

THE CHO OYU EXPEDITION, 1952

By R. C. EVANS

THIS expedition came into being very late in the day, after it had finally been decided that a Swiss team, and not a British one, was to attempt Everest in 1952. The British expedition was sent out with two objects, to select and train men for a later attempt on Everest, and to try out equipment, clothing, and oxygen gear.

Cho Oyu was chosen following reports that there were on it two possible routes. During the 1951 Everest reconnaissance, Shipton and Ward had seen Cho Oyu from the Menlung La, or thereabouts, and had concluded that there was a route to the mountain from the south. Soon after, Bourdillon and Murray had seen Cho Oyu from the Nangpa La, and formed a very favourable opinion of the route up its west face.

Our party, finally selected at the end of January, consisted of Shipton as leader, Secord, Gregory, Bourdillon, Colledge, and myself, with three outstanding New Zealanders, Edward Hillary, George Lowe, and Earle Riddiford. Griffith Pugh came as physiologist.

Bourdillon and his wife, Gregory, Colledge, Riddiford, and I sailed on the *Canton*, March 7th, while Shipton, Pugh, and Secord flew out later. The whole party finally assembled at Jainagar, in Bihar, on March 30th, and it was here that we first met Hillary and Lowe, who burst in one evening in a characteristically tempestuous manner, brandishing enormous ice-axes, the like of which few of us had seen before.

It took us seventeen days to reach Namche Bazaar, and while the march in is crowded with personal memories, few of these are different from those shared and described by other Himalayan climbers. The first two days, when we marched over a desert landscape, with sand under foot, and little shade, were unusual, and a fitting prelude to some very dry days in the Siwaliks.

It was not until April 7th, at Okhaldunga, that I began to feel that we were getting near mountains. Here I saw a lammergeier and a pair of white-capped redstarts, and on April 9th, our first day out of Okhaldunga, we passed some ruined mani walls.

On the next day, April 10th, just before our breakfast halt, we mounted a small bare hill, and saw, far to the north and east, the line of the snows. In the foreground lay the ridge of Numbur and Karyolung, the great southern boundary of Khumbu, while farther away, and to the right, we could make out Pumori, Taweche, Everest, Nuptse, Llotse, and Kangtega. They shone white, Everest itself plumed, above the yellow dust haze of the middle distance.

It was the dramatic moment of the march in, and for some of us, seeing these mountains for the first time, a moment of mark in our lives.

We now climbed into a country of rhododendrons, chortens, Tibetan dress, chang, and squat stone houses, a leisurely journey whose only incident was the theft of one of our kitbags, which contained nearly our whole stock of 12-bore cartridges. Griffith Pugh strode along in pale blue pyjamas, a startling figure with red hair, in his left hand an aluminium measure, and in his right a whirling hygrometer, which the Sherpas mistook for the latest thing in prayer wheels. They whirled it for him, intoning 'Om mane,' and looking on Pugh himself, at first, as a lama.

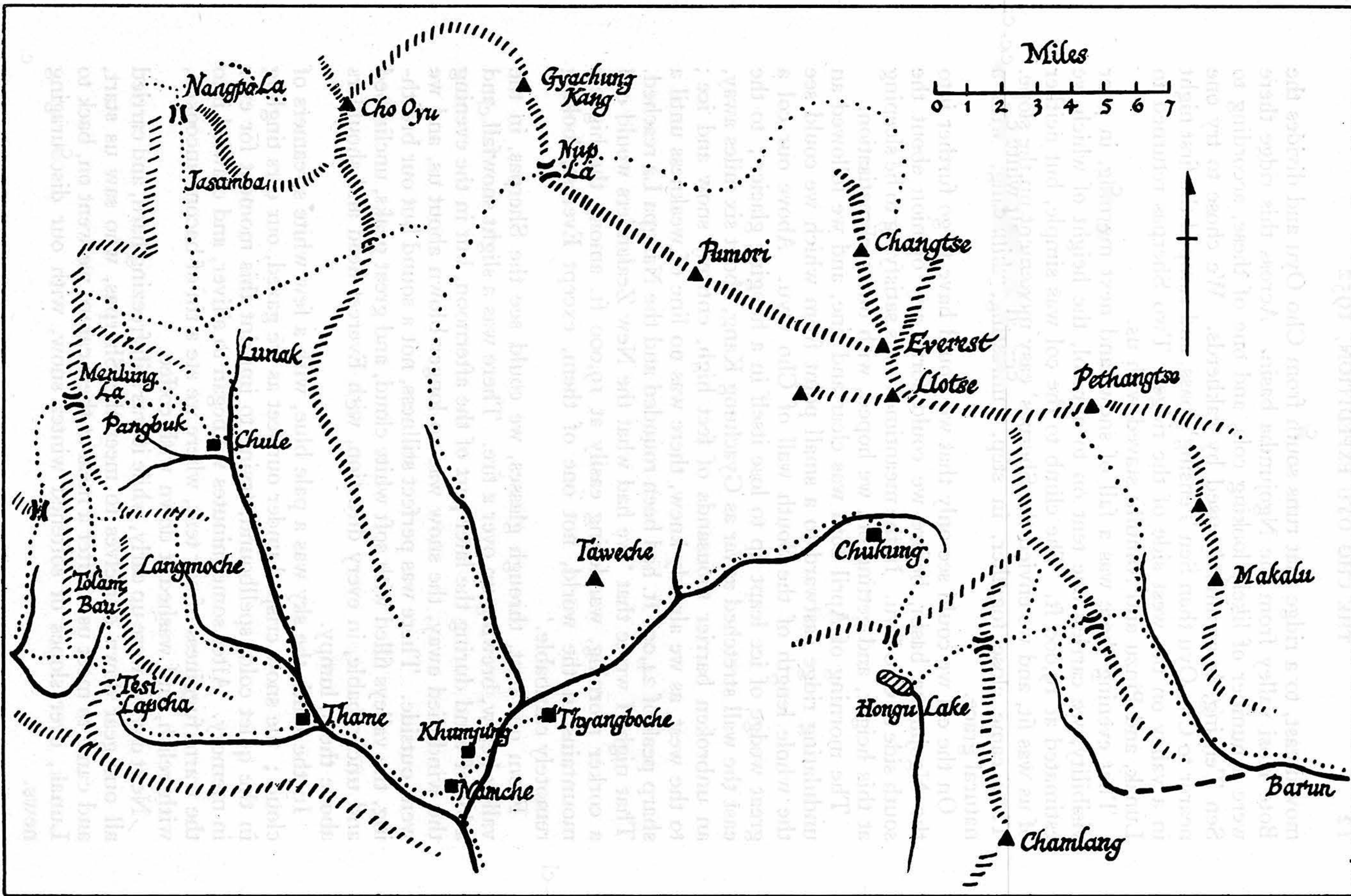
Namche Bazaar, which we reached on April 16th, lies at about 12,000 ft. on a ridge between the Bote Kosi, which comes down from the Nangpa La, and the Dudh Kosi, which drains the Ngojumba basin and the south side of Everest. Our welcome here was delightful, and for those who had known a bit of the Sherpas before, and had heard them talk of their homeland, to stay with them at Namche or, as I did later, at Khumjung, was a charming privilege. The pleasure, it is true, had to be paid for, and risks run to enjoy it, for the houses harbour fleas and lice, everyone has a running nose, and in one house the roof fell in on our sleeping place when we happened to be out.

At Da Tensing's house in Khumjung, the roof was sound, and noses drier; there were not biting insects, and, to my eye, the living-room was spotless. Chang, raksi, and Tibetan tea flowed unendingly, potatoes were always on the fire, and light conversation, the telling of tall climbing stories, and dancing, could always be arranged. The dance, a slow, rhythmic shuffle to a sweet, haunting melody, sung by the dancers, is a communal affair in which everyone takes part, and it lasts well into the small hours. As winter quarters for those who wish to get acclimatised, there might be worse places than Khumjung.

We made a dump at Namche, and started up the Bote Kosi for Thame, Chule, Lunak, and the Nangpa La, a pass into Tibet at 19,000 ft. At Chule, 16,000 ft., where we all felt the altitude, we took a semi-rest day. Hillary and I were sick, and did not stir in the morning, but the others, Shipton, Lowe, Secord, Gregory, and Colledge, tackled a nearby peak in the hope of seeing something of Cho Oyu. Winter snow still lay several inches deep on the ground, and the climbers complained a lot of the effects of height. In the afternoon I climbed a hillside to the east of our valley, pursuing Ram Chikor with stones, but without seeing anything of the mountain we had come to climb. Pugh was still at Namche, and Riddiford and Bourdillon had stayed behind to examine Khumbilia, a sharp rock peak above Khumjung. It, however, was covered with fresh snow and they were unable to get far.

From Chule, the main party went on a day's march to Lunak, 17,000 ft., a collection of huts to the south-west of Cho Oyu. Here Shipton split the party, sending Gregory and me to look at the southern approaches to the mountain, and Hillary and Lowe to look at the West face.

Gregory and I took four local Sherpas, and two Meade tents, and



moved east, to a ridge that runs south from Cho Oyu and divides the Bote Kosi valley from the Ngojumba basin. Across this ridge there were a number of likely looking cols, and one of these, according to Sen Tensing, is commonly used by yakherds. We chose to try one nearer to Cho Oyu than Sen Tensing's pass, and camped the first night in a valley on the west side of the ridge. Two Sherpas returned to Lunak, and Pinzu and Annullu stayed with us.

That evening there was a fall of snow, and next morning, in poor visibility, we carried one tent on to our col, the height of which we estimated at 19,000 ft. The climb to the col was simple, but neither of us was fit, and we envied the Sherpas' easy movement up the slope. They came close together, in step, 'unresting, unhasting,' with a natural grace.

On the col we could see only that we would have to go further into the Ngojumba basin, before we could form any opinion about the south side of Cho Oyu. In the meantime it was satisfying to be sleeping at this height, and getting on, we hoped, with our acclimatisation.

The morning of April 26th was clear and fine, and we followed an undulating ridge eastward to a small point from which we could see the whole length of the South wall of Cho Oyu. Above our col a great wedge of ice leapt up to lose itself in a hanging glacier; to the east the wall stretched as far as Gyachung Kang, about six miles away, an unbroken barrier thousands of feet high, entirely snow and ice; to the west, as we already knew, there was no line of weakness until a sharp peak of 24,000 ft. had been rounded and the Nangpa La reached. That night I wrote that 'we had what the New Zealanders would call a corker morning, wandering easily at 19,000 ft. among the highest mountains in the world, not one of them, except Everest, looking remotely climbable.'

From our tent, through glasses, we could see the Sherpas, in the valley below, brewing up over a fire. There was a slight snowfall, and a lot of wind during the later part of the afternoon, but in the evening the wind died away, the snow was no longer blown about us, and we went outside. There was perfect stillness, not a sound but our breathing, the valleys filled with soft white cloud, and great peaks, unclimbed and unclimbable, in every direction, with Everest head and shoulders above them, lumpy.

In the south the sky was a pale blue, with a few white streamers of cloud; the snow crisped under our feet as we gazed, our ears tingling in the quiet cold, spellbound, trying to imprint this moment for ever in memory. After some minutes we began to shiver, and crawled into the warm fugginess of our tent, where we ate a tin of bacon, uncooked, with relish, and washed it down with coffee.

Next day we were up early, while it was still freezing hard, and carried all our gear down ourselves to meet the Sherpas, who saw us start, and came to meet us. After a meal at their camp, we went on, back to Lunak, over slopes of softened winter snow, with our discouraging news.



CHO OYU FROM PEAK ABOVE THE NANGPA LA.

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CHO OYU-GYACHUNG KANG RIDGE FROM PEAK 19,600 FT. CLIMBED 1ST MAY. BHOTE GLACIER IN FOREGROUND.

[To face p. 14.]

Hillary and Lowe did not return until the 28th, but when they came, it was to say that the West face route might go, if some ice cliffs half-way up could be climbed.

Secord, Gregory and I now moved up to Jasamba, at about 18,000 ft. south of the Nangpa La, and climbed two peaks to the west of that pass. They were of twenty and twenty-one thousand feet, and so close together as to be part of one mountain. We went up both on the same day, and found that the higher had already been climbed by Hillary and Lowe on their reconnaissance. From here we could form a good idea of the ground and of the problem before us. Cho Oyu presented a long glacier approach, many miles from the nearest fuel, with, at the end, the unwelcome prospect of being too near Chinese territory. It looked, indeed, as if our line of communication or retreat must lie over ground easily reached by any Chinese soldiers who happened to be in the district, and got wind of our presence.

On May 6th, we took a camp to the foot of a mixed snow and rock ridge, which promised a way on to the West face. This camp was at about 19,500 ft., and was occupied by Secord, Gregory, Bourdillon, Hillary, Lowe, and me. It was in a very hot spot, a bare glacier depression, with much snow still lying on the ground.

Next day we moved to our highest camp, over slopes of snow and shale, and, near the top, ice covered with powder snow. Here we put a fixed rope. Our camp was on a ridge at 21,500 ft. and we arrived at this desolate spot in a snowstorm. Next day I stayed in, with laryngitis which had gradually been getting worse over the last few days, while the others prospected the ridge ahead. On the 9th I was clearly worse, after two nights of coughing, and Cam Secord patiently shepherded me down and over the Nangpa La to Jasamba, a journey which took us nine hours.

On the 10th, Riddiford and Shipton, who also had a respiratory infection but now was a bit better, went up to join the party still on Cho Oyu, and found that they had, on two days, gone above our twenty-one thousand five hundred foot camp, and had concluded that the ice cliffs at 22,500 ft. could not be climbed with the resources at our disposal. Leaving Hillary and Lowe to attempt a peak of 22,500 ft. to the north of the Nangpa La, the rest of the party now returned to Jasamba, and from there we all moved down to Lunak.

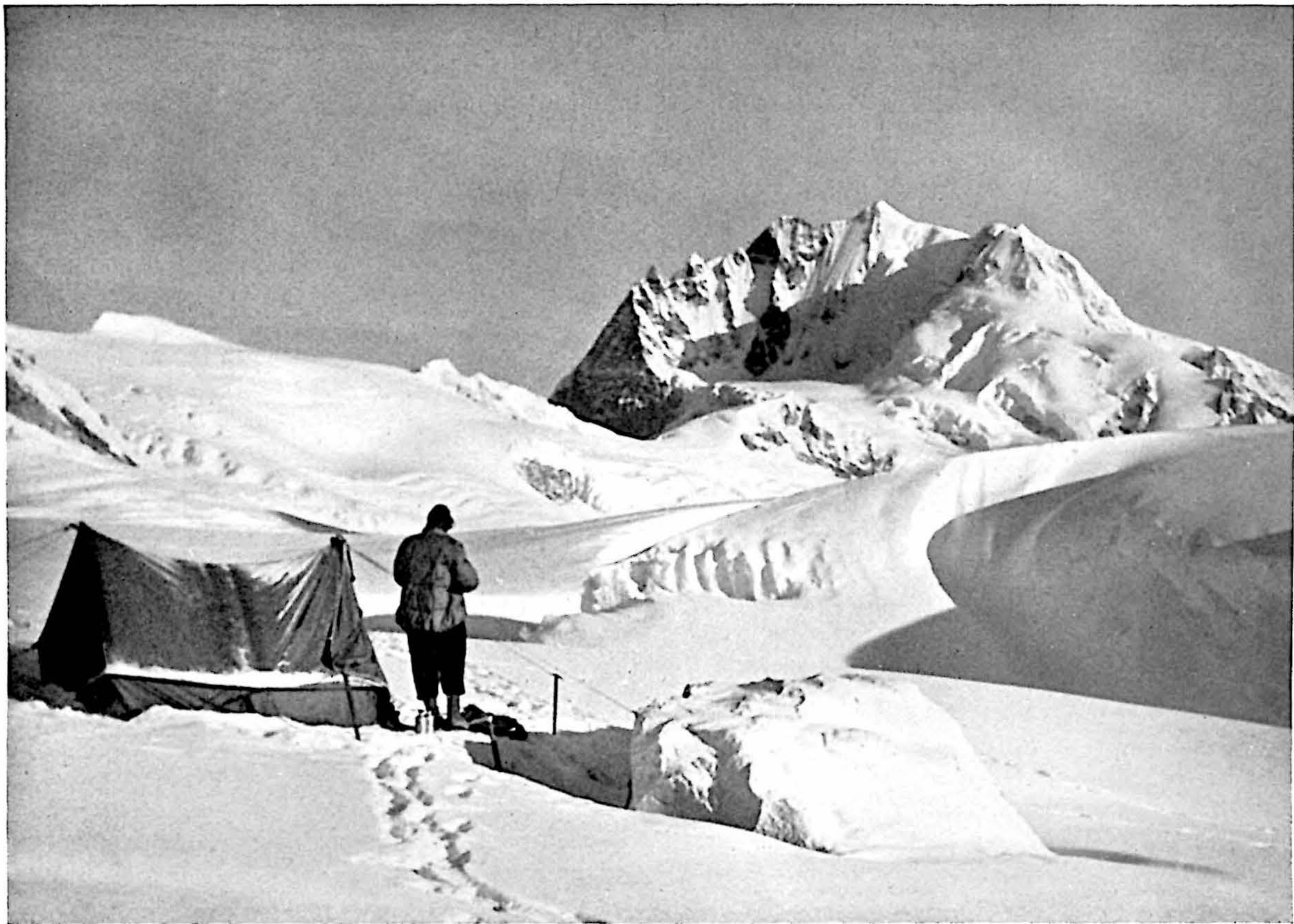
The amount of sickness at this stage of the expedition was considerable. Gregory, Shipton and I had respiratory infections; Bourdillon had barely recovered from a similar complaint; Riddiford was lame with sciatica, but still pushing himself on; and Pugh was weak with diarrhoea.

At Lunak we stayed until April 16th, when we were joined by Hillary and Lowe, who had climbed two mountains north of the Nangpa La, one of them a peak of about 22,800 ft. on which they had a difficult time in bad weather.

The party now split into three, each group pursuing the end which most interested its members. Secord, Pugh, Bourdillon, and Colledge



HILLARY BELOW ICE CLIFFS ON CHO OYU.



CHO RAPZANG FROM THE NANGPA LA.

went to the Menlung La, which was crossed in 1951 by Shipton, Ward, and others, and camped on the pass for a week, carrying out some observations of climbing performance with and without oxygen apparatus. From this camp Bourdillon and Colledge climbed a shapely peak of about 22,000 ft. to the south of the pass.

Hillary and Lowe went to Namche, restocked with provisions, and crossed the Nup La to visit the Rongbuk glaciers. This was the first crossing of the Nup La, and involved some difficult ice climbing on the Ngojumba side. They also looked at Changtse, the Everest North Peak, but turned back on finding long ice slopes up which they could not bring the Sherpas with their camping gear.

Gregory, Shipton, and I, with five Sherpas, tried to get out of the Lunak valley by a pass to the west of Lunak itself, into an unexplored corner lying north of the Menlung country, but were unable to find a route down from the col on its west side. We then cut over a little col into the Pangbuk basin and came down the Bote Kosi as far as the Langmoche valley, and went up that valley, looking for an ice plateau which we had seen from Chule. From Chule, this plateau seems to be entirely surrounded by peaks of about 21,000 ft. and it drains down to Chule by a fierce-looking ice-fall.

Exploring the Langmoche Khola was delightful, and we found there a pasture in an old lake bed, set among mountains of savage aspect, but although we reached the ridge between the Langmoche and Pangbuk basins, we were unable to find a way to our hidden plateau.

Our next move was up the Thame Khola to the Tesi Lapcha, a pass of about 19,000 ft. We camped on the pass, and climbed the snow peak to the south of it, about 20,500 ft. high, omitting its last hundred feet, which was composed of a mass of tottering séracs from which we were cut off by a deep gash. This is the peak illustrated in the book of photographs from the 1951 reconnaissance.

The Tesi Lapcha itself, the Sherpas' short summer route to Katmandu, is a glacier pass, with a steep climb on its east side, over slabs and snow slopes. Yaks are taken over, with a Sherpa fore and aft, and a third man to help at awkward spots. On the very crest of the pass is a so-called cave, which gives some shelter, but has to be approached and left at a run, since the line of its overhang is marked by the pits made in the snow by icicles which fall at express speed from the cliffs above.

On the west side of the Tesi Lapcha we found a wide, gently inclined glacier flowing towards us from the north, the Tolam Bau, and after camping on it, and following it up next day, we found that its upper end was in fact the plateau at which we had gazed from Chule, and which we had failed to reach from the Langmoche. Here, then, is a glacier which flows into two widely separated river systems, that of the Dudh Kosi on the eastern side, and that of the Rolwaling on the western side.

There is probably a pass direct from the Langmoche into the lower reaches of the Tolam Bau, but this still waits to be crossed. At the head of the Tolam Bau, and east of the icefall it sends down to Chule,

is a fine-looking mountain with three summits, and on our first arrival we climbed the central, and highest, summit. This was on March 25th, and the height of the peak, we thought, was about 21,000 ft., though our aneroid flattered us so far as to read over 25,000 ft.

That night we camped on the plateau, and explored next day for a pass into the Menlung country to the West. However, after climbing to a promising col, we found that descent on the west side was out of the question for a laden party, and that, in any case, the descent would take us, not into the Menlung basin, but into that of Nangaon, a tributary valley of the Rolwaling Chu.

That same day, after a rest in camp, we went north from the plateau, up a glacier corridor leading, we hoped, to the Menlung La. The corridor petered out some way south of the pass, and although visibility was very poor, we saw enough to conclude that this was no way into the Menlung basin. There was one short moment on that afternoon, when a tunnel cleared in the mist, and we saw, far to the north, the top of Cho Oyu framed in cloud.

Next day Shipton was ill, with a high temperature, and I became anxious to move him to a place where he could be better looked after. Here we were on stones and snow, at 20,000 ft., living on tea, tsampa, and highly spiced Sherpa stew, none of it perfect invalid food. Furthermore, the way to any village was long and exacting, and meant a certain amount of real, if easy, climbing. So it was with some relief that I heard him say next day that he felt strong enough to try to get back over the Tesi Lapcha. It was a dirty day, and we came down the Tolam Bau in mist and falling snow. Conditions worsened as we got near the foot of the Tesi Lapcha, where it was blowing a blizzard, and it was only through Da Tensing's local knowledge that we were able to hit on the right place to start the climb to the pass. As we rose, the weather improved, but it was a hard day for a sick man, and a very long one. What bliss to come down to short turf, and enough juniper for a fire, and a brew of tsampa tea.

When we set up our rendezvous camp at Thame it was near the end of the last week of May, and time for the main party to start for home, while those of us with time in hand could put into effect a scheme which we had come to call 'The Barun Trip.' This was concocted by Hillary and Shipton the year before, when they had gone up the Imja river, and over a pass to the south, the Ambu Lapcha, to Hongu lake. From there they had looked at the Barun saddle to the east, and had formed the plan of crossing to the Barun glacier at the foot of Makalu, and pursuing the Barun gorge down to the River Arun.

Before starting we must know, first, if it was possible to cross from the Hongu into the Barun, and second, if there was any sign of pasturage in the upper Barun to indicate that its lower gorge had been traversed by man. On the map there is no sign here of habitation, and the gorge is nearly twenty miles long. We decided that I should go first to see, while Shipton wound up our affairs at Namche, and that we should meet at Hongu Lake on 12th June.

I left Thame on June 1st with Da Tensing and Annullu, and after a night at Khumjung, turned east up the Imja Khola. The weather was threatening, with much cloud, and a continuous thunderstorm going on around Kangtega and the Dudh Kosi gorge. On June 3rd, after a seemingly endless trek over featureless moorland in mist and falling snow, I reached a group of yakherds' huts called Chukung, where I bought a hindquarter of yak for the modest sum of three rupees. It was not until some days later that I found that this very favourable rate was due to the fact that this particular yak had been found dead some days before we came to Chukung. The herdsmen must have been wondering how to explain his loss to the owner when we appeared as manna from heaven.

Next day we reached the foot of the Ambu Lapcha, a rock wall two thousand feet high. From our camp beneath it, Da Tensing and I climbed to the col that afternoon, to take up one load, and to see what lay beyond. The final slopes were of steep, insecure snow lying on ice, then a rock pitch where we had to haul up the sack, and some easy scrambling to a narrow snow ridge. We could make no guess as to the route down the other side. Next day, however, having brought up all our loads, we started down at a venture, bearing a little eastwards, down a steep snow slope. This brought us to rock gully, the bottom of which we could not see. Down we went, slowly, with our heavy loads, until, after some two hundred feet, we reached an overhang. Fortunately at this point it was possible to traverse a hundred feet to the west, into a snow couloir which led us down to glacier, scree, and finally the turf by the Hongu Lake. Even at this season the lake had a surface covering of snow, and I guessed its height to be about 18,000 ft. It is the largest of five lakes which give to this remote corrie its other name of 'Panch Pokri.'

At the south-east end of the lake, which is nearly a mile long, the Sherpas built cairns, rather austere by contrast with the Hindu symbols left here by herdsmen come up from the south, from Mera Kharka.

We camped here a night, and I made a dump before we moved up towards the Barun saddle. Even so, we three were heavily laden as we trudged up to the saddle. We had to cross a very broken glacier, and then walk up the valley in softening snow for about five hours before reaching the foot of the first col on to the saddle. The slopes to this west col are about a thousand feet high, and consist, after crossing a bergschrund and climbing a short snow couloir, of the loosest imaginable rock. We reached the crest about two in the afternoon, and looking over, saw that the Barun saddle is a high glacier plateau enclosed on every side but one. In that one place the glacier plunges towards the south, down a deep, narrow chasm, probably to join the main Barun gorge a little lower. I wanted to cross the upper part of the plateau, so we contoured across towards a col in line with the foot of the West ridge of Makalu, and camped below this East col under an overhanging rock.



EVEREST FROM THE SOUTH-EAST. (PARTLY OBSCURED BY LHOTSE.)

[To face p. 16.]

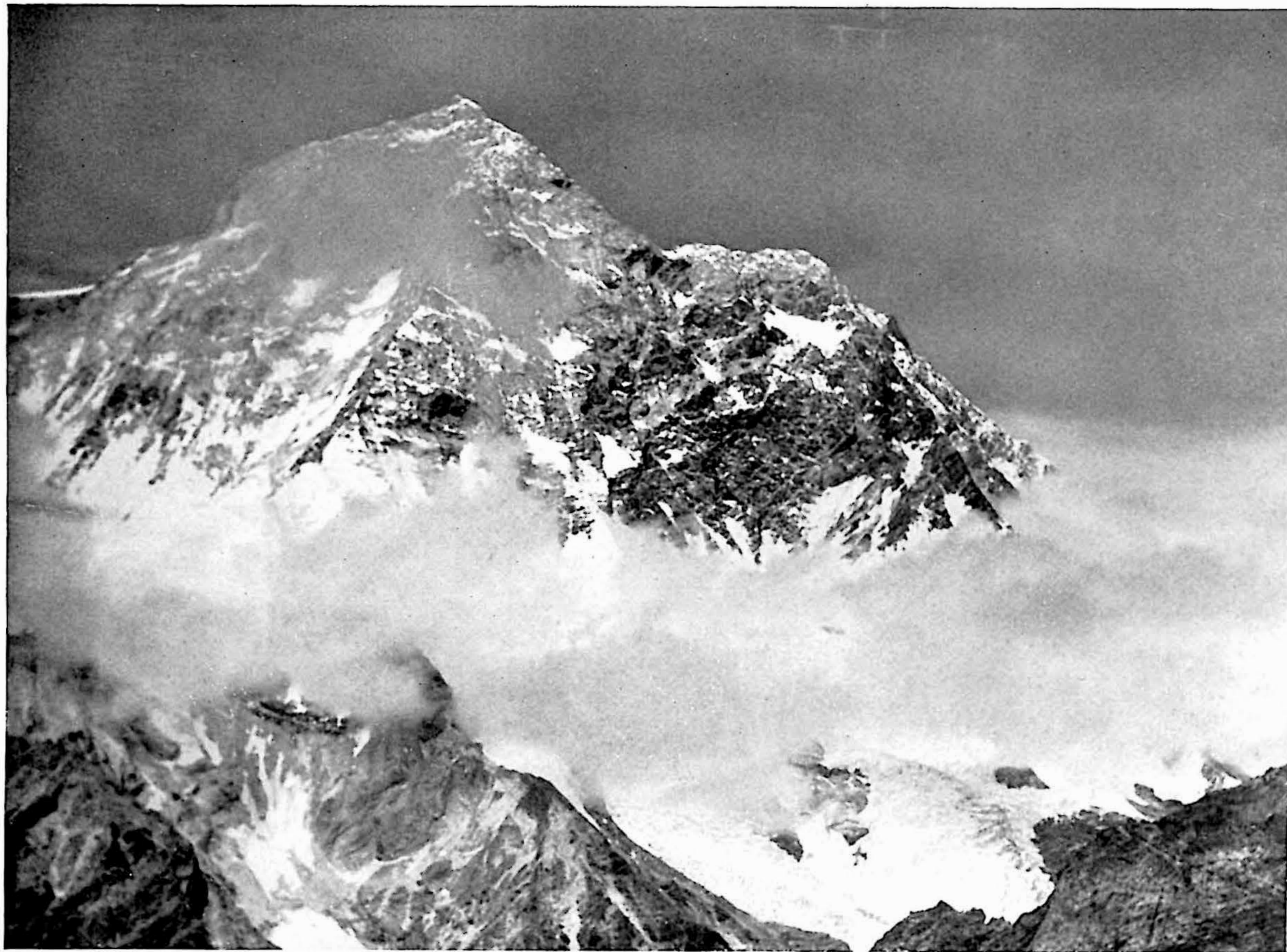
Next day, June 7th, we went over this col without loads, to see if there was a route down from it on the Barun side, and on June 8th we took our camp over, reached the main Barun glacier, and followed it down, travelling in an ablation valley, until we came to water and fuel. We had to go for two hours down alongside the glacier before we found them. Here there was a deserted sangar, with juniper, yak dung, and a herd of Tar, which moved slowly away at our arrival. We had come down now to about 15,000 ft. and we stayed here two nights, while I went a little further down the valley, and found more sangars, and abundant sheep tracks. Our camp seemed to be directly under the South-west face of Makalu, which looked much less than 12,000 ft. above us. Its sheer red cliffs and hanging glaciers were clear cut, and seemed close at hand, until cloud drifted across the face, or an ice avalanche fell, so far off that hardly a sound of it was heard.

Satisfied now that we could get down the gorge of the Barun, we returned to the Barun saddle, and camped on the East col, where we had a very rough night. Immediately south of the East col there is a snow peak of about 21,800 ft. and we tried to climb it next morning. After prolonged step-cutting we reached a narrow snow and ice ridge which was cut by a crevasse about two hundred feet below the summit. Here I embarked on an exposed wall, and was shaken on looking back half-way, to see Da Tensing exploring with great dash in another direction, and Annullu admiring the scenery with his hands in his pockets. Three days later I came back with Hillary, Lowe, and Shipton, and this time we went to the top.

In the meantime, however, I had to return to Hongu lake, where we expected the others on about June 12th, and on that day they came over from the Imja basin, mistaking me, as I went alone along the lakeside to meet them, for a solitary yeti. After even less than two weeks' absence, such a reunion was exciting, for they brought news of the Swiss adventures on Everest, as well as of their own crossing of the Nup La, and we had much to talk of that night.

On June 13th we set off together for the Barun saddle, and from a camp on the West col we climbed a peak of 22,500 ft. to the north of the plateau. This gives a magnificent view of the whole district, and particularly of the ridge from Lotse to Pethangtse. Next day we went up the mountain I had already tried with the Sherpas, and Hillary and I added another of 21,300 ft. just north of the East col. That night we camped down in the Barun and next day turned north towards Pethangtse. Two days going up the Barun took us to the foot of Pethangtse, which looks as if it can be climbed by its South face. A heavy snowfall on June 17th-18th, however, prevented us from making the attempt.

During these days we saw a great deal of Makalu. Its West face offers no route at all. The ridge joining Makalu I and II may possibly be reached from the Barun, but the North ridge of Makalu I has on it a gigantic step, which almost certainly, at that altitude, makes it



MAKALU FROM TRIBUTARY GLACIER OF BARUN (WHICH GAVE ACCESS TO PLATEAU GLACIER AND PASS).

impracticable. The South ridge is at a uniform angle, and very steep, but very broken. The East ridge has not yet been examined.

On our second day down the Barun we disturbed two men who were repairing a sangar. They were justifiably terrified at our approach, and fled at once. In spite of a determined chase we saw no more of them, and not until evening did we find a group of shepherds with their flocks.

Hillary, Lowe, and Shipton now wished to follow the Arun to the south, and took a local man to show the way. On June 20th we parted company. I took Da Tensing and Annullu, and we cut across to the north-east, over the angle made by the confluence of the Arun and Barun. I was heading for Hatia, a village at about 8,000 ft. on the west bank of the Arun. It took three wet days to Hatia, following faint tracks at first just above the tree line, and for the last day and a half in dense forest. Our tent was useless against the heavy rain, and we slept in houses and caves.

After going up the Arun for two days, we crossed it by rope bridge, and struck east across the Lumba Sumba Himal to Topka Gola. From there we followed the Mewa Khola south-east to Taplejung, and then went across country once more until we came into Darjeeling by the Singalila ridge.

Our whole journey was in monsoon weather, of course, so we saw little but our immediate surroundings. Except, that is, on one day, July 5th. We were following a sharp, high ridge, among Himalayan pines, and the two Sherpas were a little ahead of me. It was, as usual, cloudy, and the persistent cloud and rain had been having, I think, an effect on our spirits. I know that I had been idly thinking of the bath I would have a week hence, at Darjeeling. Rounding a turn of the track, I came on Da Tensing and Annullu. They had put down their loads, and were sitting at the side of the track, both looking towards the north-east. There had been a momentary rift in the cloud, and many miles away we could see the unmistakable outline of Jannu. One of the two grinned, and said, simply, 'When the Sherpas see the snows, they are happy.'