

THE YALUNG VALLEY, 1953

BY J. W. R. KEMPE

THE suggestion that we should explore the Yalung glacier came from Gilmour Lewis, who had visited the valley in 1951 with Georg Frey who was killed in attempting a peak to the east of the Ratong La. Lewis felt that, in spite of Smythe's judgment, it might be possible to find a route up Kangchenjunga from that side, and since a number of alternatives presented themselves we agreed that it was worth a try. Unfortunately at the last moment three others were unable to join us and it was clear that with only two of us, even if conditions were favourable, we should be able to do little more than probe the lower defences of the mountain.

We planned to start from Darjeeling and follow the Singalila ridge which runs north and south along the borders of Nepal and Sikkim until it joins the Kangchenjunga massif. After following the ridge, which is between 10,000 and 13,000 ft. high, we would cross the Chumbab La and trek into the middle reaches of the Yalung Valley. We would first attempt Boktoh (19,600 ft.) and Kuktang (21,000 ft.); we would then either try to climb Kabru from that side or see how high we could climb on Kangchenjunga which lies across the valley. Kabru was climbed by C. R. Cooke in 1935 from the Sikkim side of the Ratong La, but we were informed that the Sikkim Government had pronounced the mountain sacred, and we had to promise not to attempt it by Cooke's route. As a matter of fact the people on the Sikkim side of the Ratong La regard Kabur (15,000 ft.) as sacred too, and it seemed likely that the names had got mixed. However, a promise is a promise and since there are plenty of unclimbed peaks in the Himalayas we were not unduly put out.

For someone whose residence is in India and who hopes to make one or two expeditions a year, cost is a factor and it became evident when we arrived in Darjeeling on April 19 that transport costs would be high. A comparison may be made with two other expeditions. In April, 1952, dotial porters from Ranikhet in Garhwal cost Rs. 3/- per day and carried 80 lb. They could live off the land on the trek to Badrinath, so the cost of 80 lb. of carrying power was Rs. 3/-. In September 1953, from Manali, ponies carrying 120 lb. each cost Rs. 3/8/- per day. They too had no need of carrying their own food in the Chandra Valley and the rate was therefore even more favourable. But along the Singalila ridge porters would carry only 60 lb. of which, since no food was available, 30 lbs. consisted of their own. We paid them Rs. 3/- per day with food after three days and the cost was therefore nearly Rs. 4/- per day for only 30 lb.

I need not have worried about cutting the size of the caravan by shedding porters en route, because 11 Bhutia men left us after the third day and a further three porters after the eighth, thus making it necessary

for some of the remainder to double trek to bring our equipment to base camp. We started with 36 porters of whom 23 were Sherpa women. The suggestion that we should employ women was made by Sirdar Mingma. At first I regarded it with some misgiving but it turned out to be a good one. Only one woman left early, due to illness. The rest kept up the men's morale. They were wonderful carriers and we never heard a word of complaint.

Before leaving we spent three days in Darjeeling with the Hendersons making arrangements. By the time we were ready to leave, their beautiful bungalow looked like a bazaar and Lewis, already growing a beard, looked like a banya. It was exhilarating to sit out on the lawn for breakfast and gaze across to the Kangchenjunga massif, so clear that it was impossible to judge its distance, and to pick out Kabru where we hoped shortly to be. But if the Hendersons' hopes for obvious reasons were the same, they gave no hint of it.

Delays were inevitable the first day out, and April 23 was no exception. Instead of three buses, two buses and a jeep arrived at 7 A.M. to take us to Mane Bhanjan, so there was no room to take the porters and luggage. After putting this right we were stopped at Ghoum on a charge of being overcrowded. Long official phone conversations followed, and when nothing seemed to have been happening for so long that I thought it might be easiest to return to Darjeeling we were suddenly, mysteriously, and anonymously allowed to proceed. A bus then disappeared for an hour. Where it went to remains a mystery, but its occupants and the luggage turned up at 1 A.M. for khana in Mane Bhanjan. Then the porters, who had refused an advance of pay before, demanded one before we left and made a hole in the Rs. 300 in silver which we were carrying against an emergency in Nepal. Not until we started to walk did the feeling escape me that everything was entirely beyond our control, that the ways of the East are mysterious and beyond comprehension, and that it would only be luck if porters and baggage arrived that night. Not that this worried us much: one's first year in India settles all that.

The first day's walk was an ascent from 6,000 ft. to 10,000 ft. and took $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours, the destination being the dak bungalow at Tanglu. There are bungalows at Sandakphu and Phalut. Thereafter there are none. Camps along the ridge are determined more often than not by the availability of water which sometimes makes days unnecessarily short. The spring of the fifth day's march was dried up; but the Sherpas mixed snow with yak dung into an excellent soup.

On April 29 after six days' trekking, we started for the first time under a clear sky. We planned to cross the Dain La (the Devil's Pass, 14,500 ft.) and descend to Gonpatong for the night. There were in fact three passes to be crossed on the day's journey and by the time we had reached the first it was bitterly cold and a snowstorm was raging. From there the route lay across snow and was not particularly easy to find for anyone who dropped behind, as footprints were quickly obliterated. I tried to hurry up the slower porters until we had crossed the

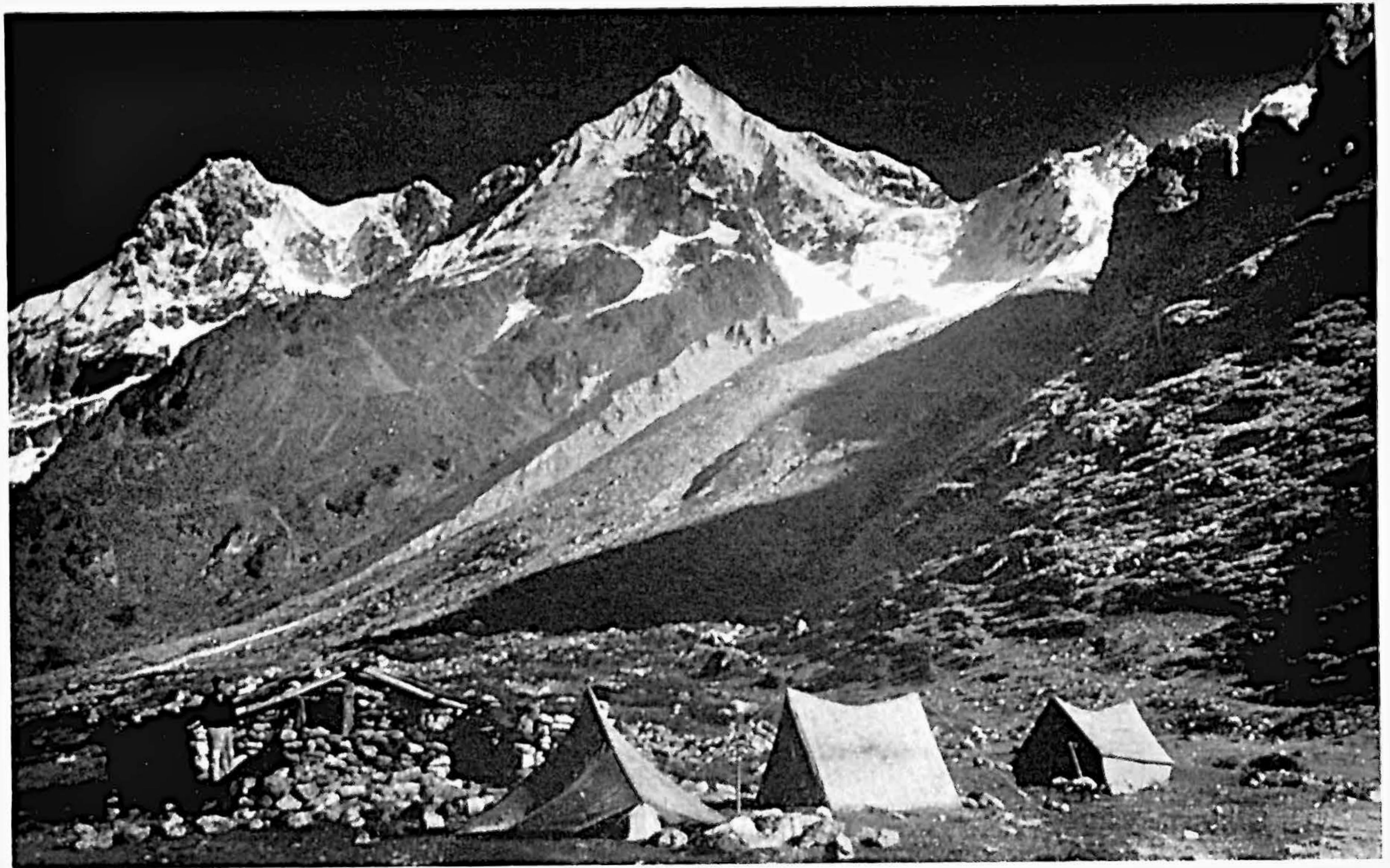
main pass. There the snow became knee deep and progress slow for 1,500 ft. as far as the track to Gonpatong. We got there at 3.15 to find only a stone hut set by a river in a wooded valley. It is the most beautiful spot.

Three hours later Lewis had not arrived, and I went back to the pass with three Sherpas to look for him. There was a full moon and we walked until midnight when mist forced us to return. The next day I sent out another search party, and ordered five porters to return to Phalut for left luggage and to keep their eyes open. By the end of the day there was still no sign of Lewis. From the map it appeared that he might be anywhere within an area of 100 square miles where there was no food. I thought of abandoning the expedition and calling in the Army from Darjeeling for help. The Himalayas are terrifyingly vast when people are lost. In the end I decided to give up one more day to searching with our own resources and we met him on May 1 coming over the pass two hours from camp. He had missed the footprints and gone down the wrong valley. If he left us in search of solitude and enlightenment he did not seem unduly perturbed at the thought of a return to my company and of having something to eat.

The next day we crossed the Chumbab La (15,500 ft.) on the far side of which there was 2,000 ft. of deep snow and on May 2 we arrived at Tseram, a cave, set amid pine trees below the 1,200 ft. terminal moraine of the Yalung glacier.

A recce on May 3 up the side of the glacier showed that Tseram was too far down the valley for a base camp and that we should move above Upper Ramser where there was a stone hut some $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours higher up. We paid the porters off, relying on those who returned from Phalut to move our base camp forward. Mingma went off for three days to Ghumsa to buy a goat, a thousand eggs and some chickens. Meanwhile I set off with Sherpa Tashi for one night's recce to climb a 17,000 ft. peak across the valley from where we might get a view of Boktoh. Though low cloud had been continuous since our arrival at 6 o'clock that evening, it was possible to pick out a route. The next day we got the peak, and to save ourselves the ordeal of a glacier traverse cut down the same side of the valley and crossed below the terminal moraine. The Yalung glacier, like so many other Himalayan glaciers in retreat, consists of mile on mile of loose boulders and piles of rubble which threaten the ankles at every step. Crossing near the terminal moraine took over an hour. The alternative route, however, was no better since we were soon deep in thick rhododendron jungle through which we had to crawl and cut our way for three hours before we could cross the river by the bridge just below Tseram.

After two wet days we moved to Upper Ramser to try Boktoh, and after a preliminary recce pitched Camp I at 17,600 ft. The crux of the climb seemed to lie in 1,000 ft. of rock above this camp, seen in shadow slightly to the right of the top of the hut in the photograph. Though this was less difficult than it looked, we found ourselves at the top with an enormous bergschrund to cross, followed by a glacier heavily



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BASE CAMP AT UPPER RAMSER WITH BOKTOH BEHIND. THE POINT REACHED WAS THE ROCK PINNACLE ABOVE THE SHADOW TO THE RIGHT OF THE COL.

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crevassed and deep in snow, and finally by a rock ascent, the geological structure of which showed that we were on the wrong side of the mountain for good climbing holds. Since the outward slanting slabs were covered in snow and other routes were impractical, we decided to abandon the attempt.

Boktoh is probably a difficult mountain to climb, though seen from afar there are alternative routes. That from the ridge to the south and from the Lapsong La to the west of the mountain are probably most worth trying. These rock ridges are separated by a glacier valley into which we did not penetrate but which probably leads to a rock precipice.

Boktoh gave us a chance to study Koktang. We had only four Sherpas and our lines of communication were therefore likely to be tenuous. Time might be saved by avoiding the icefall of the East Ratong glacier and by crossing a col to its right. That might indeed cut down food supplies to four days.

We left at 7 A.M. on May 14. Crossing the main Yalung glacier took one hour and forty minutes. We were soon enveloped in low cloud, a feature of the valley all through the period. The further we were to the east the longer were the clouds and rain sweeping up from the west in coming. Mingma's instinctive sense of direction proved infallible, for though we camped in deep snow that night in visibility of ten yards, the following morning showed it to be on a plateau about 500 ft. above the East Ratong glacier.

Next morning we wasted some time trying to get down. When this proved impossible, we moved south along the glacial plateau from which we were finally able to descend at the southern extremity by a 200 ft. snow avalanche far on to the upper reaches of the East Ratong glacier here called the Kangla Nangma. By this time, 9 A.M., the snow crust was already breaking under us, leaving us knee deep in snow and we decided to pitch camp, to allow a further recce. We soon found that the routes which had seemed inviting from Boktoh were quite impossible and decided to cross to the eastern side of the mountain.

Next day leaving at 6.15 A.M. we climbed to the top of the Kangla Mangma, crossed the southern end of the mountain from west to east, descended a steep 1,000 ft. ice gully on to an unnamed glacier which runs east from the South ridge of Koktang, climbed a gentle icefall across the glacier and pitched camp at 19,000 ft. at 3 P.M. after an hour of gruelling heat. As we had travelled round the mountain, close inspection showed one route after another to be more difficult than it had seemed from far off, and the approach to the ridge from the north remained the only possibility.

We called the glacier on which we pitched camp that night 'Windy Glacier.' A hurricane blew from 5 P.M. to 5 A.M. and I had to lean against the side of the tent to keep it down, turning over every five minutes to stop myself freezing.

We left camp at 6.15 next morning on crampons without loads and traversed upward across the steep western flank of the mountain to the Northern ridge. After 1½ hours we reached a small plateau where



KOKTANG. THE LEFT SHOULDER OF THE MOUNTAIN WAS CLIMBED.

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two tents could have been pitched and at 9.25 A.M. the North shoulder of Kuktang (20,300 ft. according to the aneroid). The peak lay a few hundred feet above us and the route along a knife-edge. The last hundred feet looked difficult. In the time the summit would have taken, snow conditions would have prevented our getting back to the tents. To climb the central peak, the top camp should be made on the small snow plateau, to avoid the return traverse across the steep mountain flank in the late afternoon. On this occasion food supplies were running short and we could not stop for another try.

On our return on May 19 my diary records only two words 'We ate.' Neither Lewis nor Mingma felt like starting next day, so I set out with the other Sherpas to look at Kabru.

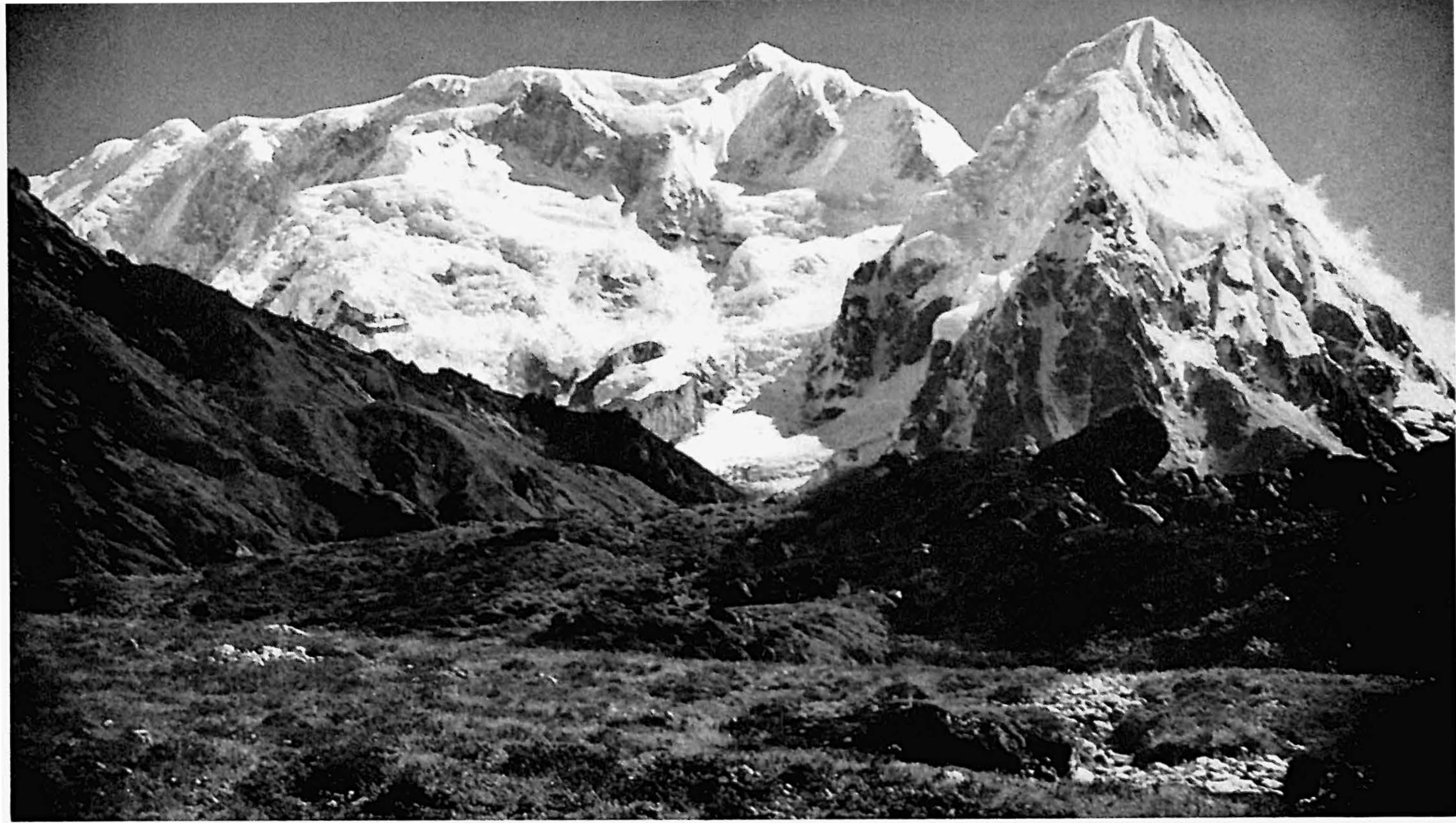
The first two hours' walk between the lateral moraine of the Yalung glacier and the mountainside was pleasant, though the descent on to the glacier itself just before the Tso glacier was not. The lateral moraine at this point, and indeed at most points, is three or four hundred feet high and consists for the most part of mud in which boulders and pebbles are loosely embedded. Steps must be made and a foot placed casually brings down an avalanche. After dropping on to the glacier, which is not only covered with piles of loose rubble but with glacier lakes making détours necessary, we walked parallel to the moraine below the snout of the Tso glacier and then struck out at right angles to the only point of ascent of the moraine on the other side. The crossing takes about three hours and anyone who escapes exasperation is superhuman. From half-way across the glacier I sent back the other Sherpas, Dani and Panu, and continued with Tashi to make Camp after seven hours.

The next day we climbed a 19,000 ft. snow peak which protrudes from the mountain face, and seeing that there was no possible way up Kabru from there decided to continue up the valley next day. We were joined by the others in the evening.

After passing 'Nao's camp' on the moraine and crossing a rubble-covered tributary glacier we walked along a rock ridge which hides the valley head from below and established camp at 17,700 ft., below the snout of a glacier which covers this face of Kabru.

We expected that the next day, May 23, would be the crux of the climb and we left at 5.30 A.M. After walking up 800 ft. of rock we roped for the glacier and reached the bottom of an icefall (20,100 ft.) at 8.30. After a short rest I tried to avoid a wall of ice by climbing up the outside edge of a small crevasse. At the top the ice gave way. I fell fifteen feet and was stopped by my rucksack becoming wedged between the lips of the crevasse. With my feet dangling in space I spent an uncomfortable five minutes while my rucksack was hauled up before I could climb out, fairly shaken. By the time the Sherpas had cut steps up the steep ice slope it was decided to remain at the foot of the icefall for the night.

We left at 7 A.M. next morning long before the sun was on us and climbed up the Sherpas' steps. At the top we had to cross a wide



THE KABRU MASSIF FROM BASE CAMP. THE PEAK WHICH WAS CLIMBED IS ON THE LEFT OF THE PICTURE AND WAS APPROACHED BY THE SNOW RIDGE TO THE LEFT.

G. C. G. LEWIS

crevasse by a rather insubstantial looking snow bridge which would hardly bear the heat of the sun for many more days. Above this we could see that the next 2,000 ft. was easy ; leaving two of the party to return, three of us continued. It was a long time before we were able to find a place level enough to carve out a platform for the tents and we established our last camp at 22,700 ft. We spent a wretched and icy night, three in one tent, on a ridge exposed to every breath of wind of which on that particular night there was plenty.

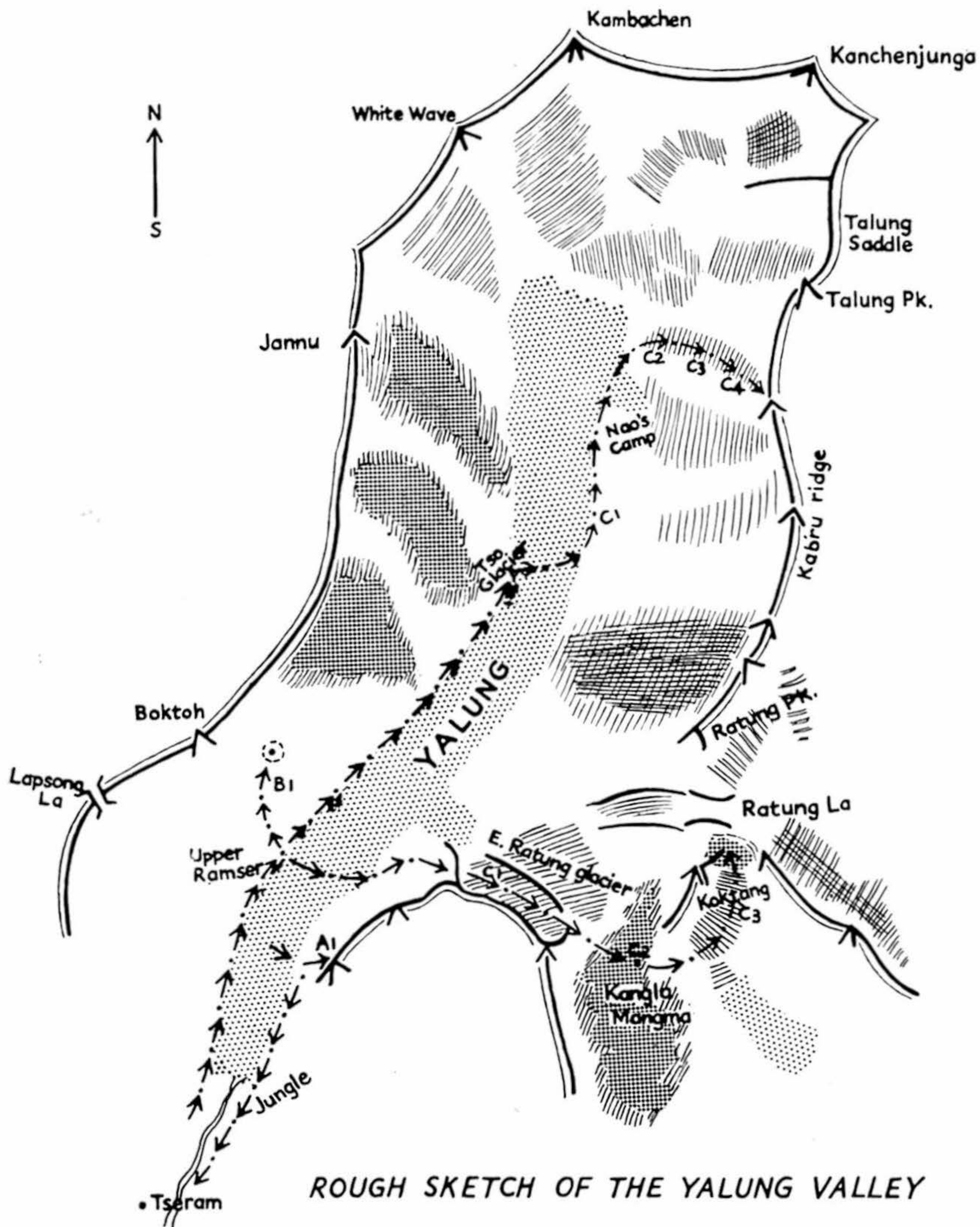
We had hoped to climb either Talung Peak or Kabru (we had not provisions for both) from this camp but a short climb next morning showed that there was a precipice between ourselves and Talung and that the best approach to it was probably from the bottom of the icefall we had climbed the day before. Talung Peak is steep from this side and almost certainly impossible by any other route but in similar snow conditions it should not prove difficult if a way can be found through the lower part of the icefall.

After two hours we reached the northern shoulder of the Kabru ridge and gazed down on to the Talung glacier. To the east we could see Pandim. Across Sikkim the mountains of Bhutan seemed unbelievably close. Jannu, White Wave, Kangbachen, and Kangchenjunga, still formed a wall above us to the north, above the lower parts of which we could see Tibet ; and away to the left the Everest group stood in solitary splendour. The aneroid showed 24,000 ft. We were not on the highest point of the ridge but I had misgivings about the snow bridge we had crossed lower down and decided to return. There would, however, have been no technical difficulty in traversing to the highest point.

We rejoined the rest of the party on May 25. I did not realize how tired I was until the following day, when Lewis went off to examine the glacier below Kangchenjunga and I decided to try to return to base camp in one day. After three hours I found myself falling over loose boulders and an hour later my knees were knocking so uncontrollably that I made an early camp.

From Kabru I looked across to the South face of Kangchenjunga. There is a wide glacier basin running back for perhaps a mile from 22,000 to 23,000 ft. and the ascent from there to 27,000 ft. does not look difficult. Lewis examined the lower defences of the mountain which run from the Yalung glacier at 18,000 ft. up to 22,000 ft. He felt there were three routes which might go. In spite of Smythe's opinion, an ascent does not seem out of the question from this side. We had no binoculars and it would not be safe to pass judgment on the final rock ridge running to the summit but the general slope is not steep. Since at the time of writing Sikkim is barred this may be the only way to climb the mountain.

The return from base camp—where we made a cache of pitons—was not without its own peculiar difficulties. We crossed the Ratong La and reached Dzungri without incident in three days. The next day, seeing some wild strawberries we cast away our rucksacks and were



ROUGH SKETCH OF THE YALUNG VALLEY

tucking in when we found ourselves covered with leeches. Two cups of rice beer, produced unexpectedly by a passing shepherd, fortified us against a double march along a narrow path through thick jungle, not stopping for five hours until Yoksam. Here some chiang whisky made Lewis sick. We climbed with relief into a loft beyond reach of leeches to refortify ourselves with marwa by way of a change. This drink is sucked through a small bamboo shoot from a pint pot made of a large bamboo. It is replenished after every few sips with hot water and seems to retain its potency for several hours. For the next two days it was our morale raiser against leeches which attacked from every side and which would otherwise have made us nervous wrecks. At Pemionchi we slept once again in a Dak bungalow where there is a rule peculiar to India that visitors will empty the latrine buckets since it is beneath the dignity of sweepers. The sweepers watched us with interest and were not above asking for baksheesh.

The next day at Geysing it was reported that Everest had been climbed by Tenzing. Hillary, it seemed, had ordered Tenzing to turn back for lack of oxygen and Tenzing had answered 'I have come to climb Everest and not to breathe oxygen' and had climbed it alone.

On June 5 we reached the roadhead at Nagar bazaar. We were told that a jeep was due and decided to take it. There followed a terrible drive and it was a relief to stop at Melli. Here we were arrested by a drunken policeman and accused of being Tibetan communists. Unfortunately we had no means of proving otherwise. Three hours of argument followed before we were released and allowed to cross the river which separates Sikkim from Bengal. But what is good enough for Sikkim is not good enough for Bengal and after further argument we had to spend the night in jail in Kalimpong, whither we were driven. For what reason I do not know—I suspect that Lewis was too scruffy to pollute the jail—we were released on parole to languish in baths and luxury at the Himalayan hotel before taking a private car to Darjeeling.