

## GERMAN CHITRAL EXPEDITION, 1965<sup>1</sup> (THE ASCENT OF FALAK SAR)

BY STEFF RAUSCH

(Three illustrations: nos. 45-47)

JUNE, 1965. The exertions of the journey through the Balkans, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan are behind us. Not only the participants but also the expedition's truck suffered badly, so we had to be towed over the Khyber Pass to Pakistan. In Peshawar we had long negotiations with Pakistan officials but we were not allowed to enter Chitral in view of the frontier dispute with India. Our disappointment was great, but by an inexplicable Asiatic decision we were allowed to enter the principality of Swat, which is nearer to the disputed border than Chitral.

It is only during the last fifteen years that mountaineering exploration in Swat has been carried out by a limited number of expeditions; earlier, Europeans were not tolerated in this part of the country.<sup>2</sup> The peaks in the area are unfortunately not as high as the mountains of Chitral and there was no information about them at our disposal.

We came by way of Malakand into the fertile and fruitful valley of Swat. The village of Kalam is the starting point for ascents in the Mankial Peaks. With a motley column of porters we set out for this rugged group of mountains. Camp was pitched at 3150 m. Our porters, a bold-looking company, some of them armed with rifles, could not be employed as high altitude porters, as the terrain ahead of us would be too difficult for them; even for us it would not be very easy to find a way through these shattered cliffs and steep ice-fields. For the first few days we had bad luck with the weather. Storms, typical off-shoots of the monsoon, swept over the district every afternoon. Our first attempt at climbing ended with a bivouac and descent in a snowstorm. Then, after a difficult climb, we stood, in a rising storm, on the summit of our first five thousander; it was the North-east *Vorgipfel* of Mankial Peak and to all appearances we were the first to make the ascent. The descent in a snowstorm of hurricane force made considerable demands upon us.

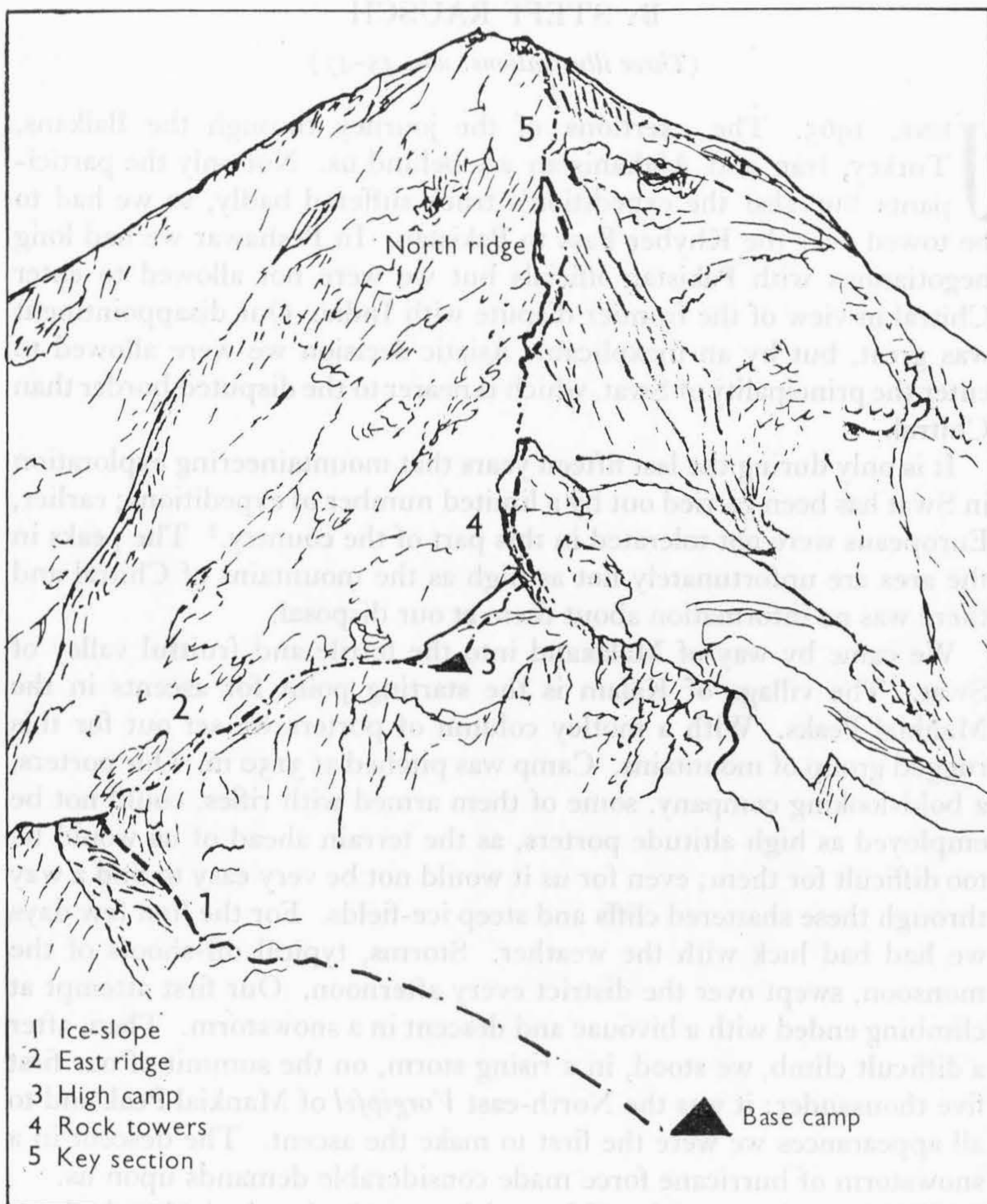
Our next aim was the 'Mustagh', a peak that had already been climbed. A camp was pitched at 4200 m., and on a perfect day we reached the *c.* 5100 m. summit by a new route over the North-west

<sup>1</sup> The members of the expedition were: Steff Rausch (leader); Franz Grundner, Wolfgang Hasse, and Eugen Näf.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. Holdsworth's party, however, had made the first ascent of Mankial in 1940.

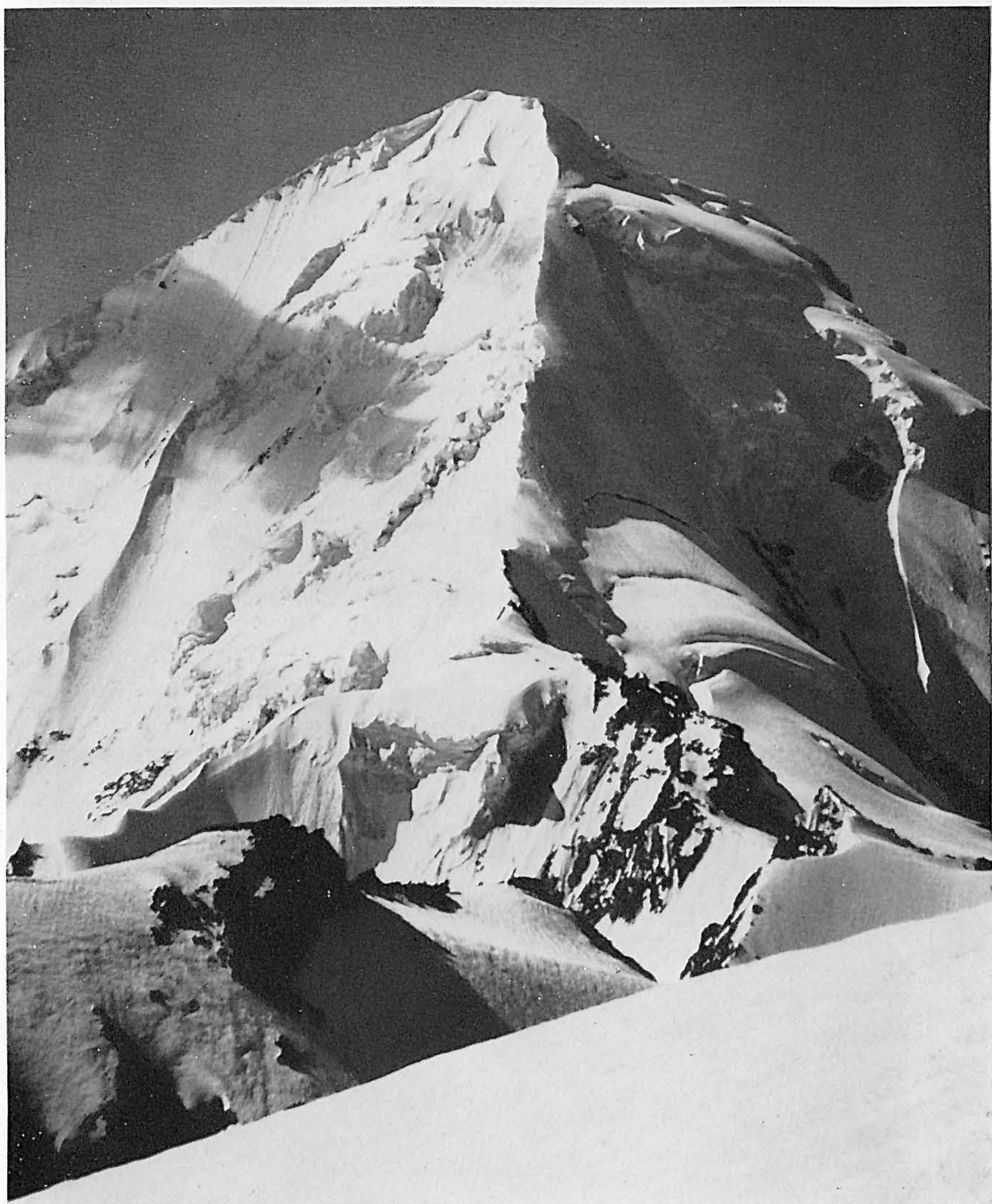
Outline sketches of the ridges were made and the panorama photographed and we went down by the route taken on the first ascent, which fortunately for us proved to be easier than the North-west ridge.

Many of the neighbouring summits attracted us, but we wanted to climb Falak Sar, 5918 m., the highest mountain in Swat.



NORTH RIDGE OF FALAK SAR (5918 M.), SHOWING ROUTE OF ASCENT

We were told by an officer of police, who seemed to be well-informed, that the mountain had been attempted several times but had not yet been climbed. It lies south of Gilgit and south-east of Chitral, between the river Ushu and the Indus. For two days we marched northwards

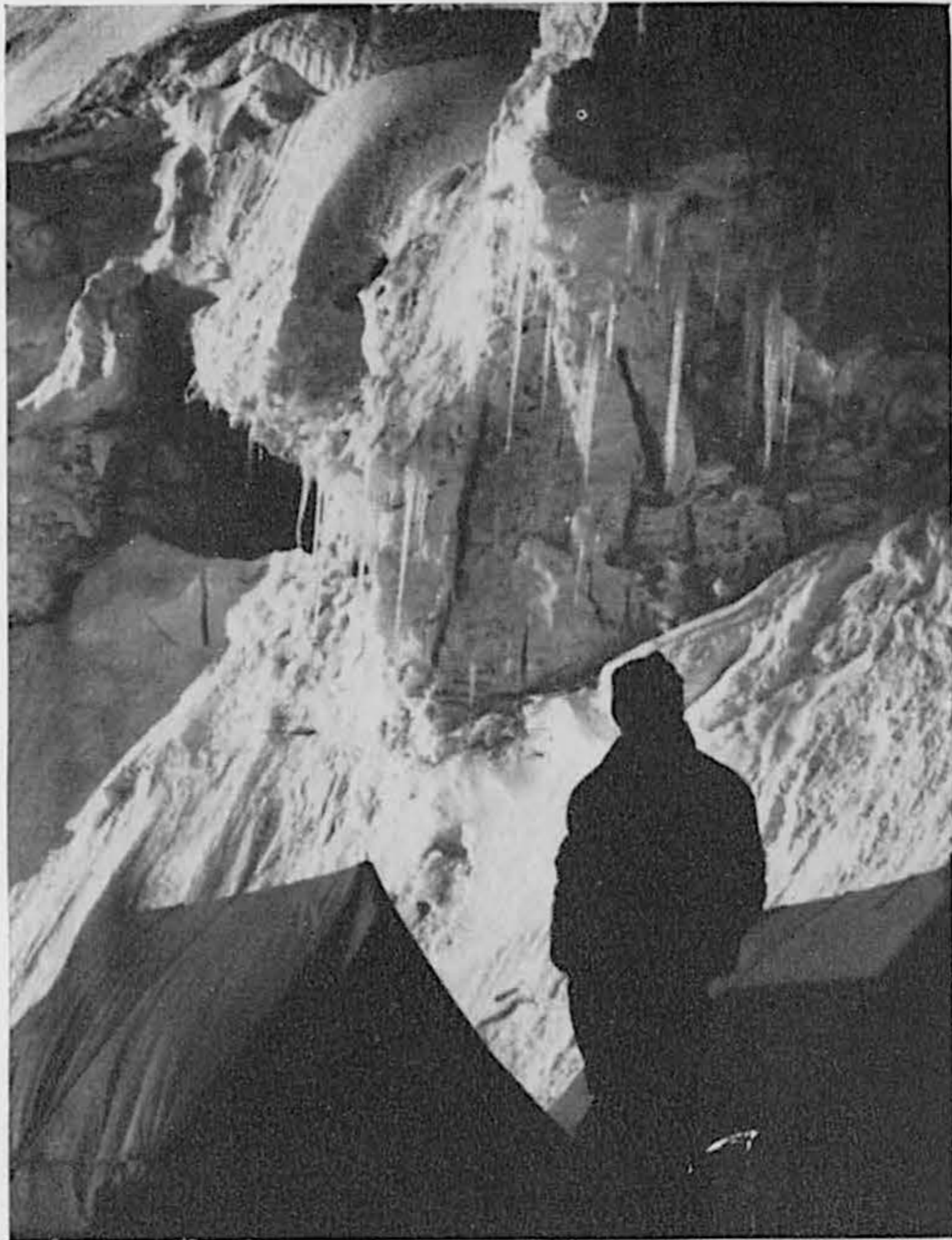


*Expedition photo]*

FALAK SAR (5918 M.), NORTH RIDGE (CENTRE).

(This photograph should be compared with the sketch on p. 216)

(No. 45)



*Expedition photo]*

FALAK SAR: HIGH CAMP.

(No. 46)



*Expedition photo]*

ON THE SUMMIT OF FALAK SAR.

(No. 47)

with our column of porters beside the wildly rushing Ushu. Then the direction of our march changed. We went eastwards over steep, wooded slopes and after a wide detour reached the mountain from the north. At 3600 m. we reached glacier level. Most of the porters were bare-footed and there was nothing else to do but send them back. During the following days we humped our loads up the glacier and established our Base Camp at 4300 m. From here we had a good view of the summit structure. The completely ice-clad North slope is covered in its upper portion with huge ice towers ready to fall at any moment, while hanging glaciers and snow terraces sparkled on the North-east face. There were numerous avalanche tracks which ruled out any prospect of an ascent here. But a route might be possible by the heavily corniced North ridge which separates the two faces.

From the Base Camp the route led through a labyrinth of crevasses, then up an ice-slope to the airy East ridge by way of which we reached a plateau at 5100 m., where we established a camp. After several days of bad weather it was not until July 18 that we could again turn our thoughts to the ascent of Falak Sar.

The North ridge could not be reached immediately from the camp. After crossing some crevasses we came to fragile, icy, rock towers which, with considerable difficulty, were avoided by traversing round them on the west side. After three rope lengths on the rocks and a traverse on steep ice we were able to climb up to the North ridge. This begins at an angle of  $45^\circ$  but steepens quickly. Eugen and Wolfgang complained of loss of feeling in their toes. On account of the formation of the cornices we were frequently forced out on to the West face. Hour after hour went by, the ascent becoming ever steeper and more exhausting. Some 200 m. below the summit we came to the crucial point, a perpendicular snow wall, several metres high. The overcoming of this wall was the most dangerous piece of work we have ever experienced in the mountains. In the wind-packed snow, no ice piton would hold and any idea of security from the ice-axe was illusory.

We plunged our arms into the snow up to our shoulders and struggled upwards in a most non-alpine fashion. We feared that the whole slope would slip away. Twice the snow broke away beneath me, for I am heavier than my companions. In desperation I battled on, my heart pounding as if it would burst; I gasped with the effort of such heavy labour at this altitude. There was no possibility of security should the snow break away. At last we found a little plateau to our right on the  $70^\circ$  steep slope on which we could take off our rucksacks for a while. On the final steep slope we encountered dangerous transverse crevasses. At 1.20 p.m., eight hours after leaving camp, we stood on the summit, a round snow dome a few square metres in area.

A sea of clouds surrounded us on all sides. Falak Sar is in such a

position that from it the mountains of several countries can be seen. To the west lay the central Hindu Kush in Afghanistan; to the north rose the mountains of Chitral, to which our approach had been barred. After the peaks of the Hindu Kush came the Pamirs followed by the mighty chains of the Karakorum. Nanga Parbat rose clearly in the distance though 180 kilometres away. We were fortunate that we were permitted not only to see all the grandeur of this magnificent mountain world, but also to record it in sketches and photographs. For a short while we enjoyed a rest on the top and then started on the airy and dangerous descent. It required a great effort to get on to the steep snowslope. The descent became a race against time and we reached the tents of the high camp as darkness fell.

We made a few more expeditions, in the course of which some minor peaks and passes were climbed so that we could take photographs of the remote valleys and get as good a look as possible at the innermost parts of Swat and at adjacent Kashmir. Then our porters arrived and we had to leave this mountain paradise.

Nobody in Peshawar could repair our vehicle and we were compelled to make an adventurous journey by train to Karachi; and then by ship through the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal to Venice. On August 20 we arrived home.

Only now did we learn that in 1960, 1962, and 1964 British and Italian expeditions had unsuccessfully attempted the ascent of Falak Sar and also, to our amazement, that in 1957 two New Zealanders are said to have climbed it. Their account, however, in no way agrees with the conditions we met. Conspicuous features like the rock towers or the steep snow wall were not mentioned and to our great astonishment we read that the summit plateau was big enough for a game of Rugby football. Nobody who has stood on the little summit dome can support this assertion. However, whether we made the first ascent or the second ascent, the experience remains the decisive factor for us, coupled with the tremendous impressions we brought home.

Our experiences during the journey and in the mountains have enriched our lives, and our heartiest thanks are due to the supporters and friends who by their help made possible this great expedition.