample time we decided to make an early start. Accordingly next day the whole party less two Sherpas got under way at 5 A.M. of a cold, dull, windy morning. We had to cross nearly a $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of flat, crevassed ridge before the steep rise to the shoulder began—a promenade which afforded awesome glimpses into the cold, grey depths on the south side, and across them to the astonishing 'Fish-tail' peak, as 'Machha Pochare' means. Within ten minutes of starting Roberts and Gyalgen, our head Sherpa, turned back on account of numbed feet, a state of affairs which the powder snow lying on the ridge encouraged. On the slope, however, the storm had blown this way and packed the remaining snow so hard that steps had to be chipped. Progress was slow, and after going for an hour, when neither the sun seemed likely to shine nor the wind to drop, we too retreated. By the time our feet had thawed out, several hours later, the wind died and the sun shone brilliantly upon a perfect day.

Since no higher camp would be needed I sent the Sherpas, whose morale was low, to Camp III in charge of Roberts whose feet were slightly touched. Three of us and Da Namgyal remained in one tent (a Logan) from which we emerged next morning at a more sensible hour for a final attempt.

In two hours we reached a rock outcrop which appeared to be roughly on a level with the top of the 'Fish-tail,' nearly 23,000 ft. Evidently we were going slowly or our camp was not so high as we believed. Steps had to be kicked, most of the work being done by Packard, and at 23,500 ft. I became convinced that age and altitude would bring me to my knees any moment. I was strong enough to get down in safety and persuaded them to go on, hoping they would move faster. By midday they passed the shoulder and reckoned that only 600 ft. remained, though a candid friend—the altimeter—which I had urged them to take, put them at 23,800 ft. Anyhow at 24,000 or thereabouts Charles Evans came to the end of his tether, and Packard, who was still fit, was rightly loth to tackle the rather thin summit ridge alone.

Possibly Evans struck an off-day, for until then he had gone the best. I was disappointed with my own performance, for above Camp III I had neither carried a load nor kicked any steps to speak of. Of course,

a diet of hard biscuit combined with a toothless mouth (they were carelessly left in the Trisuli river the second day out) is unsustaining ; but the fact is that at heights above 22,000 ft. it soon becomes manifest that a man over 50 is declining to decrepitude. That only one man out of the four tried should be of use above 24,000 ft. is perhaps unusual, but it shows the desirability of more Himalayan trials. If no proved men are available for a future attempt on a big mountain one might have to resort to the expensive and inefficient expedient of numbers to make up for lack of known quality. Whether a strong party could climb A. II by this route I hesitate to affirm. Our opinion of the final difficulties changed at every fresh view point, but it is probably the only route and is worth trying.

After some much-needed rest four of us set out for a peak of 22,997 ft. which from the Annapurna ridge had seemed to invite assault. Roberts, whose feet were troubling him, took over the bird collecting, ably assisted by Lt. S. B. Malla of the Nepalese army who had been detailed to accompany us as escort.

This venture was a shot in the dark. We had seen only the upper part of our mountain and in the prevailing conditions of cloud, mist, and a little rain we were not likely to see more. Crossing a 17,000 ft. pass to the north we reached the village of Naurgaon (14,000 ft.), to the east of which, across a deep gorge, lay our peak. That afternoon we were allowed a brief glimpse of the summit above the mist and of the base of the mountain below it. What lay between was anyone's guess. However, all went well and after four unpleasantly wet and blind days, one in a rock gulley where success hung in the balance, we camped on the edge of a dry glacier above the cloud belt. Our next camp at 19,800 ft. was at the foot of a steep snow slope of perhaps 1,500 ft. leading to the easy summit ridge. We anticipated little trouble in putting a high camp there and most of us thought the peak was in the bag. But after a hundred feet or so of excellent snow the covering grew thinner and the angle steeper until we were obliged to cut large bucket steps for the laden Sherpas. After ascending 400 ft. very slowly it was clear we should never put a camp on the ridge, so we carved a platform in the ice and left Emlyn Jones and Packard there as a forlorn hope to see if they could climb it in a day with the help of crampons. Emlyn Jones appeared to have mastered his 19,000 ft. complex.

Some snow in the night did not improve their chance. Next morning it was soon apparent to Evans and I, who had the doubtful pleasure of both seeing and hearing them at work, that they would not get far. They found it necessary to cut steps to safeguard their descent and after climbing 400 ft. in four hours they gave up. The predicting of snow conditions in the Himalaya would puzzle Old Moore. To find such a long continuous ice slope early in July was a shock for the veteran of the party who, in his wisdom and experience, had declared that the most likely bar to success would be deep, soft snow.

In mid-July three of the party started home; barren, alas, in achievement, but rich, one hopes, in experience. Leaving botanist and

ornithologist busy after their kind I returned to Naugaon accompanied by two Sherpas, bent on crossing a pass to Mustangbhot at the head of the Kali valley. Known to the locals as the Mustang La this pass is not shown on the map, but near the Tibet border the map is extremely vague. We could get no help from Naurgaon where they affirmed, quite rightly, that the river which the route to the pass crosses would not be fordable until late September. So we pushed on up the Naur valley to the last village this side of the Tibet border with the intention of making a route from there along the north side of the offending river. Under extreme pressure from the headman two men of Phugaon volunteered to come with us, but before embarking on this venture we visited a pass on the Ladakh range two days north. Flocks of sheep and goats carrying salt and rice across this pass (Kongyur La) 19,000 ft. high, which even in high summer is crowned by half a mile of snow field. On the Tibet side there is said to be no village for five marches. It is a cruel pass for animals who, before reaching the comparative oasis of the snow field, have to climb for a thousand feet along the base of a huge cliff from which stones fall with alarming frequency and appalling velocity. Some local men with us tackled this piece in short, sharp rushes, pausing to draw much-needed breath, crouched as close as possible to the foot of the cliff. What time the foolish flock took its chance well out in the beaten zone.

We found and crossed the Mustang La on the fourth day from Phugaon. Having found for them an alternative route to its vicinity, we turned to our guides for guidance to its exact position, only to learn that they had never been near the place. At length we spotted a faint track across the river which was by now fordable, for we were less than a mile from its glacier source. After frequently losing our way we got down to Tange village near the Kali. The upper basin of this river occupies a curious salient which juts north into Tibet, in which direction there appeared to be a wide gap in the Ladakh range. Whether the Kali pierces this diminished range as well as the main Himalaya is apparently conjectural, for the river's course on the map is indicated by only a dotted line. Here the Kali occupies a wide gravel bed shut in by vertical cliffs surmounted by old terraces; behind rise wildly eroded and weirdly coloured hills of cobalt, slate, mauve, chrome and orange, blending to an inky blue over distant Tibet. In this desolate waste, relieved only by the infrequent oasis of some village lying in a side nallah, there is never a tree, hardly a shrub or a blade of grass. Mustang village is the exchange mart for salt from Tibet, whence it is carried down to the east bank of this arid valley to Muktinath, where grass first appears, and thence to Tukucha, at the foot of Dhaulagiri, where it is changed for rice.

We followed this route high above the river, passing hundreds of sheep and goats with their little saddle-bags, until in two days we reached the celebrated Hindu pilgrim resort of Muktinath. It lies at 12,000 ft. in a green, well-watered valley. The wheat had just been cut and threshing with flails was literally in full swing. On the other

side of the Kali valley and a little south Dhaulagiri rises majestically, but Annapurna I on the near side is hidden. During the few days we had it in view Dhaulagiri seemed singularly free from cloud; which, together with the barren nature of the country north of it, seems to imply that the monsoon is of even less effect here than in Manangbhot.

Besides the temple to Narayan and the 108 spouts from which the pilgrim successively drinks of the sacred water, a curious thing may be seen in a dilapidated gompa hard by. At one end on a rock shelf sits the usual gilded Buddha, but beneath this natural altar are three curtained apertures in each of which burns a lambent blue flame, presumably of natural gas. A small stream flows through the centre one and the flame issues from so close to the water that it appears to be burning on the surface. Having discarded their boots the Sherpas prostrated themselves before the altar and were thus able to examine the flames at their ease; my examination was perforce perfunctory, the old crone in charge withdrawing the curtains with some reluctance for the benefit of one who so obviously was not seeking the Way. The Sherpas bottled some of this holiest of water for their friends.

After returning to Manangbhot by a 17,000 ft. pass we spent our last month at the head of the Dudh Khola (Milk river) which collects its water from the north slopes of Manaslu and from three glaciers on the south side of the Ladakh range. These three were the only true glaciers, with high moraines and several miles of debris-covered ice, which we had seen. The Annapurna, and even the Manaslu glaciers, are mere ice-falls which peter out at about 14,000 ft. before reaching the valley floor. That a range 25 miles long with an average height of possibly 23,000 ft. should have on its *north* side no glacier worth the name implies a light precipitation and a general angle too steep for snow to lie long.

In a pleasant meadow in the ablation valley of this Dudh Khola glacier at a height of 12,000 ft. is Bimtakhoti which comprises a few stone houses and a store for salt and rice. During the summer a constant stream of coolies from lower Nepal bring their maund-loads of rice to exchange for salt at the rate of 16 measures of rice for 25 salt. The salt comes first to Larkya, a place at the head of the Buri Gandaki the next valley to the east, whence zos or sheep bring it over a 17,000 ft. pass to Bimtakhoti.

Roberts, by now sick of bird-skins, had promised to join me here for a climb. Pending his arrival I went in search of a mountain which might satisfy our dwindling ambitions, but while boulder-hopping I had a fall which resulted in a damaged back. After lying very still for five days I felt equal to being carried down to Bimtakhoti by the Sherpas where another fortnight was spent in recovery. We had now little time left so after Roberts had returned from a trip to the Buri Gandaki we went down the Marsyandi and up a long, forested ridge to a sacred lake at the foot of Himal Chuli. The only possible way up this mountain is from above this lake, but it looked to us a difficult and dangerous route. The monsoon stopped abruptly on

September 20, allowing us to walk back to Katmandu in the only settled weather we had had.

The expedition spent very nearly the estimated amount of £300 a head. Members of the party subscribed £1,050 and for the balance of £800 we are indebted to the Himalayan Committee, the R.G.S., British Museum, R.H.S., the Percy Sladen Trust, and the Godman Fund. We are also deeply grateful to Sir George and Lady Falconer, and Col. R. R. Proud who looked after us in Katmandu; and to the Nepal Durbar for their permission and assistance.

Short Trip to the Nepal side of Everest

Upon returning to Katmandu early in October I was asked by Mr. Oscar Houston to join his party which was starting at the end of October for Solu Khumbu. This is the district on the Nepal side of Everest from which the Sherpas come. I had had a bellyful of 'bummelling' along the valleys of Nepal and this journey would take a fortnight each way of such 'bummelling' and allow only a week at the foot of the mountain. The lure, however, was not to be withstood. Mr. Houston's son, Dr. Charles Houston, who had been on Nanda Devi and had led the very successful reconnaissance of K2, was flying from New York to join us; there was also Mrs. Betsy Cowles, a well known American climber, and another American, Anderson Bakewell, from the Jesuit College at Kurseong, near Darjeeling. Thus with a doctor to heal us, a woman to feed us, and a priest to pray for us, we could face the future with equanimity. As the proverb says, Prayer and Provender hinder no man's journey.

On October 29 we all met at Jogbani, the Indian railhead which serves the industries of Birat Nagar just over the Nepal border where there are jute, cotton, and sugar mills, a sawmill and a match factory owned by Indians and run with Indian labour. A lorry took us 40 miles through the 'terai' on a fair road before we took to our feet for the long climb to Dankhuta. This is the capital of the Dankhuta district and the residence of the Governor, one of the Rana family, who provided us with an escort and an itinerary. Both are needed, for though the Nepalese are not opposed to strangers they are not used to them; and as for the route, it was seldom that indicated on the map which is badly in need of revision.

From 4,000 ft. we dropped to 1,000 ft. in the Arun valley which we followed for 3 days before turning westwards. Three passes of between 10,000 ft. and 11,000 ft. had to be crossed before we reached the Dudh Kosi river, three marches below Namche Bazaar. We were now in Khumbu, the district of Solu lying to the west of the river; and since crossing the first pass the very numerous mani walls and chortens showed that Hinduism had been left behind. It is a matter of altitude as much as anything, for one seldom finds Gurkhas living above 8,000 ft., or Sherpas or any of the Tibetan-like people below it. Before



LHOTSE—NUPTSE RIDGE.

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climbing up to Namche at 11,000 ft. we several times crossed the Dudh Kosi which is a remarkably small river for one that drains not only the Everest group, but also that of Cho Oyo (26,750 ft.) and Gyachung Khang (25,910 ft.). It is bridged by wooden cantilever bridges which seldom need to span more than 20 yards.

At Namche there are about 30 houses but little cultivation. I imagine the people live by the salt and rice traffic which is carried on over the Nangpa La (19,000 ft.) to Tingri Dzong and Rongbuk. Six miles up the valley from Namche by an excellent track is Thyangboche monastery, a smaller counterpart of Rongbuk on the other side of the mountain. Everest, or rather the Lhotse-Nuptse ridge, which the monks indiscriminately call Chomo Lungma, fills the head of the valley. On a grassy saddle, surrounded by birch and firs, the monastery appears less austere than Rongbuk. Within, too, it is less austere, for at Thyangboche they fortify their guests with 'raksi' before breakfast.

Leaving the rest at this very congenial sanctuary, Charles Houston and I went on up the valley and then north up the Khumbu glacier to within 4 miles of the Lho La where we camped at 15,000 ft. This glacier is fed from the West Cwm and the slopes of Pumo Ri; the only other main glacier descends from Pethangtse to the east of the mountain and the southern slopes of Lhotse. The Khumbu, pinnacled like the East Rongbuk, is about a mile wide and possibly 6 miles long. According to the locals the monsoon here is as heavy¹ as in Sikkim, and the lichen-draped juniper and birch confirm this; yet the glaciers seem unnaturally small for their parent mountains, and to the inexperienced eye there is no sign of ancient glaciation at more than 5 miles below the present snout. The south face of Everest and the long Lhotse-Nuptse ridge in front of it are too steep to hold snow and the valleys are lower than on the north side; which, together with the high temperatures of a southern aspect, will account for the absence of big glaciers.

The West Cwm, up which we should have gone but did not, is a mere slit which terminates in an ice-fall close to the Lho La. Even from the west side of the Khumbu glacier at about 18,000 ft. we could not see the head of it or even the South Col between Lhotse and Everest, the lowest point of which is 25,850 ft. Seen from due west across a precipitous face, the rocks of the South ridge looked so steep that we dismissed the hope of there being a route. But were we looking at the true edge of the ridge? Further round to the east snow lies on this ridge, and from pictures of its profile taken from the Kama glacier in 1921 the angle there appears more reasonable. The South Col lies at the foot of this ridge and the only possibility of reaching that—if there is a possibility—is from the West Cwm, which would, I think, be an unpleasant and dangerous place for an advanced base. Thus, although we cannot yet dismiss the south side, I think it is safe to say that there is no route comparable in ease and safety—at any rate up to 28,000 ft.—to that by the north-east.

¹ Figures for this should soon be available from a snow and rain gauge at Namche Bazaar left by Dr. Bannerjee of the Indian Meteorological Department.



NORTH PEAK, LHO-LA AND EVEREST FROM THE WEST.

It is idle to discuss the approach via Nepal if there is no route on the mountain ; but the only advantage it has that I can see is political and that may be only temporary. In 1949 the Nepal Durbar refused to let us go to the Everest region and sent us instead to the Langtang, and the freedom of access to the Nepal Himalaya which now obtains may be withdrawn. The Nepal route is a week shorter than the Tibetan. But instead of mules one would have to employ large numbers of coolies for whom food is not readily obtainable en route ; no acclimatisation would be acquired by the party, and against the colds and sore throats due to Tibetan dust and wind there is the more dangerous risk of malaria.