

## DHAULAGIRI, 1953

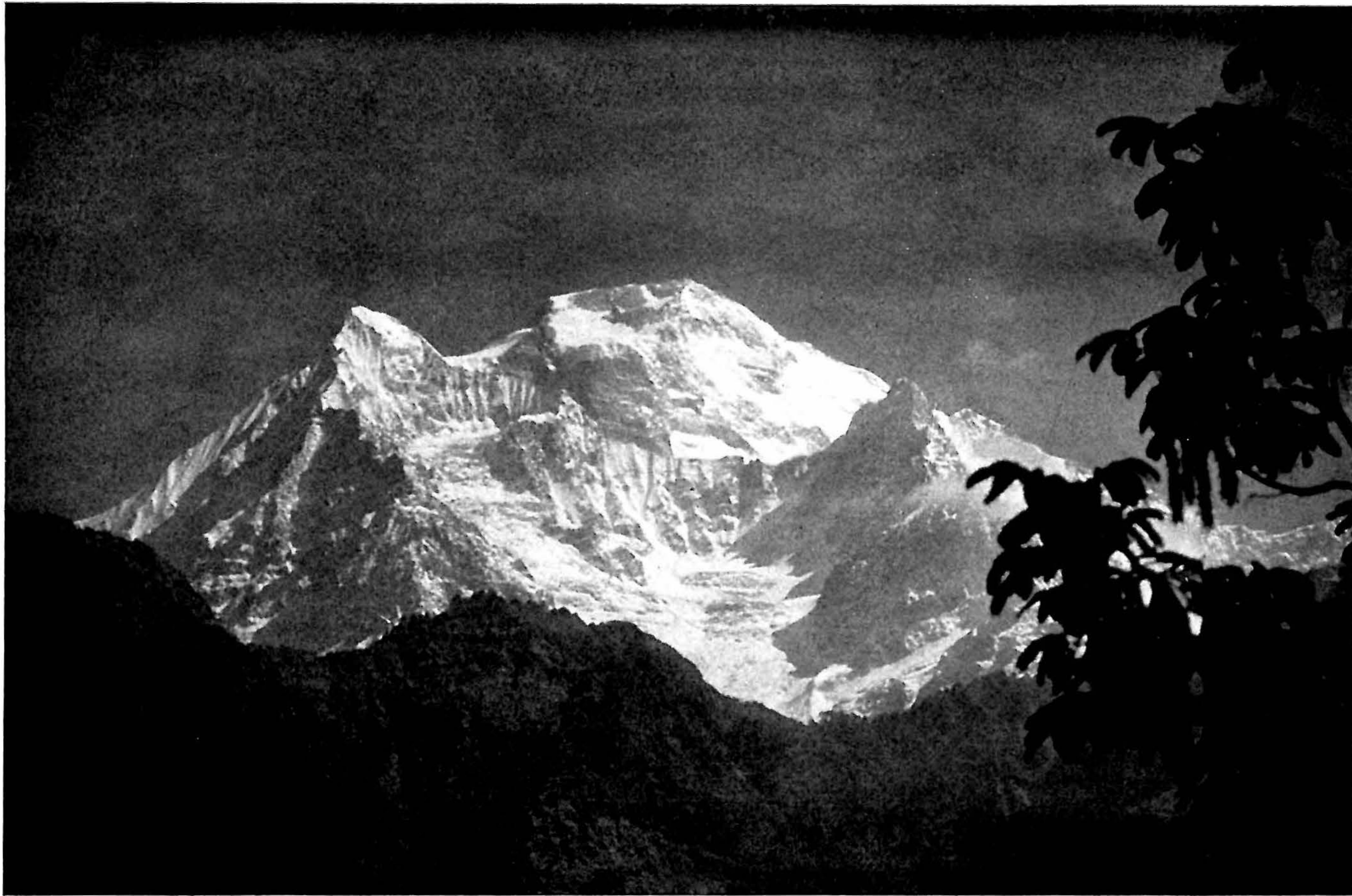
BY ANDRÉ ROCH

(Translated by BARBARA TOBIN.)

ON May 29, 1953, at Camp 4, 5,900 m. on a snowy hump on the northern slopes of Dhaulagiri, Bernard Lauterburg, the leader of the expedition, Ruedi Pfisterer, the doctor, Marc Eichelberg, Hannes Huss and André Roch were attentively studying the enormous face which rises 1,400 m. to the West ridge of the mountain. To the left, walls support a glacier slashed with blue. To the right, near-vertical slopes scattered with strips of horizontal rocks covered with powder snow, prop up the West ridge, which looks easy enough to climb in itself, but to which access is doubtful. In the centre a bulge in the face, shaped somewhat like a half pear, seems to be the best approach. Our Camp 5 had been set up at 6,500 m. on this immense slope.

That day, the members of the expedition were watching two small dots, Peter Braun and Ruedi Schatz, who were climbing from the top of the 'pear' over the last slope beneath the West ridge of the mountain. The two climbers had left without loads from Camp 5, following three Sherpas, Gyalzen, Ila Tensing and Kami, who were carrying the oxygen equipment and were opening up a track. At the top of the 'pear' the two climbers put on the oxygen masks and attacked the slope leading to the West ridge—the last apparent obstacle before the top. While they climbed, three other small dots descended in the large couloir situated orographically on the right of the pear; the Sherpas. All was going to plan, and they were climbing so well that we had great hopes of success.

The Sherpas now seemed to be sliding down the slope, they were going so fast; so fast that it looked dangerous. But to our horror, we suddenly realised that they were not sliding, they were falling, raising a large cloud of snow as they went. Two of the dots seemed to be tumbling together, while the third kept ahead of them; the slope became steeper and we watched with bated breath. The three must certainly be lost, the long slope down which they were falling ended in a sheer ice wall at the foot of which was a snowy plateau; if they reached the wall they would certainly not survive, and as we watched we realised only a miracle could stop their fall before they reached the fatal edge. Then the dot in front accelerated and we had no more hope for it. But one of us with binoculars made out that it was only a rucksack—behind it the three Sherpas were a black blob surrounded by a large cloud of powder snow, the whole tobogganing mass was approaching the crevasses before the ice-wall . . . they reached the first, cleared it, and crossing the second gradually succeeded in stopping themselves only some 200 metres from the wall. We drew a breath of relief—they were alive! The rucksack stopped on the edge but two objects hurtled over. We wondered what state we should find them



*Photo, C.A.A.Z.—A. Roch.]*

DHAULAGIRI FROM THE SOUTH.

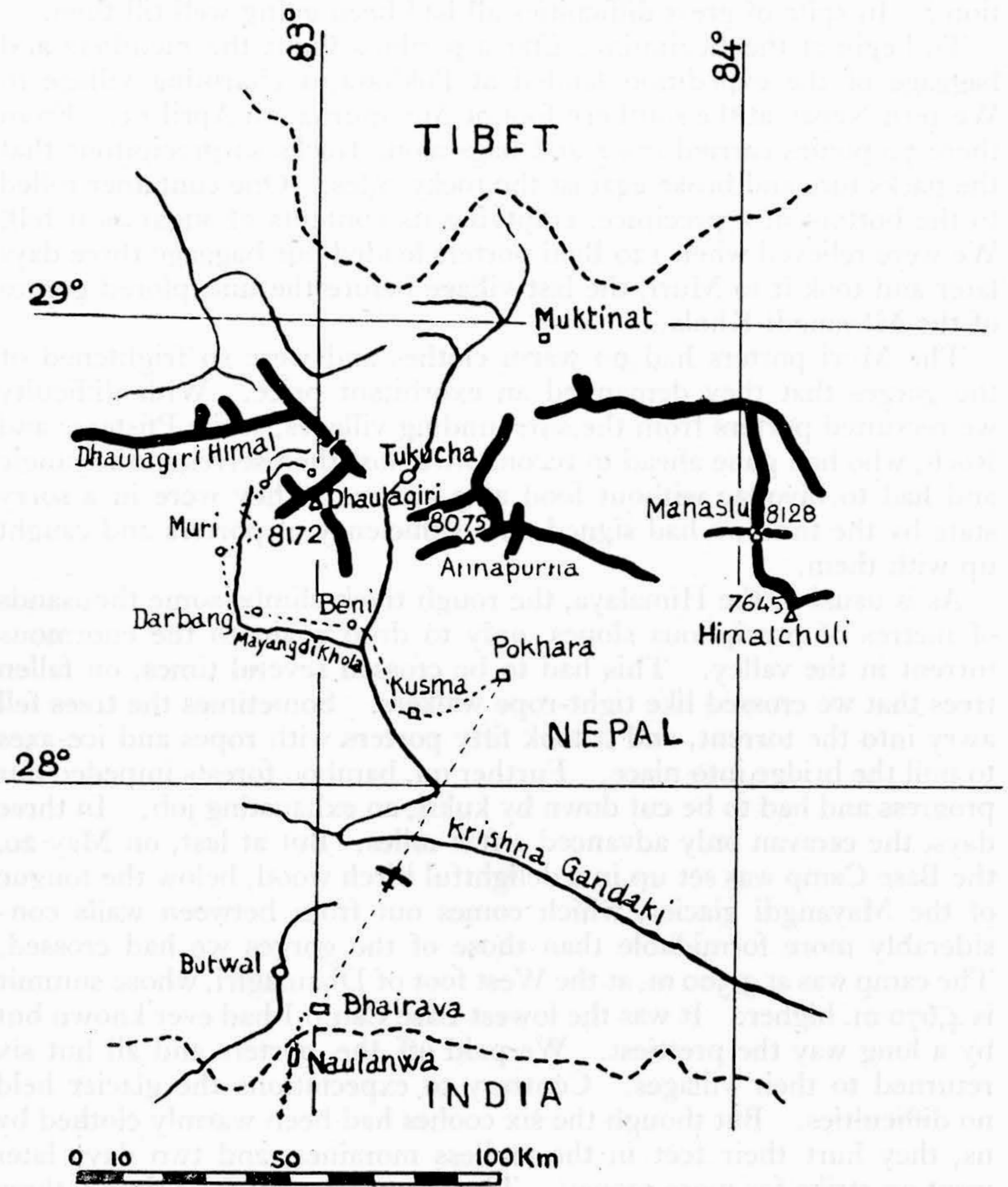
in and hardly dared think—broken legs, wounds from crampons, I had already had experience of just such an accident. We organised a rescue party; the doctor collected splints and equipment; we found changes of clothes and hot tea; was this fall going to put an end to our expedition? In spite of great difficulties all had been going well till then.

To begin at the beginning, after a perilous flight the members and baggage of the expedition landed at Pokhara, a charming village in Western Nepal, at the southern foot of Annapurna, on April 13. From there 70 ponies carried cases and bags along tracks so precipitous that the packs tore and broke against the rocky sides. One container rolled to the bottom of a precipice, emptying its contents of sugar as it fell. We were relieved when 120 Beni porters loaded our baggage three days later and took it to Muri, the last village before the unexplored gorges of the Mayangdi Khola.

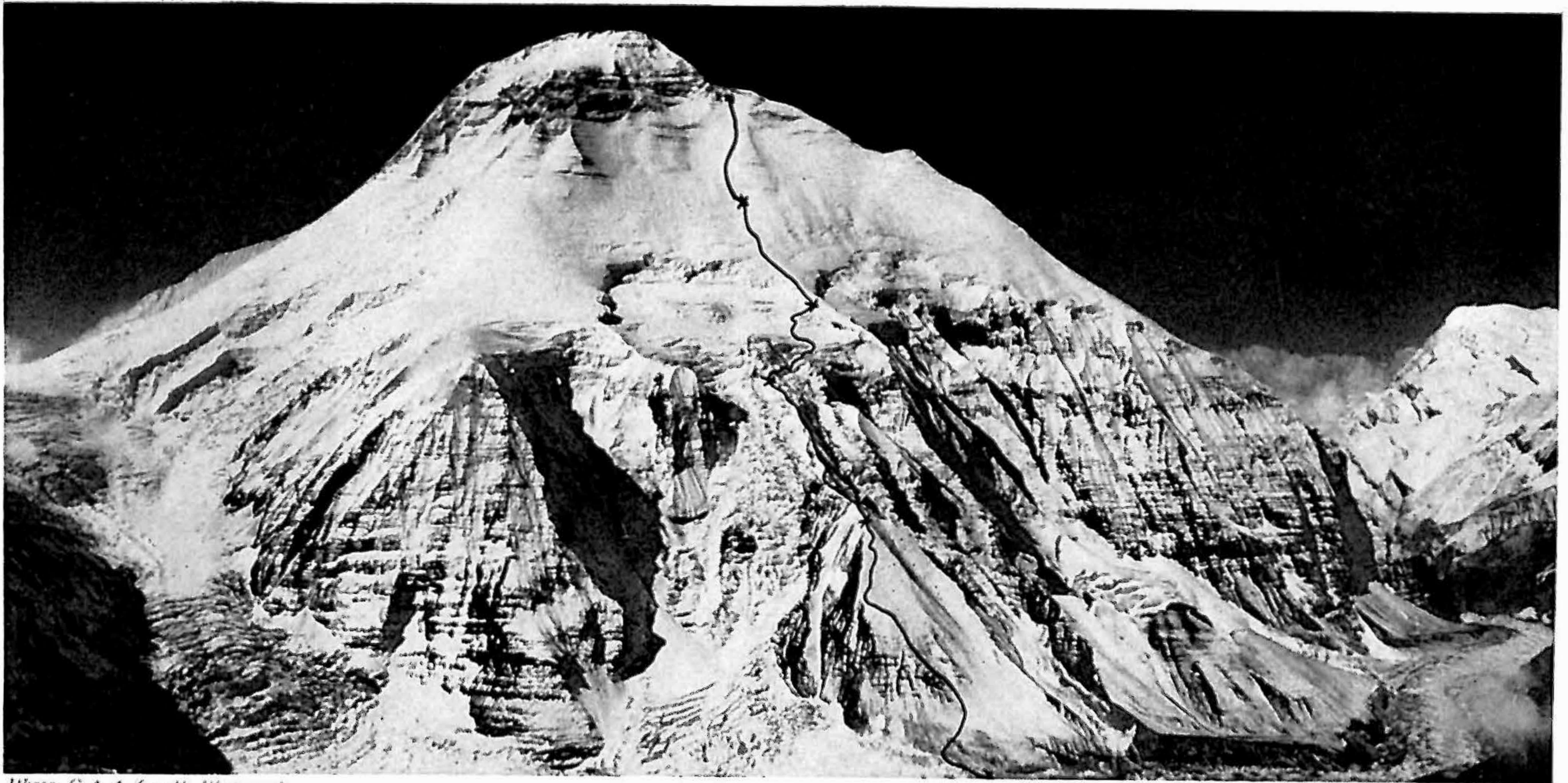
The Muri porters had no warm clothes and were so frightened of the gorges that they demanded an exorbitant price. With difficulty we recruited porters from the surrounding villages, while Pfisterer and Roch, who had gone ahead to reconnoitre, lost themselves in the jungle and had to bivouac without food at 3,000 m. They were in a sorry state by the time we had signed on a sufficiency of porters and caught up with them.

As is usual in the Himalaya, the rough track climbs some thousands of metres of precipitous slopes, only to drop again to the enormous torrent in the valley. This had to be crossed several times, on fallen trees that we crossed like tight-rope walkers. Sometimes the trees fell awry into the torrent, and it took fifty porters with ropes and ice-axes to pull the bridge into place. Further on, bamboo forests impeded our progress and had to be cut down by kukri, an exhausting job. In three days, the caravan only advanced a few miles. But at last, on May 20, the Base Camp was set up in a delightful birch wood, below the tongue of the Mayangdi glacier, which comes out from between walls considerably more formidable than those of the gorges we had crossed. The camp was at 3,500 m. at the West foot of Dhaulagiri, whose summit is 4,670 m. higher. It was the lowest Base Camp I had ever known but by a long way the prettiest. We paid off the porters and all but six returned to their villages. Contrary to expectations the glacier held no difficulties. But though the six coolies had been warmly clothed by us, they hurt their feet in the endless moraines, and two days later went on strike for more money. They were wasting their time; three of them left and the three brave ones who came on with us were Beniman, the Businessman and Tarzan. The former appeared to be a simple soul, but was really very much 'all there' . . . the Businessman had come up from Base Camp to sell us bananas. As we didn't want them he had to eat them himself, and as he had come to make money and had failed, he therefore had to join us as porter. We called the third Tarzan because he looked like an old man of the woods, with his old flint gun, so untrue that he had to fire at least five times to get a hit, and we only once had a bharal in the cooking-pot.

As Base Camp was so low and so far from the point where we intended to start our attack we had to climb some 15 kilometres up the glacier before we could begin the ascent proper. Two long stages were necessary to reach Camp 1. For 18 days we alternated between carrying



loads to this camp and exploring the region, and, above all, the route up Dhaulagiri. We were anxious to know what this route would look like, up this enormous Mont Blanc of Nepal. We knew nothing of the North face beyond what we could learn from one photograph taken by Terray and Oudot during the French expedition of 1950. With a view to having a look at the North face, the only one that seemed to offer a chance of success, we pitched our tents at 5,400 m. above Camp 1 on the southern flank of a mountain of some 6,000 m., exactly to the north of Dhaulagiri. Three Sherpas brought the tents while Lauterburg,



*Photo, C.A.A.Z.—R. Pfisterer.]*

DHAULAGIRI SEEN FROM PT. 6,000 M. TO THE NORTH SHOWING THE FIVE CAMPS AND THE HIGHEST POINT REACHED.

Pfisterer, Angtharkay and I carried up sleeping-bags and high altitude equipment. On a giddy rocky platform we cleared a space and put up our tents. Next day in spite of some unpleasant verglas we climbed quickly in the magnificent weather. Before us towered Dhaulagiri, superb, majestic; the higher we climbed the steeper it looked. We were on the final ridge of our little peak and Dr. Pfisterer was leading, with Angtharkay following and myself taking photographs. A sudden loud crack was heard and our brave sirdar disappeared with a cornice which had broken off. They had been cutting too near the crest of the ridge. Pfisterer, one foot in space, clung on and saved himself, and looking down through a breach in the cornice, saw Angtharkay clinging on to the dizzy slope; braking with his ten gloved fingers he had let the bulk of the little avalanche pass under him and taken refuge on a rocky spur. Profiting from the fact that the cornice in falling had swept the slope I climbed down with Lauterburg holding me on the rope for the first 20 metres, which were all but vertical; in ten minutes I was with our sirdar and in half an hour we were on the ridge once more. Mist now surrounded us but did not prevent us from reaching the top. Angtharkay accompanied us in spite of his fall, and even led, this time making the track a reasonable distance from the cornice.

While we were thus employed, Braun, Eichelberg, Huss and Schatz were exploring the only possible route on the lower northern slopes of Dhaulagiri, a sharp moraine leading between two shattered glaciers, a confusion of blocks, towers and pinnacles.

The Sherpas had a great job to do. Day after day without rest they took loads of some 30 kilos from one camp to the next. At last on May 26 Peter Braun, Marc Eichelberg and I, with three Sherpas, left Camp 4 to establish Camp 5 at the foot of the 'pear.' Marc and Peter went ahead to prepare the site and Braun went back with the Sherpas. We had hoped to attain the West ridge much further to the right, but one day an enormous avalanche had swept away that hope. The best route left seemed to be directly up the left of the 'pear.' The climb up to Camp 5 seemed to be endless. The snowy slopes got always steeper and longer but at last the lower rocks of the 'pear' were reached. They were limestone and very steep. Above the rocks we dug a terrace in the snow; it was much too narrow but nevertheless just took our little tent, though the snow which fell and the snow that was whipped up by the wind accumulated between the tent and the mountain, so that I had to go out at midnight and brush away the mass of snow that was threatening us. At three o'clock next morning, Marc and I, with sufficient equipment to bivouac, left this inhospitable camp and slowly climbed up the length of the 'pear' while day dawned and lit up the immense and distant horizon.

As we climbed higher the rocks became uncovered and more dangerous. We looked in vain for a camp from which a summit attack could be planned. There was not the smallest platform and the whole side of the mountain is equally steep. We inspected all routes which might lead us to the western ridge, the best a poorly defined way which led



*Photo, C.A.A.Z.—Peter Braun.]*

VIEW OF LA POIRE FROM CAMP IV. THE LEFT-HAND X INDICATES THE POSITION OF CAMP V, THE RIGHT-HAND X THE HIGHEST POINT REACHED.

over some unpleasant rocky walls to the right. I reluctantly formed the opinion that success was impossible. We could not put up a camp, not even one tent, at this height.

We were at 7,200 m. At our backs a panorama of unimaginable beauty spread out. From northern Nepal as far as the mountains of Trans-Himalaya in Tibet. The peak of 7,900 m. of Dhaulagiri Himal stands up like an enormous Weisshorn. It seemed to us more inaccessible than ever. At about 11 o'clock we went down.

Two days later, after a dreadful night at Camp 5, Braun and Schatz followed our tracks, followed by the three Sherpas whose sensational fall we described at the beginning of this article. From the top of the 'pear' these two, with their oxygen, tried to reach the West ridge. On snow they climbed direct to the rocky wall plumb below the ridge, but found the rocks difficult, they had omitted to take their pitons; they reached 7,500 m. and possibly 7,700 m. but when the rocks became too much for them, had to abandon the ascent. They had seen nothing of the Sherpas' fall.

Preparation for rescue takes a long while. Half an hour after their glissade just as we were starting off to help them, we saw the Sherpas get up and cross horizontally to the track connecting Camps 4 and 5. There we met them. Their hurts were minor. Kami had a grazed chin and the point of a crampon had broken the skin on Ila Tensing's thigh—Gyalzen was unhurt. We could not believe our eyes. In an hour everything had been recovered except their ice-axes which will remain planted for ever in the North face of Dhaulagiri.

As will be seen from these few details the ascent of this mountain is dangerous. At the top of the 'pear' a site for a camp must be dynamited. The least fall of snow brings danger of avalanche. It is not certain that the West ridge can be reached. From the ridge to the top, the route crosses to the south side. It appears possible though problematical.

Before leaving the large Mayangdi glacier which was covered with dead locusts (grass-hoppers?) Lauterburg and Pfisterer explored the North-east col of the mountain and returned by the Col des Français to Tukucha. They also visited Muktinat, the place of pilgrimage for Buddhists and Hindus. The others, taking the equipment back through the gorges, climbed the South col to finish the reconnaissance of the mountain.

To my way of thinking, we tried the only practicable route. Chances of success are extremely small as the difficulties are enormous. The climbing of Dhaulagiri will demand a new technique for the Himalaya, such as the dynamiting of the camp site, which at the present time seems far-fetched, but in fifty years' time will be accepted as commonplace by all climbers.

Although the summit had escaped us, we had been lucky enough to have explored a marvellous mountain, whose grandeur is unimaginable, and whose magnificence will remain in our memories while, in our hearts, rests the unassuaged desire to conquer it.

(By courtesy of the *Himalayan Journal*.)



*Photo, C.A.A.Z.—H. Huss.]*

VIEW OF THE NILGIRI AND ANNAPURNA FROM THE SOUTH COL OF DHAULAGIRI.