

AN EXPEDITION IN THE SIKKIM
HIMALAYA

BY JOHN HUNT

EARLY in 1937 my wife and I received an invitation from C. R. Cooke, who had climbed Kabru in 1935, to accompany him on a small expedition which he was planning for the autumn of that year in the Kangchenjunga massif.¹

The original intention was to attempt the ascent of a spur thrown out by the great E. ridge of Kangchenjunga, which we hoped might give access to Peak 1 (7775 m., 25,508 ft.). We later decided, however, that an attempt on the North Col from the Zemu Glacier would not only have more chances of success, but might provide a future route to Peak 3 (8579 m., 28,146 ft.), the highest summit.

Thus it was that on October 9 the party, which consisted of C. R. Cooke, my wife, and myself, left Darjeeling with 50 coolies for the Teesta valley. Six days later we had reached Lachen, a small village at a height of 9,000 ft. up the Lachen Chu, at which point we must leave civilization for the next two months. We met here a German party who had just returned from the Zemu Glacier, where we intended to make our base, and heard from them with some misgiving of the very unfavourable snow conditions prevailing above 14,000 ft., owing to a heavy precipitation of snow since the beginning of the month. They had, however, succeeded in making the second ascent of Siniolchu (6891 m., 22,608 ft.).

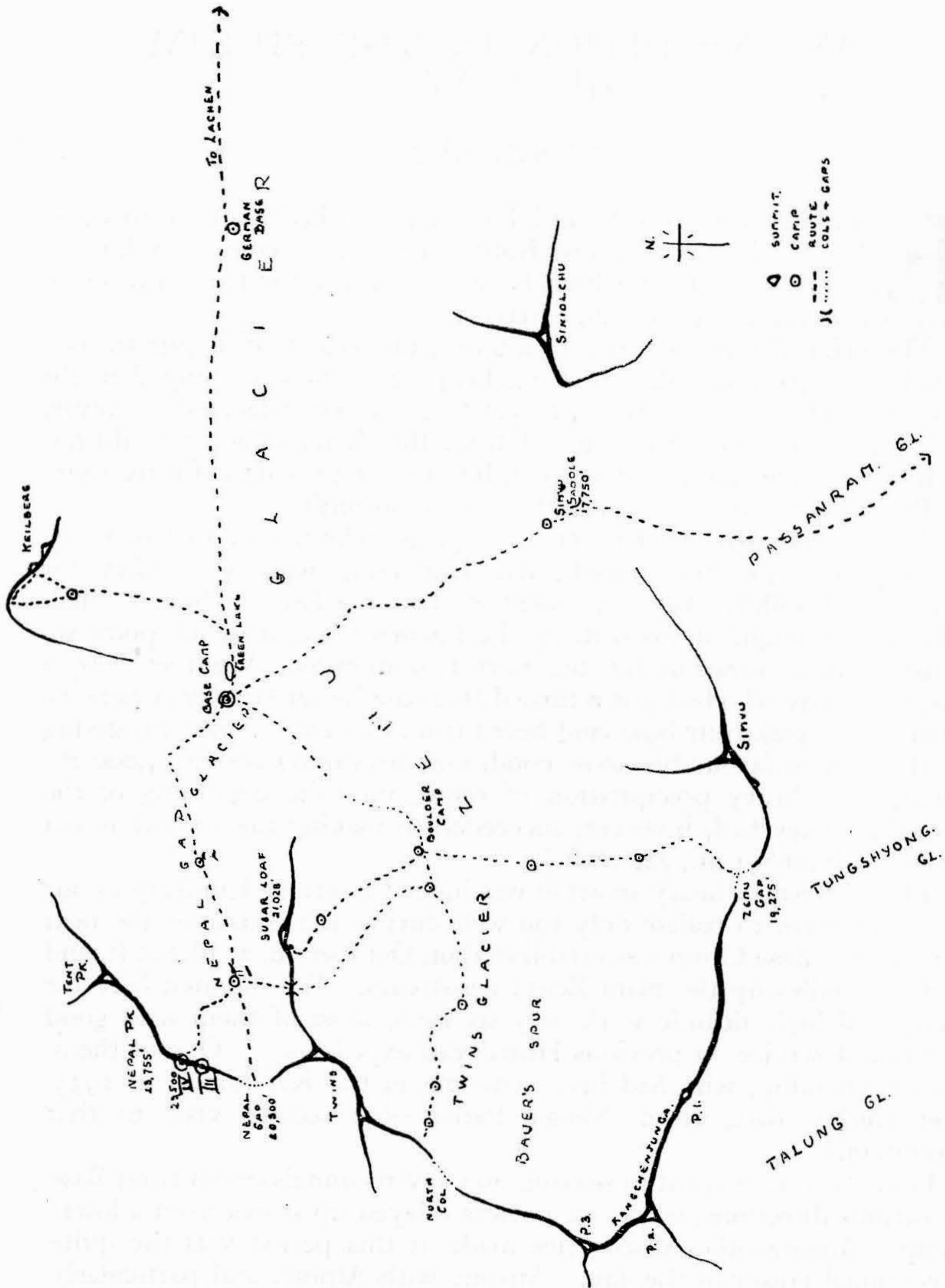
That the recent heavy snowfall was indeed a serious handicap to our plans we were to realize only too well during the course of the next fortnight. Base Camp was established on October 18, at 16,200 ft. and some 10 miles up the main Zemu ice-stream. We retained here for camp and high altitude work only six men, most of them with good records of service on previous Himalayan expeditions. One of them, Dawa Thondup, who had been with me in the Karakoram in 1935, was freshly back from Nanga Parbat—his second visit to that mountain.²

Four days were spent in making one-day reconnaissances from Base in various directions, while our porters relayed up stores from a lower camp. Among other discoveries made at this period was the quite exceptional power of the sun. Anyone with Alpine, and particularly Himalayan experience, is well acquainted with severe blistering, but a novelty to me was the pronounced swelling of face, lips, and hands.

¹ See map *A. J.* 44. opp. 176 ; heights here given are based on Finsterwalder's 1931 map (Bauer, *Um den Kantsch*).

² *A. J.* 46. 427.

Even our Sherpa porters had their faces almost blackened by the sun, and when the usual pigments failed, we resorted to face-masks.



SKETCH-MAP OF THE ZEMU GLACIER (FROM M. KURZ'S MAP), SHOWING ROUTES AND CAMPS.

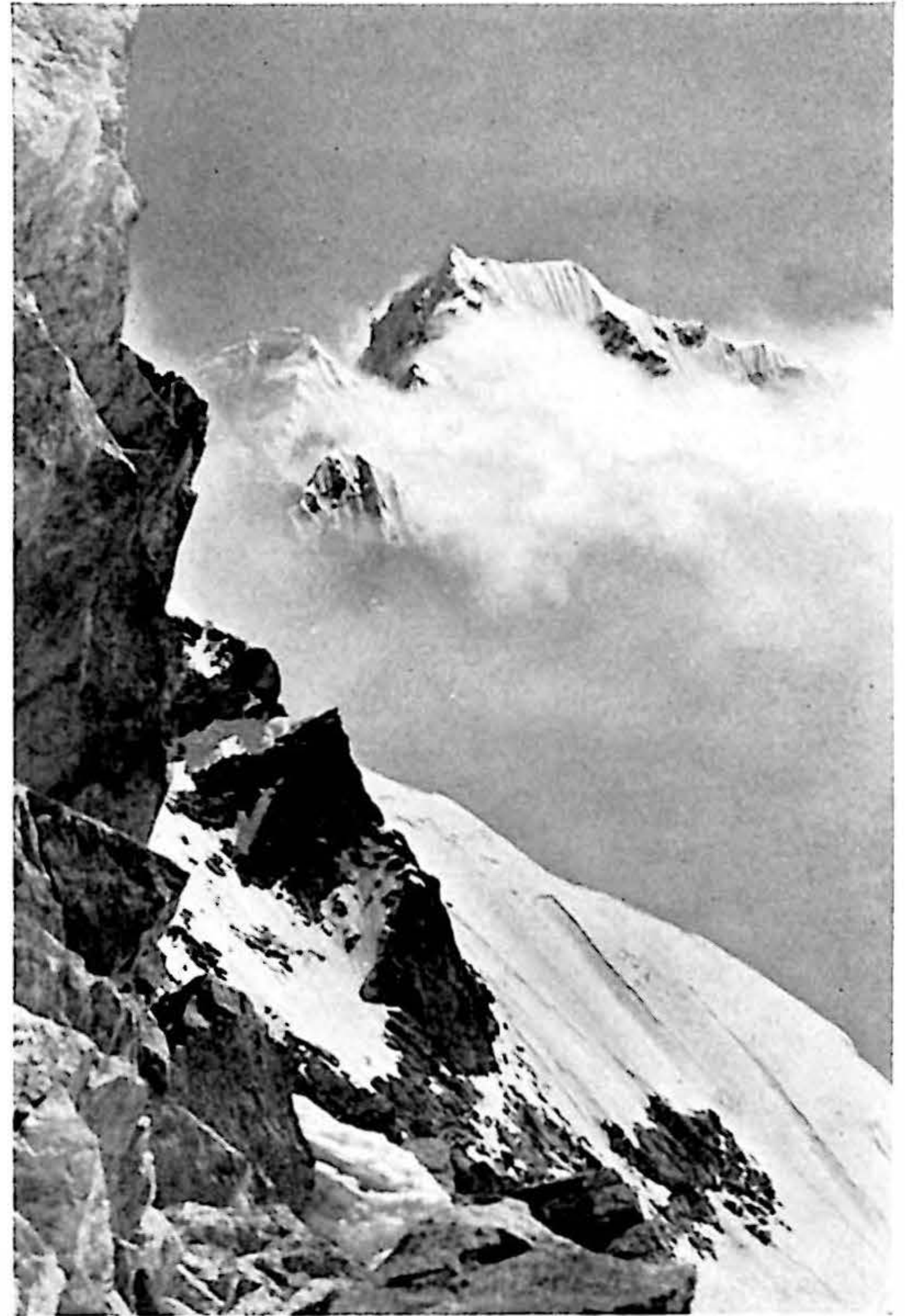
On the 23rd, when Base was complete with equipment and stores, the party moved up to the Twins Glacier, which flows from the foot of the North Col of Kangchenjunga, with the object of making a preliminary inspection of the latter, and in order to climb the Sugarloaf³

³ A. J. 44. 19n.



Photo, J. Hunt.]

LOWER SUMMIT OF THE TWINS, FROM 21,000 FT.
ON SUGARLOAF.



Photo, J. Hunt.]

SINIOLCHU FROM SUGARLOAF, W. RIDGE.

[To face p. 110.]



Photo, J. Hunt.]

FROM SIMVU SADDLE, CLOUDS OVER PASSANRAM GLACIER.



Photo, J. Hunt.]

EVEREST GROUP FROM CAMP III ON NEPAL PEAK (21,400 FT.).

(6440 m., 21,028 ft.) by way of acclimatizing. My wife and I made an attempt on this mountain on the 25th from a camp pitched at nearly 20,000 ft. on the Sugarloaf Glacier—Cooke at this time was unfit and unable to accompany us. Track-making at any height over 16,000 ft. in deep snow is an exhausting affair, and had been necessary ever since leaving the glacier snout on the 17th; on the Sugarloaf Glacier these conditions were made worse by the wind, which had formed a breakable crust on the snow surface. By the time we had reached the W. ridge of the mountain we were wellnigh exhausted, and at about 21,000 ft. it was decided to retreat. We were perhaps not yet well acclimatized, and it would have been foolish not to conserve our efforts for the more important projects. We descended to the Twins Glacier that evening to rejoin Cooke, who had been able on the previous day to reconnoitre part of the route up the Twins Glacier icefall towards the foot of the North Col. A return was made to Base on the 26th.

At this juncture there occurred a series of setbacks to our plans. First Rinsing, our best porter, became seriously ill with some virulent form of fever. A few days later, in the course of an expedition up the Nepal Gap Glacier carrying a relay of stores for our intended attempt to climb Nepal Peak (7180 m., 23,556 ft.), another porter, Pasang Chakadi, was likewise taken ill. Nursing two men in conditions of very severe cold such as were experienced at Base Camp, and with limited medical knowledge and resources, was not an easy matter. For the time being at any rate, we could not leave for our intended enterprise, and we were in any case seriously short of carrying power.

Moreover, the weather, which had been exceptionally good since we left Darjeeling, had temporarily broken, and snow, accompanied by wind, was a regular feature at Base Camp from now onwards. Such was the situation from October 27 to November 1; but we were not entirely idle during that time, for apart from the preliminary visit to the Nepal Gap Glacier, a first ascent was made of the lower (snow) summit of the Keilberg, a 19,980 ft. (6090 m.) peak above Base Camp, and a track was made across the glacier in view of an intended visit to the Simvu La at a later period. By November 1 the invalids were distinctly better, and with the return of settled weather conditions on the 2nd, we felt justified in leaving on that day with the remaining men and a second relay of stores, for our attempt on the Nepal Peak. My wife, who came with us as far as the dump which we had left on October 28, returned to Base in order to escort the sick porters to Lachen as soon as they could walk.

Camp II was pitched next day at 19,000 ft. near the head of the glacier, after a gruelling march over a vile breakable wind-crust, and while the porters returned on the 4th to bring up the remaining loads from Camp I, Cooke and I climbed the 20,000 ft. Nepal Gap in the teeth of a wind, the force of which had to be experienced to be believed. We were to become only too well acquainted with this, a feature of the season at this end of the Himalayan chain.

On the 5th we established Camp III at 21,400 ft., in a most sensational

spot directly under the cornice of the S.W. ridge of our peak, by which we were to ascend next day. As we emerged through the cornice on the following morning, an unforgettable view was obtained of the Everest group, framed between a middle-ground of tremendous precipices, and standing above a vista of peaks in Nepal. Fortune favoured us that day, for the wind on the exposed ridge was moderate (for the last time during our stay), and we were able to pitch our tent—Camp IV—at about 22,300 ft. by 1.30 P.M. All seemed set for a successful ascent, but we were unlucky. Cooke was very unfit next morning, and an attempt by myself to continue above merely served to show that the wind was dangerously strong, even on easy ground. We set out at 12 noon when it had somewhat abated, but as Cooke was still weak from inability to eat, I went ahead alone, and wearing crampons, ascended rapidly by a long steep snow slope, some 700 ft. in height, to the foot of the summit ridge. This slope had been in a dangerous condition when the German party had attempted the peak about six weeks earlier, and had caused them to turn back at a point slightly higher than the site of our Camp IV. It was now in perfect condition, and at 1.20 P.M. I had reached the S.W. summit⁴ (7145 m., 23,641 ft.), only to find that progress from here to the highest point (35 m. higher) would be quite impossible owing to the force of the wind. There was no doubt that any party, let alone a single climber, attempting to traverse the narrow crest would have been blown from their steps.

A second night was spent at the high camp, in the hope of better fortune next morning, but Cooke was no better and conditions (wind) worse. After I had climbed again sufficiently far to confirm that there would be no chance of traversing from the point reached on the previous afternoon to the highest summit, we deemed it necessary to descend, with the satisfaction of having made an ascent of the lower peak.

We returned to Base two days later, after a magnificent expedition *via* the Twins Glacier, to which we made a first direct route from the Nepal Gap Glacier over the Twins–Sugarloaf ridge, after sending down two of our porters by the ordinary route. This was perhaps the most successful episode in the programme.

The third phase of our operations opened on the 13th when we all three again moved to our camp (Boulder Camp) on the Twins Glacier. To make the most of our now limited time, it was decided from here for Cooke, with the two best men, Dawa Thondup and Pasang Kikuli, to move up to, inspect at close quarters, and if feasible attempt the ascent of the North Col. My wife and I were at the same time to make a second attempt on the Sugarloaf, subsequently visiting the Zemu Gap (5875 m., 19,275 ft.), in view of our hope of returning to Darjeeling by a new route. We took with us one porter, Pasang, and for want of

⁴ One of the summits was climbed by Schneider on May 23, 1930 (*A. J.* 42. 216, *H. J.* iii. 87). Göttner and Wien climbed the S.W. summit (7145 m.) on September 10, 1936 (*A. J.* 49. 44, *H. J.* ix. 65, *Die Alpen*, December 1936).

a trained man, a Nepali, Hawang, who had been employed at Base. The latter found difficulty in moving with a load up steep slopes, and somewhat delayed progress. It was only by relieving him of most of it and carrying it between us, that we were able to pitch our tents that day somewhat higher than before, in a very windy spot. The wind, which blew continually for the rest of the day and night, was hardly encouraging for success.

Next day we succeeded in climbing some 200 ft. higher than last time on the W. ridge over considerable difficulties, but the process of moving one at a time exposed to the violent wind had completely numbed us—a large frostbite blister was a subsequent result. Conditions were indeed unsuitable either for the traversing of narrow ridges or the tackling of technical difficulties. Moreover, as we made our way down the ridge and along the glacier, hounded by violent gusts and blinding snow, we realized that the force of the wind was increasing. Kangchenjunga was a scene of wild turmoil as we further descended with our tents and belongings to the Twins Glacier.

The Zemu Gap was successfully reached by the porter Pasang and myself during the following three days. Situated at the head of the Zemu Glacier at a height of 19,275 ft., it consists of a sensational depression in the ridge connecting the Simvu massif with Kangchenjunga. It has long been debated whether or not it can be crossed in either direction, thus making a very direct route as well as a first-rate expedition between the Rangit valley and the Zemu Glacier.

At the time of my visit, however, the matter had already been placed beyond our scope by the shortage of porters, for Hawang had, on return from the Sugarloaf, announced that he was unwell. My wife had thus the thankless task of escorting him back to Base Camp—he was in any case quite unsuitable for moving over difficult ground. This was disappointing, for from the Gap I formed the opinion that with sufficient line for roping down the initial ice wall, and for likely obstacles in the icefall visible lower down, a strong party could make the crossing from this direction. I returned to Base on the 19th, glad of a rest after three days of ploughing knee-deep in abominable snow.

Cooke and his party also returned on that day. He had made a most creditable attempt to reach the North Col. Climbing the steep wall defending it to within 800 ft. of the top, he had finally to give up owing to the continual danger of falling stones, after spending one night in a precarious position on the wall. Ever since our preliminary inspection, small hopes had been entertained of this enterprise, at any rate as a route to the summit of Kangchenjunga.

Our stay was now drawing to a close. We had already spent five weeks on the glacier, and coolies had been sent for from Lachen, who arrived on the 21st. On this day Cooke and I, with a first relay of stores, moved across the glacier and camped on the Simvu La (5410 m., 17,750 ft.), a broad gap between Siniolchu and the Simvu massif. The intention was for Cooke to attempt to reach the Rangit valley by descending to the Passanram Glacier, and crossing the ridge

separating it from the Talung. This had been our alternative to the Zemu Gap, and it seemed at least worth while for one of the party to try it, though we had not the carrying power for us all to do so.

I returned to Base next day, and my wife and myself then went down with the Lachen men and our remaining equipment. Food stores were reluctantly abandoned. In spite of the disappointment of not attempting the Simvu La crossing, we had a delightful journey back through Sikkim. We paid a visit to Gangtok from the Teesta valley, where we arrived very fortunately in time to watch the bi-annual Lama Devil-dancing at the invitation of the Maharajah. We left here on December 3, and returned to our loads at Dikchu, on the Teesta; then, leaving this river, we crossed *via* Maka and Kyosing to the Rangit valley. The date of our visit to Pemionche should have coincided with Cooke's arrival from the Guicha La, but there was no sign of him, and we returned to Darjeeling *via* Rinchinpong and Chakung. Our last days were made the more enjoyable by the perfect weather, and the views which this very beautiful route offers of the Kangchenjunga massif.

We reached Darjeeling on December 5, and were joined next day by Cooke. The latter had been forced by bad weather to abandon the plan of reaching the Talung Glacier, and had had to cut his way through thick jungle down the little-explored Passanram and Talung valleys, and rejoin the Teesta at Mangen.

This brought to an end a very happy mountaineering holiday, savouring rather less of the spectacular and ambitious nature of a large expedition, than of a programme conducted on Alpine lines.