

SCOTTISH NEPAL EXPEDITION, 1952

BY T. MACKINNON

CHOICE of district in the Nepal Himalaya is governed by the necessity of first obtaining a political permit to climb. The rival merits of central Nepal, Manaslu area, and the great gorge of Rolwaling occupied our thoughts during the winter of 1951-52. Finally we decided on Rolwaling district, applied for a pass, and started to plan the expedition for the coming winter.

On a previous expedition in Garhwal our policy had been to travel light, cover a great tract of mountain country, and climb small peaks where possible. This time we had a hankering to go higher, but we did not want to concentrate on one big mountain; therefore we sought a compromise.

To climb high peaks in winter we needed more tentage and warmer clothing for porters. Also we had to equip six Sherpas. With food and equipment for 100 days in the mountains, it took only 23 coolies to shift our gear as against 17 in Garhwal, yet we were in a very much stronger position for real mountaineering.

We were four; T. Weir and D. Scott of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, and G. S. Roger and I of the Alpine Club. All had been to the Himalaya before except Roger.

We left Katmandu on September 26, and six marches out, from an Alpine meadow at Charikot, we caught our first glimpse of the Gauri Sankar massif high above the monsoon cloud. The snow peaks remained hidden for four days as we moved up the Bhote Kosi towards Tibet. We chose the less known lower route beside the river which led through wild, jungly country.

Only after we had turned east, climbing for approximately 4,000 ft. into the Rolwaling valley did the clouds lift, revealing our unique position under Gauri Sankar. The mountain rose above us in one bound of 11,000 ft. We had thought of this isolated mountain as a possible objective. The south face and east ridge appeared hopeless. The west ridge offered the only possible route, but to reach this from our present position would have entailed 8,000 ft. of climbing on gorge walls more precipitous than the Rishi, covered with jungle on the lower slopes and involving much rock work higher up. We considered that the approach would take all our climbing time and we ruled it out. Later from the east we saw the other side of this favourable west ridge and it looked even more encouraging.

In two marches we were in our exploration area at 12,000 ft. East of us on the moraine of a great glacier was the source of the Rolwaling. North, immediately overhead, was the frontier ridge of Tibet. South was a rock peak we intended to climb for a first reconnaissance.

Our surroundings were in startling contrast to the country only one march behind us, where brilliant autumn colours made vivid reds,

yellows and russets against the deep green of the pine forest. Here we were in a strath, camped by the village fields of Beding, a strange village of lamas built into the north wall of Rolwaling.

The friendly lamas of this place extended a warm welcome and gave us assurance that we would get porters and all the food we needed. This enabled us to pay off our Charikot men, who had served us well but now wished to return to the warmer valleys. In two hectic days, preparing for a move to the highest pastures at Nangaon, we were fêted in the local monastery and accompanied by all and sundry to our base camp a few miles higher up, where the floor of the valley became broader and primitive little houses were scattered in a network of dry-stone dykes.

Our reconnaissance peak now lay somewhere around 5,000 ft. above us and we climbed it next day. Deep snow was rather a worry here, as a foretaste of what we might expect on higher peaks, but once on the rocks the climbing was good on sound granite slabs. We were most fortunate to get a view from this peak before a snow storm enveloped us. That view vitally affected our plans.

We had come up here to look north towards Tibet, where Secord reported there were some interesting mountains. The only approaches to these we now saw were covered with fresh snow, and we feared that once inside the area any further storm might cut off retreat. It was the eastern view that startled us. Here was a range of mountains not on the map, the kind of peaks we wanted, with numerous fine summits rising to approximately 22,000 ft. Access to this fine group seemed possible from a glacier rising immediately below our feet, leading to a spacious upper snowfield.

The unsettled weather caused careful consideration before we finally moved off with five Sherpas and five local men to establish Camp 2 at 16,000 ft. in a grassy hollow by a moraine lake surrounded by fantastic ice peaks.

It took one and a half days from this point to get to Camp 3 above the glacier at 19,000 ft. The snow was deep and trail breaking was tiring. This camp gave us one of the wildest mountain views we had ever seen: we were perched above the clouds, amongst snow peaks on fire with sunset. Below us we caught glimpses of fierce rock teeth jutting out of incredible depths. The feeling of space, of incredible height, was the reward of this place.

Next morning, after a leisurely breakfast we cut steps up a steep 200 ft. ice-wall and left a fixed line. This landed us on a narrow corniced snow ridge curving upwards to rocks which formed an arête giving a good rock climb to the top. Only two men could sit comfortably on the summit block. We agreed that this was the way to enjoy the Himalaya, four sahibs and two Sherpas lying on a sun-warmed slab at 20,000 ft. with a horizon of unclimbed peaks in every direction.

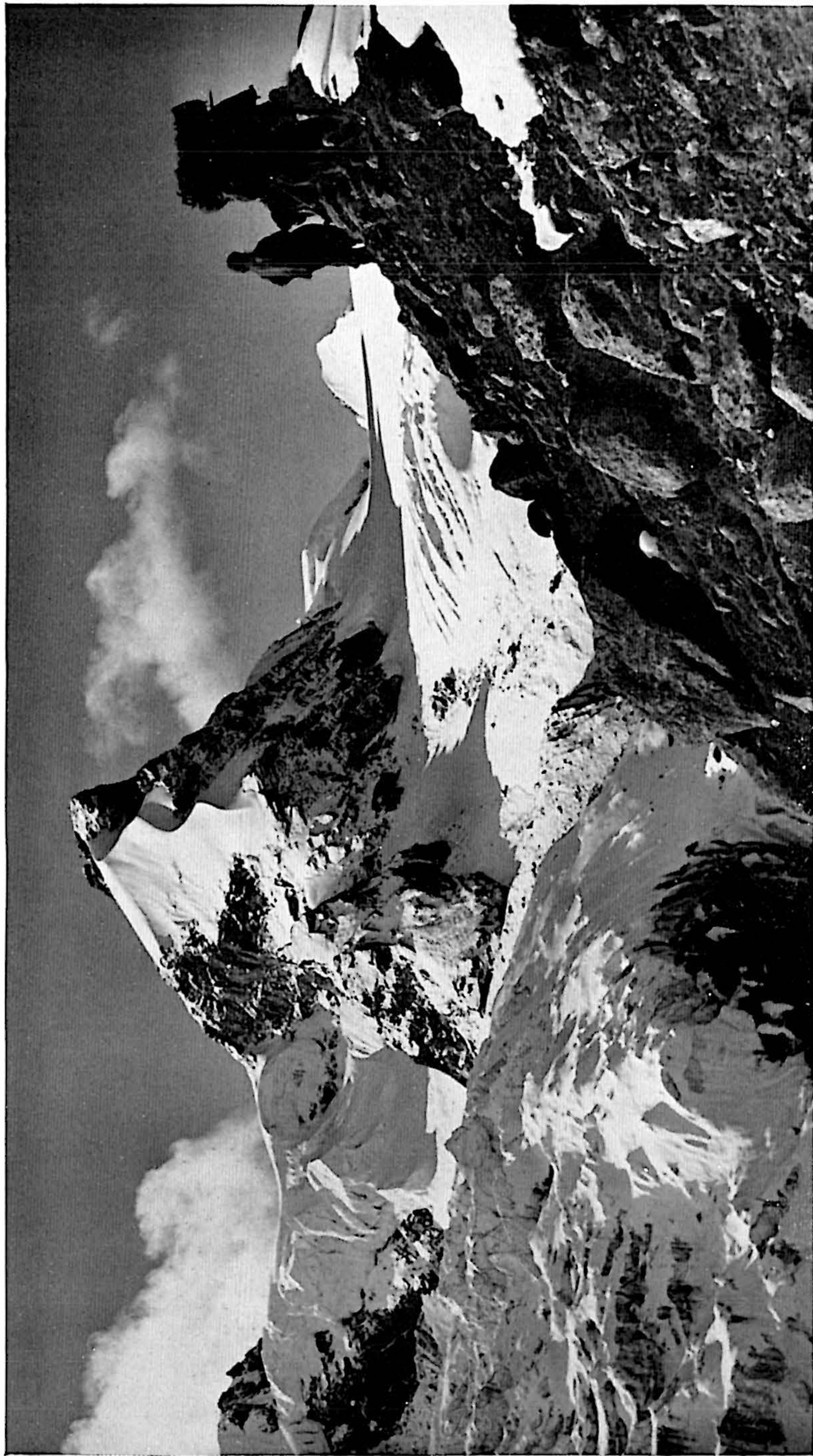
But mountain peaks are not merely to be admired. There was one peak of 22,000 ft. that seemed to us asking to be climbed, and a discussion developed as to how it could be done with only two fit Sherpas



Photo, T. Weir.]

UNSUSPECTED PEAKS OF SOUTH ROLWALING.

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Photo, Douglas Scott.]

FIRST 20,000 FT. PEAK CLIMBED BY EXPEDITION. CAMP III WAS ON SNOWY SHOULDER TO THE RIGHT OF THE PEAK.

and four Sahibs. It was agreed that one camp at 20,000 ft. would be necessary and that two Sherpas might carry for one man but no more. My companions insisted that I should set off immediately for the peak and I sounded Dawa Tenzing and Ming Ma. They were enthusiastic.

Leaving the others we raced down to the fixed rope, descended quickly to camp, packed a tent and food for three days, and were back to the fixed rope by mid-day. Moving now in the opposite direction we found a breach in the glacier giving access to the upper snowfield of our mountain where the real hard work began. Breaking a trail in the deep snow for the laden porters was extremely tiring and at 4 P.M. we were glad to camp. It was now cold and windy and we lost no time in getting into our sleeping bags for a meal of tsampa with sugar and then lots of tea.

Powder snow covered everything in the morning, causing delay in finding buried equipment. The snow had been driven through the sleeve by the wind. We were ready by 7 A.M., a good meal of tsampa inside us. It was very cold and the snow was well frozen, enabling us to move fast. We were almost blown up the first ridge by the wind. It blew out the rope in great arcs and the whole surface of the mountain was moving.

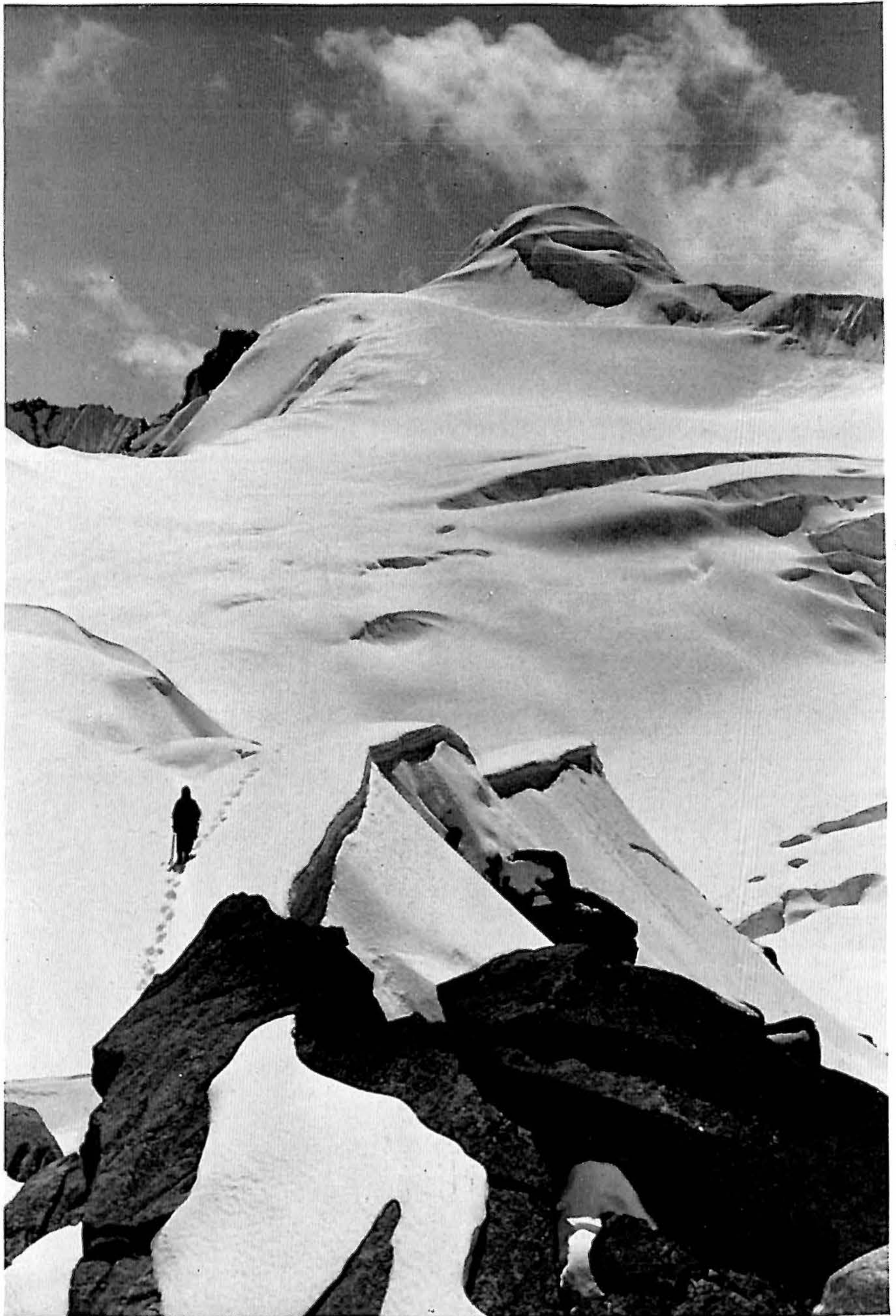
The summit of the peak was a snow-dome, much crevassed, and defended by steep slopes up which it was possible to kick steps. We judged the slopes to be safe from avalanche in their present condition and we lost not a moment. The Sherpas were in their element and it was 9 A.M. when we arrived on the summit.

The position of the peak was such that it was further south than any other snow covered mountain in the neighbourhood, with the result that it was possible to look down great ice ridges into jungle ravines. One looked over the foothills of Nepal to the distant haze of the Indian plains. In the other direction the Sherpas identified Cho Oyu and Everest from amongst a mighty throng of ice spires.

It was much too cold to loiter. After 15 minutes we moved off, and apart from the places where it was necessary to move only one at a time, we fairly raced back to camp. Then began back-breaking work for the porters carrying loads down to the col and, after a short rest, descending to moraine-lake camp. Back among my friends I felt I had had the best of two worlds that day.

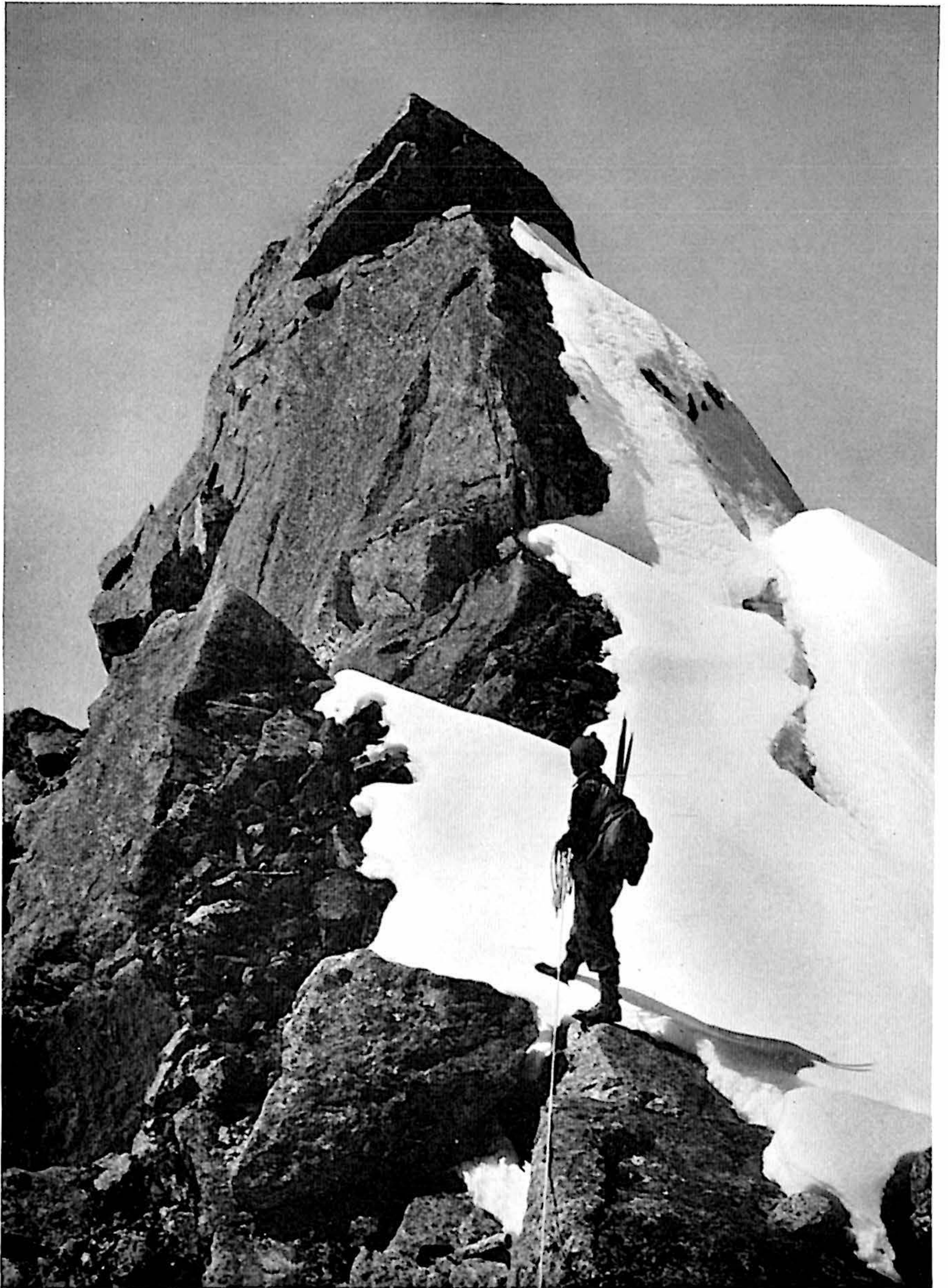
My companions had selected for a climb next day a finger of rock which rose some 3,000 or 4,000 ft. above the camp. We were promised by its very appearance an outstanding rock climb. It gave us a day as fine as any in the Alps. Starting from a tricky step on a steep ice-covered wall it landed us on a sunny platform.

The peak bounded up from here in a succession of granite ribs each with its own delightful surprise and varied character. The rock was as sound as the best in Glencoe, and we were climbing with the enjoyment of our home ground. Fitness comes as a great reward to the Himalayan traveller. To-day we were all gloriously alive. Each Sahib had a Sherpa on his rope and they were enjoying themselves, even if the



Photo, T. Weir.]

22,000 FT. PEAK CLIMBED BY LEFT HAND RIDGE.



Photo, Douglas Scott.]

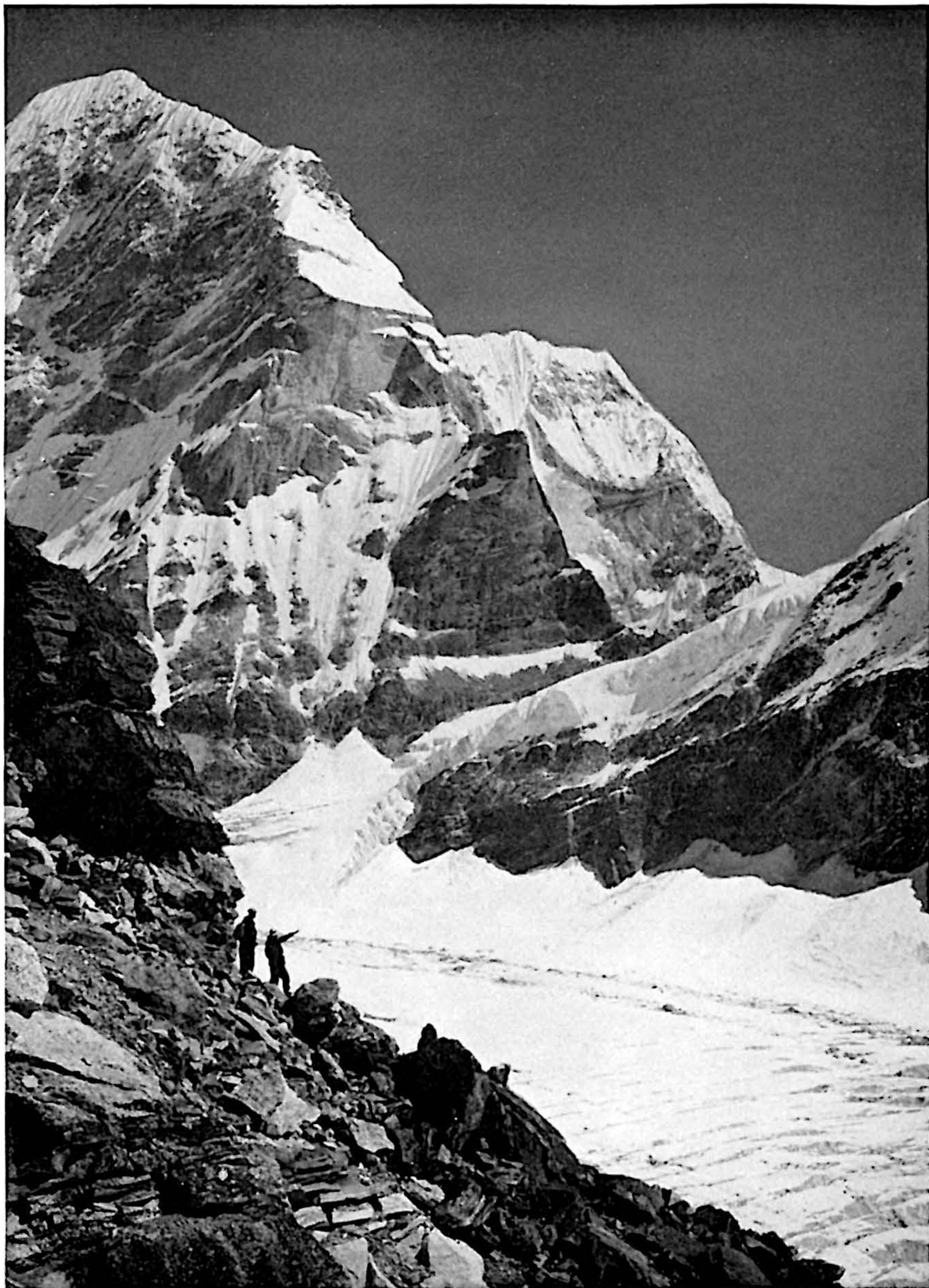
SUMMIT OF 19,000 FT. PEAK CLIMBED IN ROLWALING.

technique of lay-back had them baffled at one place. The summit was a slender point which only one man could occupy at a time.

This was our last climb in this neighbourhood. The time had come to cross east into Sola Khumbu. It was now November and we had a hankering to see Everest and the Sherpa country before quitting the Himalaya. The Tesi Lapcha at 19,500 ft. had been crossed once by Hillary and it was reputed to be a good route.

We were lucky in getting men and women from Beding village to come with us. They were the most delightful hill people we had ever met. The steep rocks, treacherous descents, glacier and ice-falls of this difficult pass never removed a smile from any face. They were magnificent carriers and quite unsophisticated. The crossing from Nangaon to Namche took four and a half days.

I can add nothing to what has already been said of the beauties of Sola Khumbu and the wonderful south face of Mount Everest. It was a privilege to see for ourselves this mountain area. Snow was falling on the high mountains now and there was little hope of further climbing. Besides our time had nearly come to an end after a splendid month of mountain travel and climbing. We bade farewell from a 19,000 ft. rock peak, and were back in Katmandu by November 20.



Photo, Douglas Scott.]

TESI LAPCHA.

[To face p. 420.