

LACHSI AND THE ZEMU GAP¹

BY H. W. TILMAN

WHEN we reached Tingkye on the way home from Everest at the end of June the party was beginning to disintegrate—the rats were leaving the sinking ship. Shipton having armed himself with a theodolite instead of an ice-axe had already left for the Nyonno Ri, Odell and Lloyd planned to return by the Choten Nyima La, and I was bound for the Naku La. Warren was unlucky in having to stick to the ship to look after the paralysed porter, but Smythe, scenting the fleshpots from afar, had already disappeared behind a cloud of dust and small stones. It was time to part. We had been together since February, there were transport difficulties occasioning delays of two or three days, and everyone, including myself, was grumbling and grouching as if time was not merely money but untold wealth. Our troubles culminated at Tingkye with the theft of a valuable box belonging to Odell. My relief will therefore be understood when I left Karma Paul to bear the burden and started off accompanied only by two Sherpas, knowing that our progress would depend on our exertions and not on the whim of some Tibetan official.

We made for the Naku La, an 18,000-ft. pass just W. of Chomiomo. It is used by Tibetans who graze their sheep in the Chaka Chu on the Sikkim side. There is a very beautiful lake half-a-mile long and a quarter wide on the Tibetan and a smaller one on the Sikkim side. On crossing the pass we at once met the cloud, mist and rain, which was to prevail throughout our journey. Before one reaches the smaller lake a curious thing is seen. Spanning the valley floor from hillside to hillside is a stone wall, roughly thrown together, some 6 ft. thick and 4 ft. high. No doubt it is of Tibetan construction, but I have no notion when it was built or whom it was to repel.

I had designs on Lachsi, a 21,100-ft. peak lying 4 miles S. of Chomiomo. It had been attempted before but not climbed.² The map led me to believe that it bounded the E. side of the valley in which we now were, but in spite of the rain and mist it was sufficiently obvious that no high mountain but a low rock ridge formed the E. wall. We camped that night, July 1, with some Tibetan shepherds at a place they called Naku some 4 miles below the pass. A depression on the ridge separating us from the next valley to the E., near which Lachsi must lie, invited us to cross it. Going up to this next morning we found from cairns that it must be used, and we learnt later that it was called the Tashi La. Sikkimese and their yaks going presumably

¹ See illustrations, *H. J.* ix. *opp.* 96, 97.

² *H. J.* ix. 149.

from the Lhonak to the upper Tangu valley use it. It is exceedingly steep, even for yaks, on the Tashi nala side.

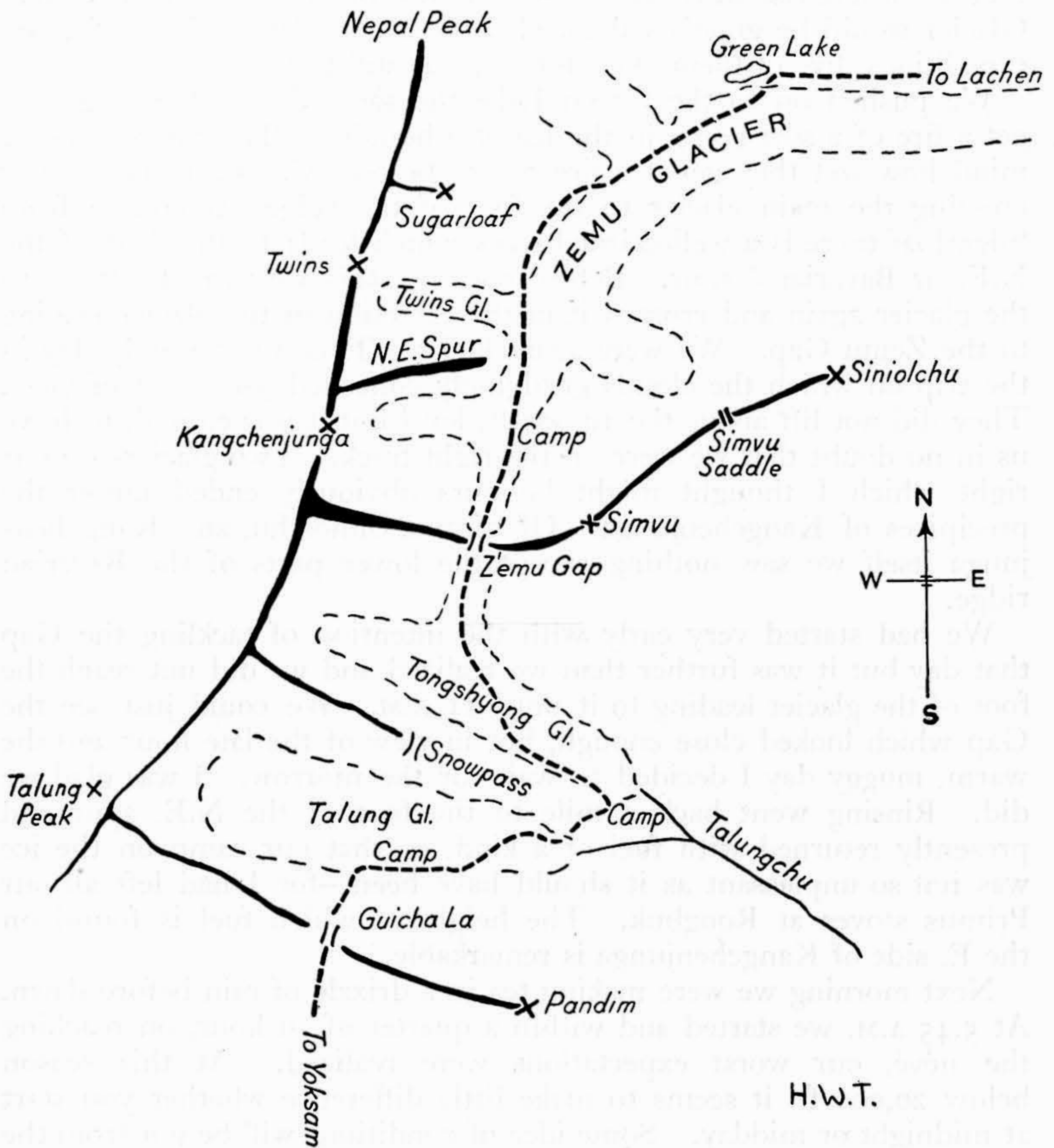
Crossing this pass we had one great piece of luck. It was the usual cloudy drizzly day, but just as I topped the ridge a rift in the clouds showed, immediately opposite me across the valley, what I guessed to be Lachsi. Its appearance from here was very similar to that seen from the S., a long snow plateau crowned by a pimple, but from here the snow skyline was broken by a deep notch. This fortuitous glimpse lasting barely a minute was the only reconnaissance allowed. The Sherpas who joined me on the ridge a few minutes later never saw it at all, and when we climbed it had no notion of where we were bound. However, this momentary glimpse had revealed a possible route, so we went down and camped at the foot of the pass in the moraine trough just short of the head of the glacier. The height I judged to be about 17,000 ft.

Starting at 5 A.M. in drizzling mist we headed first N. up the icefall at the head of the glacier, and having reached the top began to veer round in a half circle until we were heading for our peak almost S. The snow was very bad indeed until a height of about 20,000 ft. was reached, when there appeared to have been some attempt at freezing during the night. Having seen so little the day before, all kinds of astonishing features began to disclose themselves, so that I began to wonder whether we were on the right mountain. The pimple did not show itself until we were within a quarter of a mile, but then it was unmistakable. Meantime the plateau was getting less plateau-like though it had always had too much tilt to deserve that name. On the Tashi side there was a steep and broken icefall and the E. side was precipitous. Here at last was the notch I had been expecting, but it was deeper, wider, and altogether more deserving of consideration than I had imagined. The plateau narrowed to a knife-edge before we were able to descend, but I had to leave one of the Sherpas on top as he did not like the 'chasms and crags' which constituted the view. Rinsing and I managed to climb out the other side and were soon at the foot of the pimple, which proved to be about 100 ft. high. Care was required to reach the very attenuated summit by a ridge of loose rock concealed under snow. Six hours had been spent on the ascent and we returned to camp in a mixture of rain and snow, the now uniformly soft snow underfoot obliging us to take 4 hrs. over the descent.

We reached Tangu next day, the 4th, passing a Sikkim grazing camp where the Tashi Chu bends E. to flow into the Lachen Chu about 3 miles above the bungalow. Here we found Dr. Schaeffer's party who were spending several months in Sikkim collecting birds, insects, and plants. Karma Paul and the caravan had left a few hours previously. Schaeffer's party comprised every breed of scientist known to man. I buttonholed the anthropologist and earnestly besought him to spare no pains in tracking down the Abominable Snowman, urging him not to be discouraged by the croaking of the zoologist

who would assuredly tell him that if he did succeed in tracking it down he would find no Abominable Snowman, no Snark, not even a Boojum, but a bear.

Next day we took the Lachen road and turned short up the Zemu glen, camping with some shepherds at Yaktang. The hut rose like



an island out of a sea of cattle-trampled mud and was amazingly squalid inside, but for all that we passed a very pleasant night with the cow-herd, his wife, and sundry relatives. The next camp is in a cave about a mile below the glacier snout and before it is reached the dripping, swampy forest is left behind. Most cave camps can be summed up as draught and drips—this was no exception, but better than outside in the rain. The route now follows the moraine trough on the true left bank of the glacier and at first is very rough going. After crossing a stream, which should be crossed early; the going improved vastly and the old German Base Camp was reached in 3 hrs.

Here there is a collection of tins and rubbish reminding one of England's most popular beauty spots. We have much to be thankful for that Tibetans are such persevering scavengers. Anyone walking up the E. Rongbuk Glacier would not realize that there more tins had been opened and more rubbish tipped in the last twenty years than anywhere else in India. The grimness of life on the E. Rongbuk Glacier would be greatly enhanced if the accumulated débris of seven expeditions, five of them EXPEDITIONS, was still to be seen.

We pushed on to the Green Lake the same day and managed to get a fire of a sort going in the lee of a boulder. The Sherpas never mind how wet they get if a fire has to be tended. From here, after crossing the main glacier to the foot of the ridge descending from Sugarloaf there is a well-cairned track which leads to the foot of the N.E. or Bavarians' spur. Before reaching this we turned left on to the glacier again and crossed it in the direction of the glacier leading to the Zemu Gap. We were again lucky. This was the only day in the trip on which the clouds grudgingly conceded some sort of view. They did not lift above the 19,000-ft. level but it was enough to leave us in no doubt that we were on the right track. Two glaciers on our right which I thought might be ours obviously ended under the precipices of Kangchenjunga. Of Simvu, Siniolchu, and Kangchenjunga itself we saw nothing except the lower parts of the Bavarian ridge.

We had started very early with the intention of tackling the Gap that day but it was further than we realized and we did not reach the foot of the glacier leading to it until 11 A.M. We could just see the Gap which looked close enough, but in view of the late hour and the warm, muggy day I decided to wait for the morrow. I was glad we did. Rinsing went back a mile to the foot of the N.E. spur and presently returned with fuel of a kind, so that our camp on the ice was not so unpleasant as it should have been—for I had left all our Primus stoves at Rongbuk. The height at which fuel is found on the E. side of Kangchenjunga is remarkable.

Next morning we were making tea in a drizzle of rain before dawn. At 5.45 A.M. we started and within a quarter of an hour, on reaching the névé, our worst expectations were realized. At this season below 20,000 ft. it seems to make little difference whether you start at midnight or midday. Some idea of conditions will be got from the fact that it took us $3\frac{1}{2}$ hrs. to reach the col, though I suppose there were only about 2000 ft. to climb. The Gap is 19,200 ft. There are no difficulties on this side, but the approach is narrow and subject to avalanches from both the Kangchenjunga and Simvu sides. We had to walk up over the remains of two very big avalanches, one from either side. The drizzle had turned to snow driven in our faces by a wind from the col which made route-finding so difficult that I was forced to take my glasses off. From my visit in 1936,³ when I attempted the crossing in the other direction, I expected to find an ice wall on

³ *H. J.* ix. 95 sqq.

the S. side and had taken the precaution of bringing 240 ft. of rope. Even so, on first looking over the top I got a shock. There was a wall, probably 200 ft. of it, and overhanging sufficiently to prevent one seeing its foot. There was no roping down this, but further search revealed a very steep and narrow snow gully beginning where the narrow neck on which we stood abutted on the snow-covered precipices of Simvu. Between two deeply cut runnels of bare ice there was a narrow ribbon of snow 2 or 3 ft. deep. It was loose but very wet and with careful handling compacted into steps. I shall not guess the angle for fear of being called a liar, but it seemed to me that a man with a prominent nose standing up straight could have wiped it on the snow. I went down a rope's length and made a platform for one of the Sherpas who followed. It was misty below and I was not certain that we could gain the snow plateau lying below the wall which was our furthest point reached in 1936. There was a bergschrund at the bottom, but another rope's length sufficed to see me over this and on to easier ground. I climbed back to the platform and had the loads sent down the ice runnel to our level, where by reaching out with an axe we could drag them on to the platform. The first man then went down, the remaining Sherpa, Rinsing, joined me on the platform, and the load-lowering was repeated. My own load which was lighter than that of the Sherpas I sent down the runnel under its own steam. It took the bergschrund in its stride and disappeared at the rate of knots, cart-wheeling in the mist. The possible loss of sleeping-bag, spare clothes, camera, tobacco, and all our sugar, was tempered by the certainty of having no load to carry, but I was not sorry when we retrieved it later. The remaining loads were lowered.

After finding my load we moved on to the next obstacle, an icefall which had given us much trouble and step-cutting in 1936. It had altered out of all recognition. A great chasm more than 100 ft. deep and 100 ft. wide had opened right across the glacier from one containing wall to the other. We managed to get down to where a *rappel* of 50 ft. would have done the trick, but it overhung slightly, there was a crevasse in the bottom of the chasm, and it was impossible to say whether one would land there or on terra firma. It would have been awkward to have found oneself suspended over the crevasse at the wrong end of 50 ft. of rope, but I suppose with an intelligent use of the second rope the situation would not be irretrievable. The difficulty in such places is to make the men on top understand what is happening below; even in the gully we had just come down I had the greatest difficulty in telling them what to do. However, we left this and moving across to the right I reconnoitred another route. It led off in an unorthodox way with a 15-ft. jump, so it was of importance to know that the bottom part would 'go,' although I fancy we had already burnt our boats by descending the gully which would have been difficult to ascend with loads. The lower part was possible, so the Sherpas jumped and down we went. The last 30 ft. was an

icy funnel which finished remarkably close to a crevasse. I well remember Lhakpa's plaintive cry on being told to trust to the rope: 'Did I want to kill him?' One load on being shot down did end in the crevasse but with a little trouble we fished it out. Having lowered both men down I cut halfway and slid the rest.

Climbing out the other side I was afraid there were more surprises in store, for mist hid everything. But as we descended the going became easier, and presently we reached the spot below the icefall where we had camped two years before. It was buried in avalanche débris which extended downwards several hundred feet. When we were there in May 1936 small avalanches were hissing down the Simvu side, stopping just short of our tents. I imagine these big falls take place after the first heavy monsoon snow when the temperature rises very rapidly. September and October should be safe months unless snow falls early.

We reached the Tongshyong Glacier at 3 P.M., five-and-a-half hours from the top. To cross the Gap in its present condition in the reverse direction with laden men would be extremely difficult. The alleged crossing in 1927,⁴ on which I have given an opinion elsewhere,⁵ was a remarkable feat. The party left their camp on the Tongshyong at 3 A.M., crossed the Gap, descended to the Zemu, and returned by the same route in time for breakfast at 9 A.M.

We were rather tired, ourselves and our loads were wet through, and the thought of getting fuel at the snout of the glacier led us to go there rather than cross the easy snow pass leading to the Talung Glacier which we had found in 1936. Besides, it was all downhill to the snout. We found our fuel late that evening, but it was the wrong kind of shrub and nothing would induce it to light. We supped austere on cold water, sugar and satu. No sooner had we turned in than my eyes began to smart and presently I was in the agonies of snow-blindness, the result of travelling without glasses for most of the day. There had been no vestige of sun, but that makes little difference. There was no sleep that night either for me or Lhakpa, who had also been touched. Dr. Longstaff tells me you should always carry a drop of castor oil which quickly relieves the pain. Next morning the pain was less, but I could only see as far as the ground at my feet. This did not matter much for the prevailing mist prevented anyone not equipped with infra-red eyes from seeing much farther.

We attempted to cut across the foot of the ridge to the Talung Glacier but kept too low and were presently fighting a losing battle with rhododendron and other abominations. Six hours later we had covered about a mile and found ourselves overlooking the Talung snout but unable to reach it on account of very high and steep earth cliffs. Such cliffs are a feature of the ground near the Talung and Tongshyong junction. We bush-crawled to the right and were stopped by a rock cliff, but now we were getting desperate, so using a rhododendron as an anchor we lowered the loads and ourselves down.

⁴ *G. J.* lxix. 344.

⁵ *H. J.* ix. 98.

Wet and weary, we toiled across the glacier and proceeded slowly up its right bank, camping at 5 P.M. There was plenty of vegetation, but nothing would burn in those conditions. We dined as before, but it was such a relief to have one's eyes easier that nothing else mattered.

The mist was as thick as ever when, after a cold breakfast, we started to look for the Guicha La. I had been there before but I feared there would be much trial and error before we found it. However, our luck was still in. We had not been going an hour before I spotted a wisp of mist which had a decidedly bluish tinge. I dare not suggest it was smoke for fear of rousing vain hopes, but presently the Sherpas announced it was smoke and in a few minutes we were drinking sheep's milk and warming ourselves in a matting hut belonging to some shepherds camped at the foot of the Guicha La. They had come over the previous day.

There were more misadventures in store for us before we got down to villages, but this account of a very small side-show has already taken up more than its share of space.