

ASSAM HIMALAYA UNVISITED

BY H. W. TILMAN

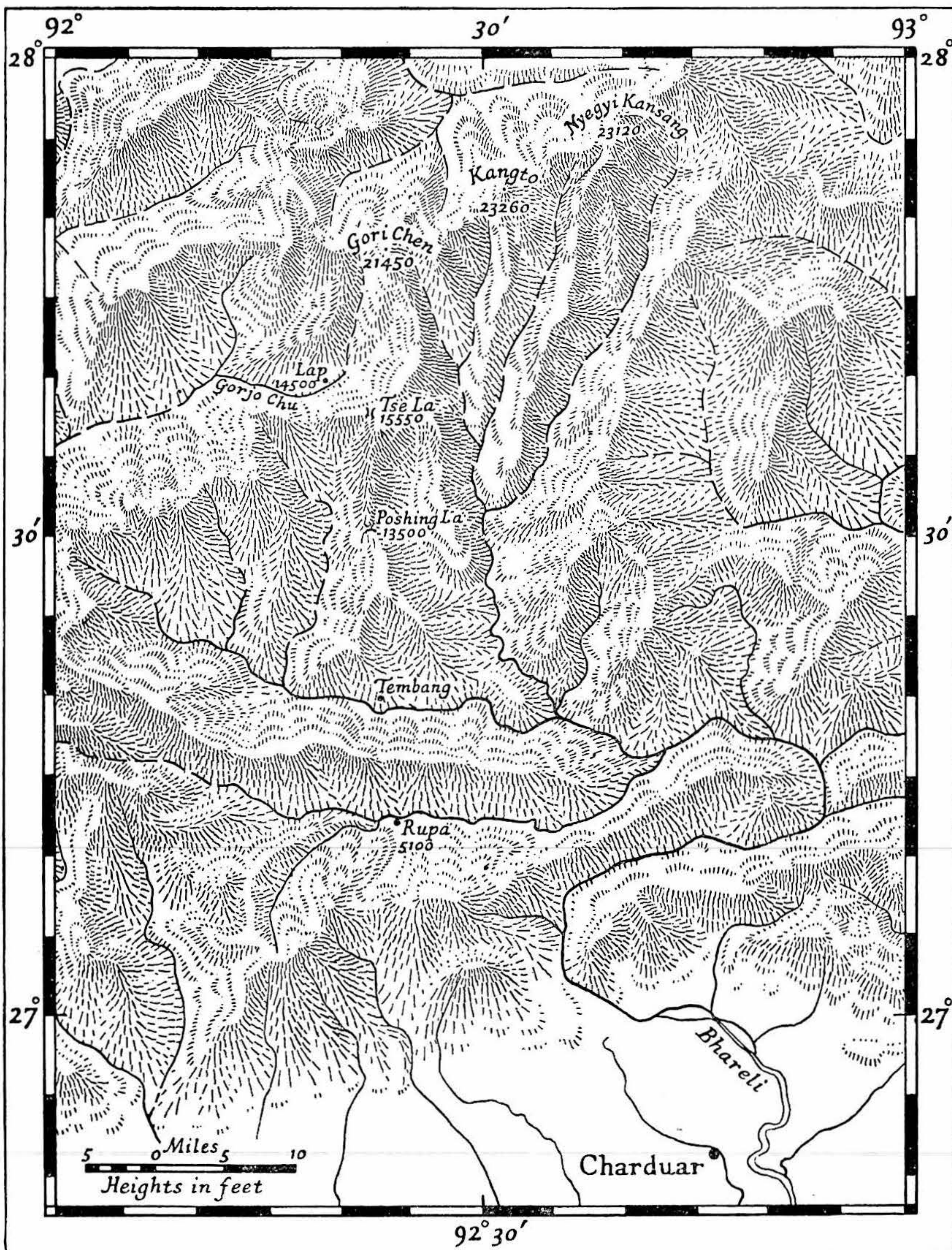
THE least successful expedition usually succeeds in setting foot on the mountain of its ambition ; or if a slight error is made, as sometimes happens, then on some other mountain in reasonable proximity. In what category then is the expedition which sets foot on no mountain at all, as was our fate in 1939 ?

The mountains of our ambition were some of the Assam Himalaya—as many as possible, though I would have been content with either Gori Chen (21,450 ft.), Kangto (23,260 ft.), or Nyegyí Kansang (23,120 ft.), which are the only three out of some twenty odd in the same group which are named. I also hoped to make a map ; not in the cause of pure science, but with a utilitarian notion of its possible usefulness to myself in future. And it is always well to have a secondary objective, preferably scientific, as we are urged to do on Mount Everest expeditions ; for though a few misguided people climb for fun, many think that mountaineering by itself, particularly if unsuccessful, is a waste of time and money.

From the mountaineer's point of view nothing is known of the Himalaya east of Chomolhari, and not much is known of them topographically. For 180 miles they form the northern boundary of Bhutan and for another 250 miles that of Assam ; but it should be noted that though the Himalaya are at present assumed to mark the Assam-Tibet frontier this has never been delimited. (The whole range from the Tista valley in Sikkim to Namcha Barwa (25,545 ft.) and beyond is called the ' Assam Himalaya ' by Burrard and Hayden ; it seems less confusing to confine the term to the mountains actually lying north of Assam.) Where the range passes from Bhutan into Assam there is a wide breach formed by the upper eastern basin of the Manas river, but immediately east of this is a group of high peaks which cover about 50 miles on an E.N.E. alignment. It was these I hoped to explore.

The major peaks have been fixed trigonometrically from stations in the Assam valley. During their great exploration of the Tsangpo gorge in 1911 Messrs. Bailey and Morshead travelled and surveyed along the N. (Tibetan) side of the range ; in 1935 and 1938 Kingdon Ward skirted the western end, and visited the valley of the Gorjo Chu, which, for reasons that will be apparent, forms the only approach to the range. In 1934 and 1936 Messrs. Sherriff and Ludlow covered much the same ground, but the peaks, passes, and glaciers of this region remain unvisited. There are two routes from Assam into Tibet through the gap formed by the eastern tributaries of the Manas river.

The more eastern route skirts the Assam Himalaya, crosses the Gorjo Chu valley and passes within ten miles of Gori Chen, thus forming



Reproduced by courtesy of the Editor, *The Geographical Journal*.

the obvious line of approach from the south. It would be simpler if the approach could be made from Tibet where there are villages from



Photo, F. Kingdon Ward.]

GORI CHEN AND THE VALLEY OF THE GORJO CHU JUST BELOW LAP.
SEEN FROM THE CHERA LA.

[To face p. 54.]

which food could be got and where the effects of the monsoon would be less felt ; but for British mountaineering parties most of the goodwill of Lhasa is exclusively needed for Everest expeditions. On the S. side of the range, except for the narrow strip of country between these two routes, the foothills of Assam are the home of savage tribes—Miji Akas, Silung Abors, and Daflas. Known as the Balipara Frontier Tract this unadministered territory stretches east to the Subansiri and beyond. The eastern route to Tibet lies on the edge of this hostile territory and it is not possible to go to the east of the road until near the Himalaya, where the country becomes too high for these forest-dwelling savages. A Political Officer stationed at Charduar, some twenty miles north of the Brahmaputra, is in charge of the Frontier Tract.

On account of the many expeditions going out this year, all of which had bespoken their porters early, it was not easy to find good porters in Darjeeling ; there were two German parties, an American, a Polish, and a British. German mountaineers were more active of late in the Himalaya than we were. The three porters I took were Wangdi Nurbu, Nukku, and Thundu ; the two former both experienced men, Wangdi in particular being one of the best all-round men now available. Thundu was an unknown quantity.

We left Charduar on April 11 to march to our first camp, Tiger Flat on the Belsiri river, where we were to meet twenty porters (Nepalis) whom the P.O. was good enough to lend me from his porter corps. Fifteen of them carried our stuff ; the rest carried food for all because for the first five marches the country is uninhabited. This first camp at the edge of the plain and the beginning of the foothills, only about 500 ft. above the sea, was, I think, the cause of our subsequent undoing. It was a pleasant enough spot in a clearing surrounded by thick jungle—pleasant, at least, in daytime, before the night-shift of mosquitoes and other noxious insects began work. I had anticipated mosquitoes for the first few marches, and since leaving Darjeeling had taken the precaution of dosing the party daily with quinine ; but the weather was exceedingly hot and dry (the tea districts of the Assam valley and Darjeeling were suffering from a prolonged drought), so I fondly imagined that mosquitoes would be less numerous. Moreover, mosquitoes in uninhabited country, such as this was, cannot be infected with malaria ; but here I failed to take into account the porter corps, which had a standing camp not far away, and the fact that men were passing frequently up and down the road. Within a few hundred yards of our camp was another standing camp, that of a European Game Warden (the forest here is Game Reserve) from whom it was reassuring to hear that the mosquitoes were of a harmless kind. A more pressing danger apparently was a rogue elephant which had visited my friend's camp the previous night, attracted possibly by three tame elephants amongst which was a cow, and had only been driven off with difficulty. If he wined our rice, atta, or salt, we could expect to be raided. Uneasy in mind and with ears well cocked I returned

in the dark to my own camp, and before turning in reconnoitred a route up the nearest tree.

Rising early, after a poor night of heat and bites, I was surprised to see the coolies had already gone, leaving behind most of the loads. I was told an elephant was coming for these, and sure enough, like a rabbit out of a hat, a great mountain of flesh presently appeared in the clearing, dragging after it by its trunk a length of chain stout enough for a ship's cable. After a large padded mat such as is used in gymnasiums had been secured on its back the loads were passed up and built into a neat pile. Wangdi and I exchanged astonished glances as the twelfth 60-lb. load went up, to be followed by two men and the fifty odd feet of mooring chain; whereupon practically the whole of our outfit swayed off into the forest borne upon that one capable back. Here indeed was the perfect solution to transport problems. Yaks, zos, goats, mules, ponies, donkeys, men might be all very well for picnics, but for serious business let us have elephants. It was with fresh respect for Hannibal that I followed thoughtfully in the wake of that ludicrous, swaying rump—stepping out at a good four miles an hour in the effort to keep up.

Our second camp was still not more than 1000 ft. up. Mosquitoes seemed less numerous but in the daytime there was a new amusement in the form of blister flies or 'dimdams.' Every bite of these results in a blood blister with which my hands were soon covered. The coolies used some kind of oil—citronella, I think—with effect. Beyond this we climbed steadily out of the reach of pests, and after crossing the Bompa La (*ca.* 9000 ft.) reached the first Sherchopka village of Rupa (5100 ft.). The Sherchopkas are of uncertain origin, but in appearance at least are not unlike the Mönbas, whom we shall meet further north, who in turn are akin to Tibetans. But the Sherchopkas speak a language of their own which quite defeated the Sherpas. North of the Bompa La a very striking change of vegetation takes place owing to the drier climate, the bulk of the rain falling on the southern slopes. On the one side, amongst thick undergrowth, are magnolias, oaks, birch, and rhododendron, festooned with creepers, moss, and lichen; on the other, a valley whose slopes are covered with blue pine set amidst sparse grass.

From here our well-disciplined Government coolies (halts and starts were signalled by whistle) returned while we went on with eight men, who carried bows and arrows; four women, whose privilege it was to carry the heavier loads; and three small boys aged about eight, who nevertheless carried a full 60 lb. and smoked their bamboo pipes. Climbing up the northern side of the valley towards the Bomdi La (9000 ft.) we passed out of pines and grass and once more entered rain forest. The pass was crossed on the second day when we dropped down to Rahung in the deep narrow valley of the Digien river. The height was now only about 4000 ft. Here we had to engage fresh porters to take us one short march to Tembang which could be seen high up across the valley. The headman talked animatedly in a

Hindustani that only Wangdi could catch the drift of; to make negotiations smoother he told the headman that I was the P.O.'s younger brother.

With more than the usual quota of women and children carrying our loads we crossed the river by a bamboo bridge and toiled up 2000 ft. of grass and pine-covered slopes to the Mönba village of Tembang which was reached April 19. The suspension bridges of these parts are built on the same three-strand principle as those elsewhere, but are less frightening to cross because the three main cables are contained by a bamboo hoop every three or four feet. It is taboo for women to carry loads across bridges. From this village either of the two routes to Tibet can be taken; that to the west via Dirang Dzong, the Tse La, and Tawang, or the easterly by the Poshing La (13,500 ft.), the Tse La (15,500 ft.), and Mago. For the last Tembang is the only place where coolies can be got. We were now in the district of Mönnyul which politically and religiously is part of Tibet, although by treaty it is part of British India. This anomalous position has yet to be cleared up.

That evening Wangdi and I went up to the headman's house to ask about coolies. We exchanged snuff and raw arak very amicably, but a deadlock was soon reached over the coolie question. We were told that the Poshing La was never open until June and in the end all that we could persuade them to do was to allow me to take one Tembang man on a flying visit to the pass to see if there was much snow. The presence of the Dzongpen of Dirang Dzong at the party was probably the real stumbling block. This village is the administrative centre for this part of Mönnyul, but it lies on the other route by which no doubt the Dzongpen wished us to travel, sprinkling a few rupees in his village in passing.

Nukku, myself and the Tembang man left next morning at 10 A.M., three hours having been spent in persuading the local victim to be sacrificed. While the discussion was proceeding in the incredibly dirty village I watched the sun lighting a big snow peak which was probably Kangto, although the Mönbas called it Sherkang Karbo. This encouraging sight of the snows was the first vouchsafed us. Camping that night at a place called Lagam, where there were a few huts and a Gompa, we left at 4.30 next morning hoping to go to the Poshing La and back in the day. From the map, which at this point becomes sketchy, it looked about 10 miles with a rise of 4000 ft. This proved to be an underestimate.

After climbing abruptly for 2000 ft. the track lay along the uneven crest of a ridge, through rhododendron, juniper trees, and thick mist. After two hours going flat out we dumped the rope, for it seemed impossible there could be any snow pass within several days' march. An hour or so later, still going fast, I asked Dorje, the local man, how far it was to the pass and was told that it was now about as far as yesterday's march. I thought he was being purposely discouraging. Having dropped much we began climbing steadily, with rising hopes,



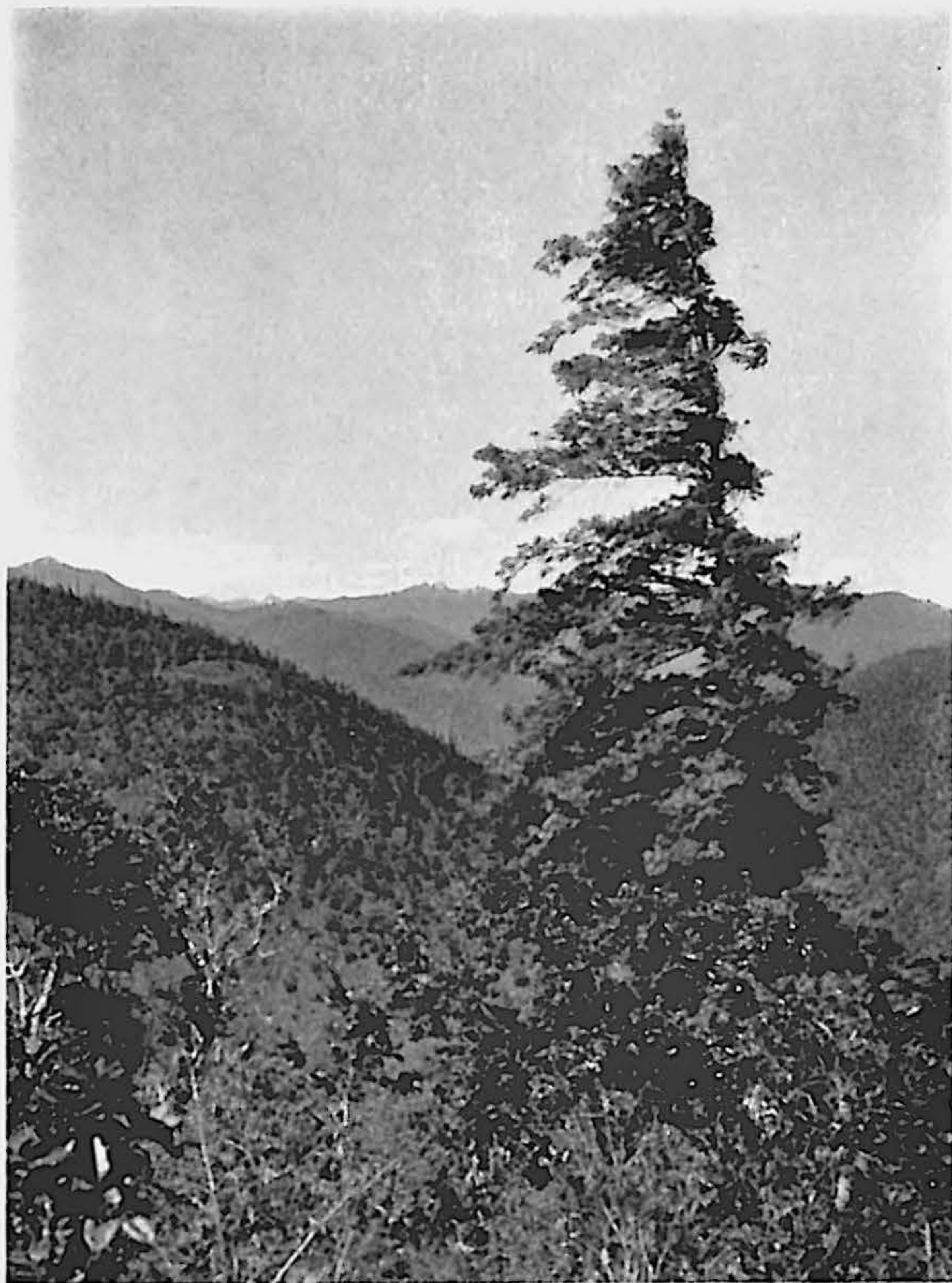
Photo, F. Kingdon Ward.]

GORI CHEN AND OTHER PEAKS FROM YAK CAMP BELOW THE POSHING LA.

[To face p. 58.]

and at 11,500 ft. came upon a chorten and the usual signs of a pass. I asked Dorje confidently if this was it; he replied that we were nearly halfway. We descended to a grass glade, a pond, and a hut, beyond which we saw in the mist a grassy shoulder crowned by what looked like a cairn. This must be it, I thought, this wretched Dorje does not want us to reach the pass. Dumping the rucksack containing our food Nukku and I started for it with a rush, but Dorje, who then came up, advised us to keep calm for the pass was still about as far distant as the place where we had left the rope. After this we toiled on sullenly. I was rapidly acquiring a headache; it was now midday; halts and inquiries became more frequent. It was time to think of turning if we were to get back to Lagam. At 12,000 ft. we came upon some snow drifts, whereupon Dorje assured us that if there were snow lying here it must be feet deep on the pass. This riled me, because if we failed to reach the pass itself Dorje would inevitably paint a gloomy picture when we got back to Tembang and the trip would have been made in vain. I determined to reach it if we took all day; if necessary we could sleep by the pond which, by the way, was the only water on the ridge. Dorje too had a headache now (we had not come so far and so fast altogether in vain, I reflected, at this piece of intelligence), but Nukku seemed as fresh as ever. At long last we came to a steep, rocky rise up which we climbed to 13,500 ft., and the pass at 1.30 P.M. There was nothing at all to be seen in the mist, but that there was no snow worth talking about even Dorje admitted. Having come to a clear understanding with him on this point, Nukku remarked casually that we would now return to Lagam. 'Sez you,' said I, but the sarcasm was wasted because the Sherpas have not had our advantages of a good modern education. However, having returned to the pond and had some food and half an hour's rest, we left at 3 P.M. for Lagam. As is generally the way on a descent there was a great deal of climbing. The gentlest rise reduced me to a feeble crawl and at 4 P.M. I 'sold out,' as the New Zealander expresses it—in other words lost my lunch. Darkness overtook us at 7 P.M. as we began the 2000 ft. descent to Lagam.

Next afternoon at Tembang we renewed the negotiations with the headman, who began by politely suggesting that the Tibetan translation of my Government permit, calling on all and sundry to assist bearer in the matter of food and transport, might not be the same as the original copy with the official stamp on it. After sitting by until Wangdi brought the struggle to a satisfactory conclusion I retired to my sleeping-bag with the first attack of malaria. This was April 22. Two days later Nukku and Thundu were down. On the 28th, when I was better and the Sherpas convalescent, the coolies were ordered for the 30th, on which day we marched to Lagam. As only sixteen instead of the twenty required were forthcoming the Mönbas had to carry very heavy loads. After camping in the hut by the pond we crossed the Poshing La without difficulty and dropped down to Samjung, a camping-ground in the valley leading



Photo, F. Kingdon Ward.]

BLUE PINE (*PICEA EXCELSA*) AND THE ASSAM HIMALAYA
FROM ABOVE DIRANG DZONG.



Photo, F. Kingdon Ward.]

LAKELET ON THE RIDGE BELOW THE POSHING LA.

to the Tse La. The nearer we got to the mountains the worse the weather became.

On this march Wangdi went down with fever, but fortunately Nukku was now able to do some camp work. Much to my surprise Wangdi was quite recovered next morning; and in the course of the next month his malaria proved to be of a benign type, as distinct from the rest of us who had malignant tertiary. Almost every other day about noon he would go to bed shivering, to rise an hour or two later apparently none the worse. His recovery was happily timed, for that morning all his forceful personality was needed to persuade the Mönbas to move. Snow had fallen heavily during the night, so they were reluctant to start. Dorje, with his valuable but irritating habit of seeing things as they are and not as we should like them to be, was still with us; but we could have dispensed with him that morning because, besides telling us exactly how far it was to the pass, he went beyond his office and, Cassandra-like, foretold more snow. The men had Tibetan boots but no snow-glasses, so that more snow would probably be borne with more equanimity than bright sun. In the end we enjoyed both; during the long seven-hour trudge to the pass the sun shone, while on top we encountered a mild blizzard.

We camped at Lap in the valley of the Gorjo Chu on May 3. The valley was wide, bare and brown; but juniper grew plentifully, and Lap was graced with some stone huts, one of which had a watertight roof. Influenced by the fact that the valley led N.E. in the direction of Gori Chen, the useful height of 14,500 ft., and that while crossing the pass we had caught a glimpse of a snow peak, I decided to make this our base. It had been a trying march for all. The Mönbas had the loads and we our fevers; Thundu lagged far behind, and I celebrated our arrival by again 'selling out.' That evening all but four of the Mönbas were suffering from snow-blindness, which I treated with a mixture of castor oil and cocaine. It did not seem very efficacious, and next morning most of them were semi-blind, but in spite of that they all decided to visit the two tiny villages of Dyuri and Nyuri (known collectively as Mago) with which the Tembang people have close trade relations. Mago is a day's march farther on the road to Tibet. Thundu's malaria had now returned afresh, Nukku was not right either, so I decided that Wangdi and I would go with the Tembang men (whom we paid off) to see what the resources of Mago might be.

Snow fell throughout the night and began again as we descended the valley. Little snow lay at Lap, but amongst the firs and rhododendron, to which three hours' fast going brought us, it lay a foot deep. The path then struck out of the valley and climbed a spur to the north by the Chera La (13,000 ft.) before dropping into a steep and narrow valley on the far side of which was Dyuri. Mud, snow, nine houses and a chorten comprised Dyuri; Nyuri, its counterpart, lay just across another stream. The elevation is over 11,000 ft., so that no crops can be grown. The Mönba inhabitants live mainly on the products of

their yaks and sheep eked out with grain which is brought up from Tembang in exchange for wool and butter.

We spent a day here when, having collected 40 lb. of satu (a 4-lb. measure contributed by each house) and the promise of two men to help us move our camp up the Gorjo Chu, Wangdi and I returned to Lap. It was a dreary trudge back over the Chera La and up the valley, on a grey day with snow underfoot and more snow falling. Cheerless too was the stone hut where Thundu and Nukku lay, the one groaning and retching, the other groaning and spitting. Thundu was prostrate, but Nukku remained up and about. The question was whether to go down now with the help of the Tembang men (which practically meant abandonment of the trip) or to hang on and hope for recovery.

Next day, the 7th, I took a walk up the valley and some three miles up found a suitable site for our next camp; the plan being to establish an advanced base at the head of the Gorjo Chu, whence I hoped we should be able to make a circuit of Gori Chen, possibly climbing it too, and finally make a journey east to Kangto and Nyegyí Kansang. The usual snow drizzle was falling, but I made out a snow-covered ridge a further three or four miles up which marked the valley head. The Tembang men returned that evening from Mago and started for home next day leaving only ourselves and two Mago men. With them Wangdi made the first carry to the proposed camp, while I carried the plane table to a 16,000-ft. ridge close by, where I got a 'fix' just before the mist and drizzle closed down.

I was not well next day but Nukku seemed better and was able to carry the survey gear for me to another 16,000-ft. station. Again mist stopped work by 9 A.M. Feeling very cheap, I meant to lie up on the 10th, but the morning was wonderfully fine and clear, so with Nukku I did another station on the far side of the river. Meanwhile Wangdi and the two Mago men carried daily up the valley until the 11th when we paid them off.

For the following week I was in bed with fever and was not out again until the 18th. Thundu seemed to be mending slowly, though he was very weak, but Nukku was unaccountably dull and lethargic. He would not go to bed but could do little work; Wangdi, who had everything to do, used to get very angry with him. He seemed not to have any fever and complained only of pains in the legs and shoulders. On the 19th, he, Wangdi, and myself carried loads to the upper camp, where Wangdi and I remained. Nukku was told to come up with Thundu after a few days provided they felt fit enough.

We made a fruitless climb to a station next morning, snow falling heavily before we reached it. On the 21st it snowed all day. I was in a small tent while Wangdi slept in the kitchen under a boulder and a tarpaulin, where he spent the time fanning an unwilling fire shrouded in smoke. Wandering slowly up the hillside I saw some bharal, and blew some feathers out of a snow pigeon with a .22 rifle we had brought. Dawn of the 22nd was murky but we revisited the same station early and finished a rapid 'fix' just before the clouds

rolled up at 8 A.M. All our weather came up the valley from the west. From these various stations, Gori Chen and several 19,000-ft. and 20,000-ft. peaks in its vicinity were visible; of Kangto and the peaks to the east there was no sign. Back in camp I lay up with fever, and the next day, which was of course fine, I was unable to make use of. Wangdi, too, was having his usual two-hourly bouts of fever on alternate days but, unlike mine, his strength seemed unimpaired. He is an invaluable man, without whom we should have been in a much sorrier plight than we were.

On the 24th we set out early in an effort to reach a col on the snow ridge at the head of the valley. Had we reached it we should have got a glimpse into the basin surrounding Gori Chen; but after going for about an hour I realised I should never reach it and went back to camp with another attack. I sent Wangdi down to Lap to see what the other two were doing, whence he returned with the news that Nukku was unconscious.

Yaks from Mago were now grazing in the valley, three of which we collected next morning from near by to help us down to Lap which we reached at noon. Thundu was in his sleeping-bag in much the same condition; Nukku was lying fully dressed by an extinct fire, breathing stertorously. Two yak-herds were camped close by to whom we applied for help, but no amount of money would induce them to carry Nukku down on a yak. They simply said they would not do it. Finally we persuaded one of them to go to Dyuri with a large bribe for the headman and a request for six men. Thundu, who was desperately weak, would, I hoped, be able to sit a yak; I should have to do the same, for I was now having daily bouts of ague and high fever and was only able to walk downhill. Next day, the 26th, at 4 P.M. Nukku died without recovering consciousness; probably of cerebral malaria. The headman of Dyuri with six men and four zos came on the 28th. I was glad to see them.

The six men carried Thundu in turns on their backs all the way to Tembang; I had one of the zos which gave me a safe and pleasant ride. It rained every day. When we arrived at Rupa on June 5 it was disconcerting to find that no one would go down to the plains at this time of the year, the rains having broken. Instead they offered to take us to a village of tame Akas two marches down the valley to the east, whence there is an alternative route to the plains down the valley of the Bhareli river. When we reached Jamiri, the Aka village, the headman refused either to provide coolies or to sell food or fuel, affirming in a very offhand way that he had no truck with any Government; he then indicated a camp site for us two or three miles away from his village, but we camped as close to it as possible in order to let our nuisance value have full play. As we found later, he was lying about his status because he was one of the tame Aka chiefs who receive a small subsidy from Government. The same man was foolish enough to visit Charduar later while I was still there and appeared on the mat before the P.O. in consequence.

But for a more friendly neighbouring headman we might have been at Jamiri still ; it was only four days down to Charduar but Thundu was quite incapable of marching. When we did get our coolies, four men and six girls, two of the men carried him turn and turn about the whole way to Charduar. Even admitting that the unfortunate Thundu was now ' a mere anatomy ' it was something of a feat. After some adventures with swollen rivers we reached Charduar on June 11, only two months after setting out.

It is easy to be wise after the event. There are several precautions that might be taken, assuming of course that malaria is due, as some think, to a mosquito bite and not merely the result, like sore throat and influenza, piles and paralysis, of an ' unscientific diet,' which is the opinion of others. Our first camp, which seemed to be the worst source of infection, could be avoided by a long double march. Mosquito nets, trousers instead of shorts, bamber oil, and heavier prophylactic doses of quinine, would all help to reduce the risks. Anyhow, Wangdi, to mention only one, is ready to have another go.