equally faulty I cannot say. Who shall draw the line between pusillanimity and prudence? Prudence, as Dr. Johnson tells us, 'quenches that ardour of enterprise, by which everything is done that can claim praise or admiration, and represses that generous temerity which often fails and often succeeds.' To which I shall add that in mountaineering one man's prudence is another man's poison.

AN ASCENT OF CHOMIOMO

By T. H. TILLY

Read before the Alpine Club, April 6, 1948

DURING the last two years of the war, many mountaineers were stationed in Delhi and others visited the various headquarters there from time to time. There is a freemasonry amongst climbers and it was not long before a flourishing circle had been formed. The Himalayan Club, which gave us a cordial welcome and elected many of us to membership, was a focus from which radiated small bands of enthusiasts with eyes set hopefully above and beyond the prevailing squalor. It was a time, above all, when the unifying influence and experienced guidance of such a club could give, and probably did give, both in quality and in value, in greater measure that at any other period during its history. Instructors, past and present, of the R.A.F. Mountain Centre in Kashmir formed a nucleus, and most of the British climbing clubs were represented, including a few members of the Alpine Club and a number who subsequently became members.

In the Himalaya, as elsewhere, the coincidence of ignorance and enthusiasm is apt to be perilous, and it was therefore all the more fortunate that Lt.-Col. C. R. Cooke, O.B.E., was in Delhi at that time and willing, indeed anxious to place his great experience at our disposal, as well as, with Mrs. Cooke, giving much delightful hospitality. This is my opportunity to pay a belated tribute of gratitude.

It was largely due to Col. Cooke, an expert on the subject of Sikkim, that we went there in July 1945 for a month. It was represented to us, with justice, that to leave India without having paid a short visit, at least, to Sikkim would be to banish the Prince of Denmark from the Himalayan Hamlet. So we, Wilfrid Noyce, Gordon Whittle, George Crosby and I, planned a brief journey to the valley of Lhonak in north-western Sikkim. We were to travel as tourists anxious to see the sights, though other, and slightly more ambitious projects were not to be excluded. We had to be content with monsoon leave. In the summer season there was no prospect of being granted the full year's allotment of 28 days' leave, and in wartime one cannot, without a reasonable prospect of a court martial on return, calmly wire for more leave if

the mountain proves harder, or the porters more refractory than anticipated. Moments of exiguous leisure, during the weeks before July 10, when we had planned to start, were spent in rushing and cycling ever more incoherently in the great heat securing equipment, sending telegrams, buying food, and indulging in long conspiratorial telephone calls. The minutiae of organisation seemed endless. And after weeks of more or less successful preparation, things suddenly began to go wrong. Only a few days before we were due to leave, we had still no news of tents and vital gear from the Himalayan Club store in Delhi, in use by a Swiss on Bandar Punch, and I had to send my bearer post haste up to Simla and Dehra Dun to capture it on its way home. In spite of a series of progressively more urgent telegrams, no permits arrived, and several are necessary for Sikkim. We all felt frayed and worn out. Then (it seemed the last straw) all leave in Noyce's unit was stopped. The luck was too bad to last. My bearer returned with all the gear. A final telegram from Angtharkay told us that he would be at Gangtok with 16 Darjeeling porters on the 12th. The expense was considerable, but we felt it was necessary to take out this insurance against transport troubles and consequent delays. But, to our great regret, we had to leave without Noyce, though we were delighted when he managed to visit the scene later in the year and, after his splendid ascent of Pauhunri, climb our mountain with us in spirit. And so we left Delhi for Calcutta on the morning of July 10, 1945.

Incidentally, the permits never arrived, and whilst bluff, assisted by a fortuitous telegram, took us through the Sikkim frontier post at Rungpo, the problem had to be faced at Gangtok and took six hours to solve. Medical certificates of fitness had to be handed over and we had armed ourselves with these. The first question on the form (there is always an 'appropriate form') was: 'Apparent age?' The Service M.O. looked at Crosby. Crosby looked back defensively. 'Twenty-five, I should say,' said the doctor. 'How old are you?' 'Thirty-eight,' said Crosby. The M.O. then looked at me: 'About forty,' he said and forthwith wrote it on the paper. It turned out that we were all thirty-eight.

The weather was humid and wet as we detrained at 6 A.M. on the 12th at Siliguri. It happened to be both my birthday and the 34th anniversary of the first ascent of Chomiomo,[1] by Dr. A. M. Kellas. The former event appeared to my companions to be of small interest: of the latter we were then unconscious. A little puffing billy took us at a snail's pace up the lower reaches of the Teesta valley to Giellekhola and a relay of lorries (hired from the Sikkim State authorities) from there up to Gangtok. Landslides, mostly in the minor key, caused many delays and it was evening before we arrived at Gangtok to be welcomed by one of Angtharkay's wonderful Cheshire cat grins with a set of sixteen variations, two of them apparently female. The enormous and excellent meal which was produced, including superb pineapple fritters, was a foretaste of good things to come. It proved

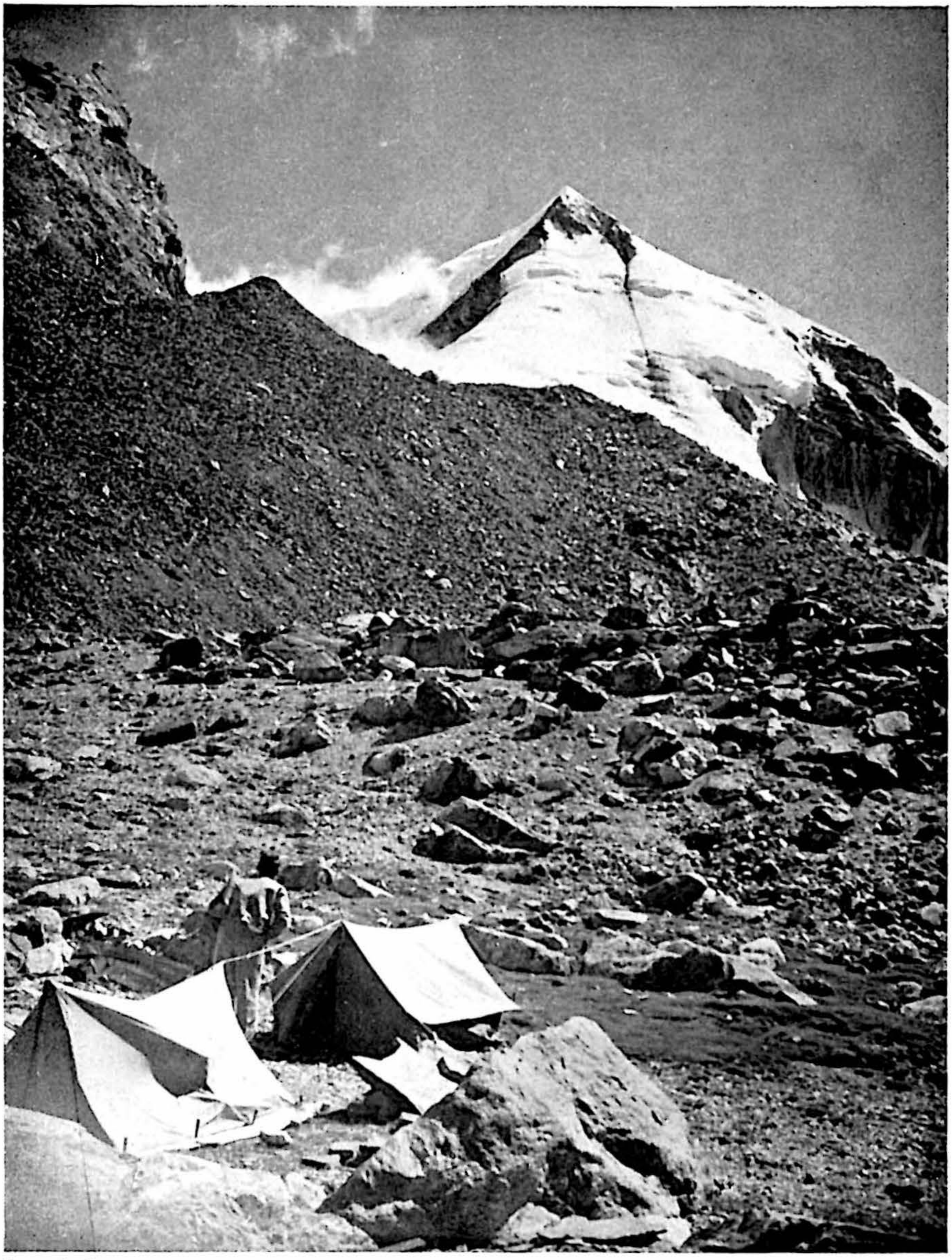
[1] *A.J.* 26. 133 sqq., with map facing 142.

as good an eating holiday as those for which people are now rushing over to Ireland.

Mountain ranges are, of their nature, chaotic and take unkindly to rationalisation. Nevertheless, it may serve for the present purpose to imagine the mountains of Sikkim, much simplified, as a letter E lying on its side. The horizontal stroke, on an E.-W. axis, represents the main range and the pendent, vertical strokes are the subsidiaries. The route taken by the party followed the valley of the river Teesta, between the long western stroke of the E (the Kangchenjunga range) and the short central ridge, passing through a gap in the main range almost to the source of the river—a route which, at least as far as Lachen where the Zemu valley comes in from Kangchenjunga and the west, has been so often described that it is only necessary to say of it that during the monsoon it is like a vast tunnel : the floor is mostly water—the thundering, wildly rushing Teesta, varying in colour from grey to a rich cocoa, the walls are almost vertical jungle, the roof is grey cloud. The effect is, to me, not beautiful and rather depressing. A few dank lilies and orchids may be seen from time to time in the lower reaches, cicadas of various kinds keep up a constant mechanical whirring of varying pitch, like a dentist's drill, small crabs scuttle across the tracks or lie half submerged in pools of water, and everything green conceals myriads of leeches. Foolishly, I walked over the most leechy stage in rubbers with bare legs and paid dearly in blood and subsequent discomfort. The leech injects an anti-coagulant, resulting in continued bleeding and, later, intense itching, particularly at night in the sleeping bag.

Beyond Chungthang (5350 ft.) at the junction of the Lachen and Lachung valleys, a great area of hillside on the W. side of the valley, rendered unstable by monsoon rains, collapsed a few days before our return, partly blocking the Teesta with a fan of débris and devastating, by blast, the opposite hillside and the track with it. This seasoned the return journey, up to the last moment, with the spice of uncertainty and ultimately gave us a difficult and not very safe crossing. The size of these avalanches is not seldom cataclysmic. The smaller ones may be often difficult, even dangerous, to pass. We had one porter carried away and almost lost crossing a torrent flowing down the track of a fall. Luckily he managed to stop himself just above a big drop. He was badly knocked about and had to be carried into Gangtok where careful examination disclosed nothing worse than a badly sprained ankle, apart from numerous cuts and bruises.

The gorges up to Lachen (8800 ft.) are tremendous and impressive, but the effect was considerably minimised by low cloud and it was raining hard at Lachen. A much more pleasant stage lay through a charming upland valley to Thangu (12,800 ft.), the highest dak bungalow on the route, and here we took a day off to overhaul our equipment, erect the tents (which we had not yet seen), and give ourselves a rest. It was here also that Whittle made the suggestion that, instead of crossing the hills to the W. into Lhonak, we continue up the Teesta



Photo, G. Crosby.]

CHOMIOMO FROM BASE CAMP.

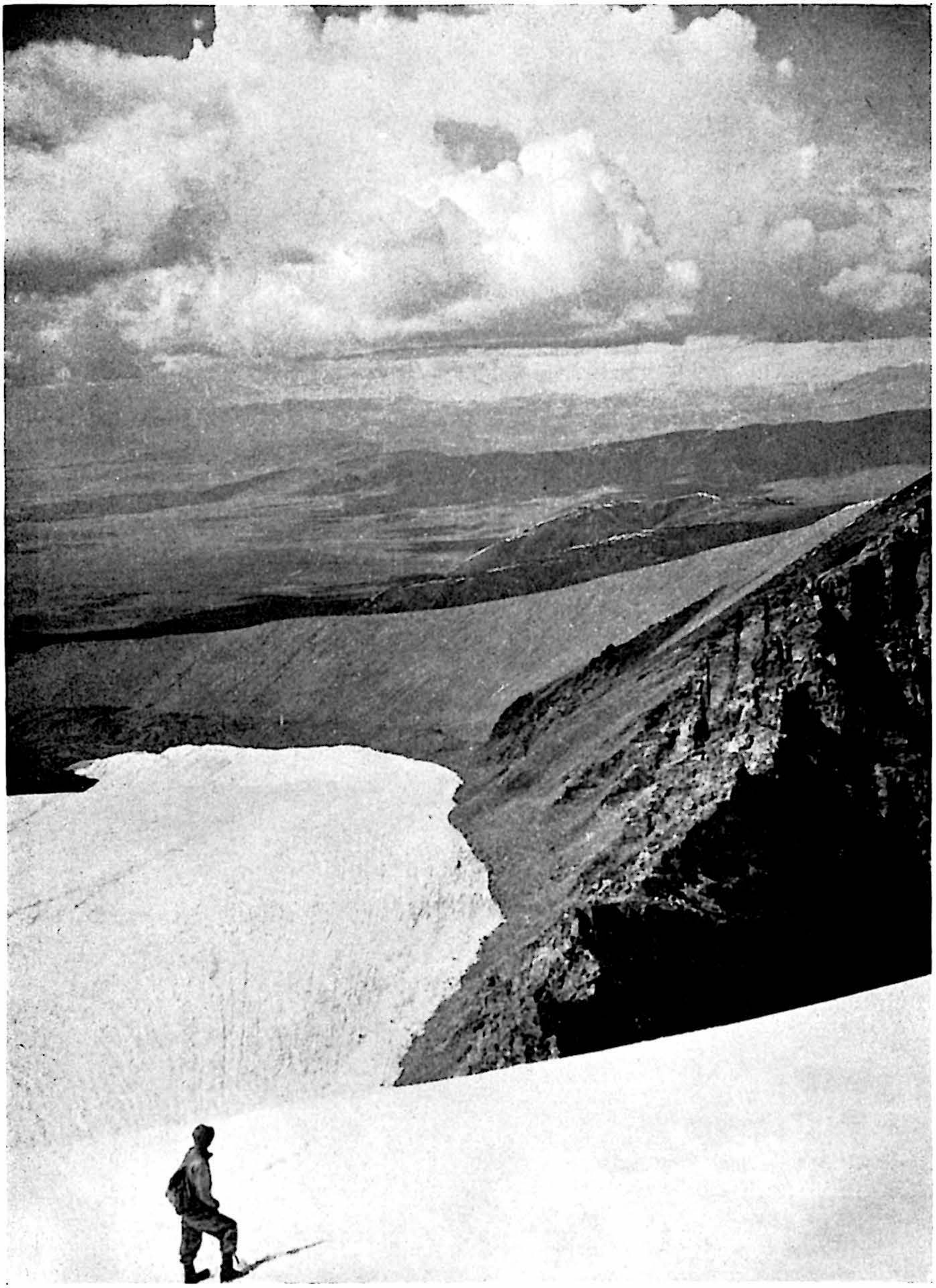
valley for the final stage and attempt Chomiomo (22,403 ft.). It appeared that Angtharkay had been high up the mountain with Mr. G. B. Gourlay in 1933—an attempt which came near to success and only failed 400 ft. below the summit owing to bad snow conditions. He remembered the route, too, which would save us much time in reconnaissance—time we could ill spare.

The delightful walk up to Donkung (15,600 ft.) seemed vividly reminiscent, at least in the lower part, of scenes amid the Scottish Highlands. We loaded up with wood at the limit of bush to conserve kerosine. Higher still, a few snow peaks gladdened all eyes except mine. I was feeling rather feeble and on arrival at Donkung retired into my sleeping bag where I remained for the next couple of days with a high temperature and all the signs of an attack of influenza. No doubt I had caught a chill on the way up. The fever soon subsided, but the resultant cough and diarrhoea proved rather troublesome on the mountain.

Immediately opposite Donkung rose the magnificent peak of Khangchengyao (22,600 ft.), and Crosby spent a day studying it, and the range extending S. from Chomiomo, from a pleasant 18,250 ft. hill to the W. In the meantime, however, ill fortune continued to wait upon us. Whittle went down with a severe attack of mountain sickness which proved so acute that he was obliged to descend to a lower altitude forthwith. He was unable to walk, but after some trouble a pony was procured for him to ride. We saw him next in Gangtok on the return journey. He had helped much towards the adventure and our sympathy went with him in his disappointment.

On July 22, in fair but dull weather, Crosby and I preceded by Angtharkay and our remaining porters, left Donkung for the base camp. A side valley to the W., with fine views of the precipitous E. face of Chomiomo ahead, was followed until a hanging valley on the N., leading to a low col, could be traversed. A fine rock peak of 19,360 ft. awoke our cupidity but in the event it was not to be. Crossing a ridge some distance above the col, and descending easy slabs and scree, we found the base camp already established at a height of about 17,500 ft. in a delightful oasis amid the moraines with fine views over to Pauhunri (23,385 ft.) and Khangchengyao. But base camps, being near the feet of the glaciers, are usually cold and often windy and this one proved no exception. Crosby and I each had a small tent while the porters shared a large one.

Low cloud prevented any view the following morning. The upper part of the route lay up the skyline ridge but the summit is far beyond, and considerably higher than the apparent summit in this view. After sorting and packing loads for Angtharkay and six porters we set out for Camp 1. The moraines were somewhat complicated but the glacier, after an initial steepness, proved very easy. It snowed spasmodically. Only the lower part of the N.E. face was visible, including large, but solid looking ice walls. A buttress near the summit ridge had been sending down considerable quantities of rock



Photo, G. Crosby.]

N. CHOMIOMO GLACIER AND TIBETAN PLAINS FROM CHOMIOMO.

but nothing fell while we were on the glacier. Keeping cautiously out of harm's way, we ascended the long slopes of scree and broken rock at the head of the glacier, meeting on the way three porters returning. It was heartening to see Nima Tensing's effervescent grin. But the scree was unstable and it was laborious work. Crosby was going fairly well but I dragged wearily. The height was 19,000 ft. but I felt my weakness to be due rather to the after effects of the chill : only the sight of Angtharkay, armed with a cup of tea, at the top of the slope eventually induced me to join him.

Camp 1 was placed on a shelf above a small buttress and beneath a row of cliffs. The arrangements allowed Crosby and me each to have a tent at this camp also, but to share one at Camp 2 which was incidentally much warmer. It snowed steadily at Camp 1 and the night was cold, the tents being iced. We had provided ourselves with pneumatic rubber mattresses and slept soundly as a result.

July 24 dawned beautifully and we enjoyed a breathtaking view over to Pauhunri, a sea of cloud concealing the Cho Llamo plains. It was arranged that Angtharkay and the other three, Dawa Thondup, Ila Namgyal and Ghil Khan, should carry up to Camp 2 and that the two last should descend to Camp 1 for the night, returning to Camp 2 again the following day to help evacuate the camp. The upper part of the N.E. face was in full view, though much foreshortened, and we could not judge where we should be able to place Camp 2 ; but from the moderate average angle of the N.E. ridge, as also from Gourlay's experience, it seemed that a place would probably not be very hard to find.

The easy shelf led from the camp to a gap in the ridge at almost 20,000 ft. Here the porters fixed a beautiful streamer of prayer flags across from one rock wall to the other. This performance gave them intense amusement and the atmosphere became pleasantly festal. We all passed auspiciously beneath the banner and addressed ourselves to the easy ridge ahead, or rather the porters did. I, being addicted to ' a nice sit down ' on a mountain, settled down to a quiet cigarette out of the wind. Crosby studied the Tibetan plains with photographic eye.

The rocks petered out into a broad snow ridge which swept up, at an increasing angle, to a steep buttress with the gleam of ice beneath. To avoid the buttress a traverse to the right led to the steep snow slopes of the N. face. Higher up, many steps had to be cut in névé ice, and it was while engaged on this task that we were overtaken by a violent squall from the north-east with hail and snow. Angtharkay, however, was making large, comfortable steps for the benefit, no doubt, of the weaker brethren who, on this occasion, were glad enough of them. The squall soon passed and it became blisteringly hot. Long slopes led up to the ridge where there was a site which Angtharkay thought suitable for a camp. I had my eye on a possible site higher up, and an easy but tiring ridge gave out on a small level platform of scree.

Photo, G. Whittle.]

CHOMIOMO, S. FACE.

Photo, G. Crosby.]

DAWA THONDUP AND ANGTHARKAY AT CAMP 2.

Here was room and to spare for our two tents, but no sooner had we established ourselves than the camp was struck by another, and very much more severe squall of wind. We feared for the tents during some of the gusts but, as always, the Sherpas had done their work well. The gale moderated and finally dropped, after 1½ hours, but much snow had fallen, some of which had found its way into the tent. Our hunger, however, did not seem to abate the higher we climbed, and we enjoyed a good meal and a warm and comfortable night. We both felt some satisfaction at having reached 21,000 ft. only twelve days above sea level, particularly as neither of us was very fit. Crosby, in fact, had been having pain and stiffness in his hip and it was not, therefore, with any great surprise that I heard, the following morning, that he did not feel up to continuing. This was, as it happens, the last serious disappointment of the trip, but in its way the greatest.

The rest of us left camp shortly after 8.30 A.M., I rather after the others. We soon roped up when a few crevasses appeared and not far above entered a cloud-cap which, apart from fragmentary glimpses, lost us the views for which we had hoped. The snow slopes seemed interminable and I was reduced to eight and then to six steps and a rest. Angtharkay and Dawa were very understanding and patient, but if they had been alone I doubt if they would have had cause to halt at all. The slopes steepened for a stretch so that steps had to be kicked and the axe was in use once or twice, including the ascent to the summit ridge, over the remains of a cornice. Here a long rest was taken before the ridge was traversed. I was going better now and we made good progress along the snowy ridge until a gendarme forced us off the crest on the Tibetan side, the Sikkim face being a precipice. The long trudge back to the ridge, which rose again beyond the gendarme, seemed unnecessarily tedious. The mist was extremely dense, and as the ridge had its ups and downs it was a problem to know just where the summit was. A steep snowy step which suddenly appeared was surmounted by a sloping shelf on the Tibetan side of the crest and it seemed that we were on the summit. At any rate, it was clearly a good place to bring out the bag of acid drops and these were going down steadily when the mist suddenly parted disclosing a lovely vignette of the summit of Khangchengyao above boiling depths. After this we kept a weather eye open and before very long an unmistakable dome-shaped top loomed out of the mist. It did not take us long to reach it, but my best was not nearly good enough for Angtharkay, who flung off the rope and positively raced to the top from where his shouts of triumph must have been audible at the base camp. I merely reverted to the sitting position and, *faute de mieux*, the bag of acid drops. It was warm and we stayed on the summit for almost twenty minutes during which several further slight clearances served to confirm our position but gave us only the vaguest snatches of view.

The descent seemed very easy. The climb must have taken about four hours, but I fancy only about three quarters of an hour saw us back at Camp 2. The two porters, Ghil Khan and Ila, had arrived

from Camp 1 and, after a welcome snack of biscuits and a mug of tea, camp was quickly struck. Crosby and I followed the porters at our own pace, Crosby feeling weak but steadily improving as we descended. The day was perfect. The whole mountain was now cloudless and I could not rid myself of a vague feeling of regret that we had deserted the summit so early. But careful stepping down the staircase on the N. face traverse banished graceless thoughts and, while Crosby continued slowly towards Camp 1, I found my rock seat again above the col with its long vista of the Tibetan uplands before me, striving to engrave the passing moment on the tablet of memory. Angtharkay, at Camp 2, had taken me by the arm : ' Look, sahib, Kampa Dzong ! ' Eyes less acute than his, following the pointing finger, had barely discerned the tiny patch on the distant plateau. Now, as they sought the spot again, some of the mists seemed to clear from the strange romance of the successive Everest expeditions. Kampa Dzong was not only a local and a physical landmark. Turning, I crossed from Tibet into Sikkim and the ridge rose as a screen at my back.

A word or two in conclusion. Nothing much can be learned from a trip of this kind except perhaps (which is in no sense a discovery) that a peak of this height is accessible within a fortnight from sea leval, and this without much in the way of either training or acclimatisation in the usual sense. But the margin is not unduly generous and failure seems probable without fair weather, good snow and, above all, sound porters. It is hardly wise to impose demands upon the climber which he has not yet acquired the stamina to meet. To do so may well be to invite failure. He will probably be hard put to it to hoist his own reluctant and protesting mechanism, unencumbered, to the summit. The best of the Sherpas seem always to be more or less acclimatised. The heavy work of load-carrying and step-cutting is better left to them. Thus, if a peak has to be rushed, as we rushed Chomiomo, meagre reserves of energy should be carefully conserved and not dissipated in work which the porters can undertake more efficiently. Chomiomo is relatively an easy peak, and probably only mountains of this character are reasonably accessible under such conditions. Harder peaks take longer and so necessarily impose upon the climber a higher degree of both fitness and adaptation to the conditions, but they can hardly be practicable within 28 days' leave. I felt, on the summit, that I could have managed another such day of 1000 to 1500 ft. without undue distress provided that the snow were no worse—which would be a most unsafe assumption in practice. We none of us make any bones about the debt we owe to Angtharkay and our porters. Through their unique help we were enabled to take part in an experience which, even though we may perhaps never see these great mountains again, will remain with us as long as memory.