EXPLORING THE API AND NAMPA GROUP

By JOHN TYSON

(*The substance of an address delivered to the Alpine Club on April* 6, 1954.)

Since 1947, when the Nepalese began to allow foreigners to explore their country, many parties have climbed or carried out scientific research in Nepal. Yet large areas are still unknown, especially in the north-western corner of the kingdom. When W. H. Murray and I decided early in 1953 to visit Nepal it was this region which attracted us most. The story of its early exploration by Europeans was colourful, for the first white man to penetrate the region was A. H. Savage Landor, most extravagant and picturesque of travellers. Overpowering the Nepalese frontier guards, he entered the Nampa valley and explored the glacier system at its head. Crossing later to the Tinkar valley, he entered Tibet by the Tinkarlipu Pass. This in itself was a remarkable enough journey for 1899, but not as remarkable as the account and illustrations which followed it. Considering Alpine traditions and the Alpine Club as fit only for ridicule, he had described the ascent of a peak over 23,000 ft. high, dressed in a straw hat, shoes and a ' cane.'[1]

Intrigued by this report, Dr. Longstaff visited the region six years later, in 1905, and, engaging the coolies who had accompanied Landor, was led to the farthest point he had reached. This was a mere 16,500 ft. above sea level ; Landor had used artistic licence.[2]

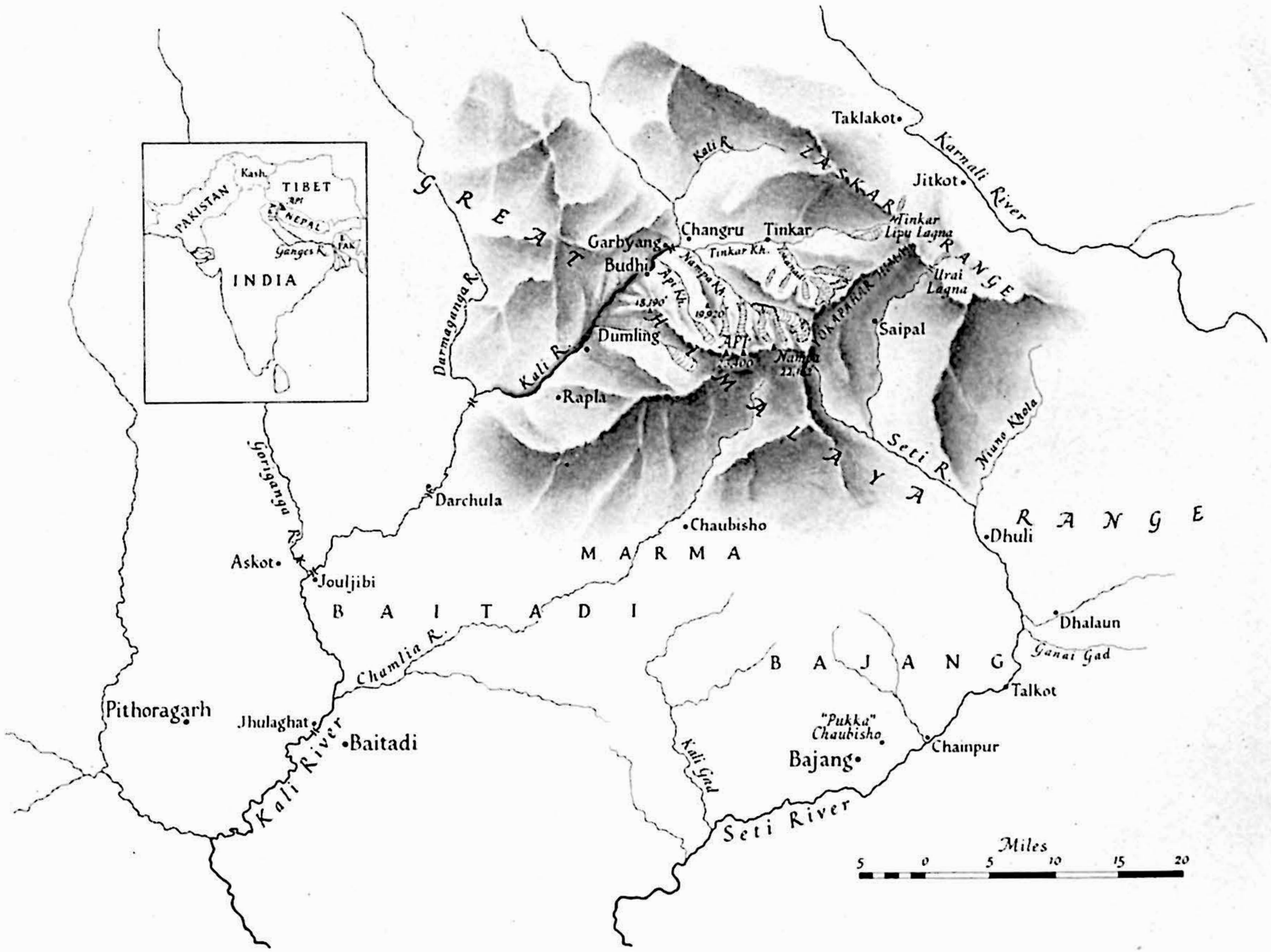
There is no record of any other visitors until the journeys of the two Swiss geologists, A. Heim and A. Gansser, in 1936.[3] Like Landor and Longstaff (of whose visits they seem to have been unaware) they entered Nepal from Indian territory near Garbyang, and in the space of a few days had located and photographed Api, the highest mountain (which they called Nampa) and added greatly to our knowledge of the region.

The sketch maps and photographs of our predecessors and the rather poor map-sheet of the area produced by the Survey of India supplied just enough information for us to plan our journey in its main features. Gansser's photograph of Api showed that a great ice cap rose at a gentle angle from about 20,000 ft. to the summit. Access to this cap might be gained from either the west or the north. Our main object was to reconnoitre and, if practicable, to climb Api (23,399 ft.), the crowning summit of a wild tangle of peaks ranging across north-western Nepal from the frontier of Tibet near Taklakot to that of India at the Kali River. In addition we hoped to explore the country lying to the north of Api, to make a complete circuit of the Api group, and to reconnoitre

[1] *Tibet and Nepal*, by A. H. Savage Landor, published by A. and C. Black, 1905.

[2] *A.J.* 23. August 1906, No. 173, pp. 214–217.

[3] *Thron der Götter*, by Arnold Heim and August Gansser, published by Morgarten-Verlag A.G. of Zurich, 1938.



PART OF NORTH-WESTERN NEPAL. BASED ON SURVEY OF INDIA, WITH EMENDATIONS IN AREA NORTH OF GREAT HIMALAYAN RANGE.

the Saipal group to its east. During the journey I was to make botanical and entomological collections for the British Museum.

It was clear that two main problems would have to be overcome. The first would be that of reaching the north-western side of the mountain, for this would involve entering the corner of Nepal bounded by the Tibetan frontier, the barrier range of Api, and the Indian frontier. Since Gansser's visit Tibet had become a closed land under communist control, while India now refused to allow Europeans to cross her ' Inner Line.' Thus the main pilgrim track along the Indian bank of the Kali River was denied to us. We would have to make a route up the eastern bank of the river in Nepalese territory. We knew that a track of some sort existed up to the southern end of the Kali River gorge. For a critical ten miles where the western spurs of Api plunge to the river-bed there was said to be no route. We would have to chance it. The other problem would be that of escaping from this Nepalese enclave across little known ranges to the east during the monsoon. Gansser's photographs of these mountains gave us little cause for optimism, but this was another risk which had to be taken. We would have to travel as a small lightly-equipped party, living largely off the land.

There was an unfortunate delay in the granting of our permit from Katmandu which cost us almost a month of fine pre-monsoon weather. This was a very serious loss. However, it enabled Bentley Beetham to join us at the last moment.

On Saturday, May 23, the three of us, with three Sherpas and eighteen Dotial coolies, set off on the first stage of our journey to Api, sixty miles to the north-east. It was a typical start ; the sun blazed down on us from a cloudless sky as we followed dusty tracks through the foothills. In the morning we were often rewarded by the sight of Trisul, Nanda Devi and Api floating above a sea of mist. By noon haze obscured the snow peaks and the oppressive heat of the valleys discouraged movement of both man and beast. We would lie in the shade and continue on our way in the cool of the evening.

On the fifth day we crossed into Nepal at Darchula and enquired about the route northwards. We could follow it, we were told, for twenty miles on rough tracks but beyond that no ' sahib ' could pass. Only mountain goats could follow that route.

The tracks in Nepal proved every bit as bad as had been predicted. In four days we had covered the twenty miles to reach the tiny village of Dumling, the last habitation south of the gorge. At this point Beetham had to turn back. For some time he had found great difficulty in coping with the native diet and had become so weak that his return was now imperative. His extensive knowledge of natural history and his wide experience had made him a delightful companion, and we were very sorry to lose him. Happily he soon made a complete recovery.

The critical ten miles now lay before us. Extra coolies were hired and all loads were reduced from sixty pounds to forty. The route was spectacular. It followed ledges perched on the bare, rocky mountainside hundreds of feet above the river. It climbed laboriously over

spur after spur or dropped to the very edge of the water where perpetual spray nourished lush tropical plants and where troops of shaggy, grey Langur monkeys ran among the bamboos. We averaged two miles a day in the gorge.

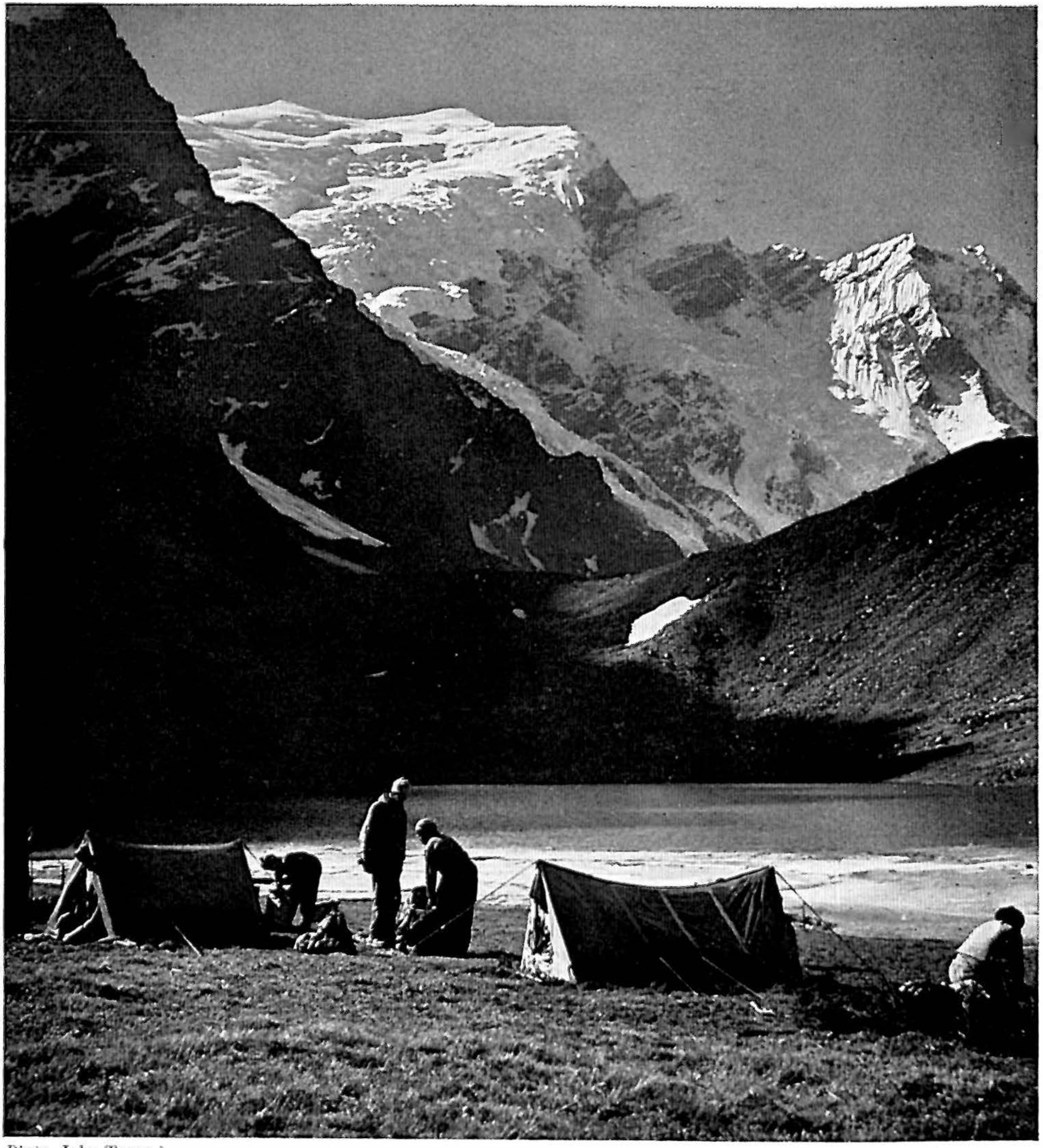
On the evening of our ninth day in Nepal the dank recesses of the gorge gave way to open meadows, carpeted with spring flowers and wild strawberries. Their task completed, the Dotial coolies who had served us so well from the start were keen to return home. The three best, however, agreed to stay with us for the whole journey.

Next day we climbed for 1,500 ft. through pinewoods to a spur from which a clear view could be obtained. Below us was a narrow valley which our coolies called the Api Khola. It appeared to lead straight to the heart of the Api massif. Beyond this valley was a lofty ridge leading up to Api whose summit was clearly visible 12,000 ft. above us and seven miles away. We decided to try to reach the crest of this ridge and camped on a meadow amid banks of primulas and saxifrages, near Gansser's farthest camp of seventeen years previously. It was a clear starry night, and I lay awake long beside the fire, dimly aware of the Sherpas' laughter and the crackling of juniper wood.

Two days later we placed a camp at 14,000 ft. from which we had a clear view of the west side of the mountain (Plate I). The great ice-cap which forms the upper part of the mountain discharges by a steep ice-fall into the Api Khola. An ascent of this ice-fall would take us on to the north-western ridge of the mountain. Murray walked up next day to reconnoitre an ascent by this route, but found that the whole ice-fall was raked by avalanches, of which several fell as he watched.

It was by now the middle of June. There was still a chance of gaining this same north-western ridge from the north, so we descended with all speed to the Kali River and climbed the next valley to the north, the Nampa Khola. While we pitched our base camp, the threatening cloud which had been piling up in the Kali valley rose and engulfed us. The monsoon had arrived. Its onslaught was violent, and not only made high climbing for the time out of the question but also greatly handicapped our attempts to reconnoitre the most likely route to the summit—namely the Nampa Khola side of Api's north-west ridge. In a clearing of the mist we discovered that a short glacier above our camp gave easy access to the cwm between Api and its eastern satellite, but above the cwm the slopes seemed uncompromisingly steep and icy. Meanwhile the north-western approaches remained hidden in cloud.

Though we were reluctant to leave the issue undecided, it was now time to continue our journey. When Gansser seventeen years previously had reached a vantage-point far up in the Nampa Khola, he had been amazed to see, in a sudden break in the mists, a whole 'new' range of mountains of 20,000 ft. and over, extending north-eastwards from Api towards the Nepal-Tibet frontier. This twenty-five mile range was now the chief obstacle to our plan of circling the Api group. No pass exists across it, though there are legends of former routes between the Nampa Khola and the district of Marma which



Photo, John Tyson.]

PLATE I.—API FROM THE API KHOLA.

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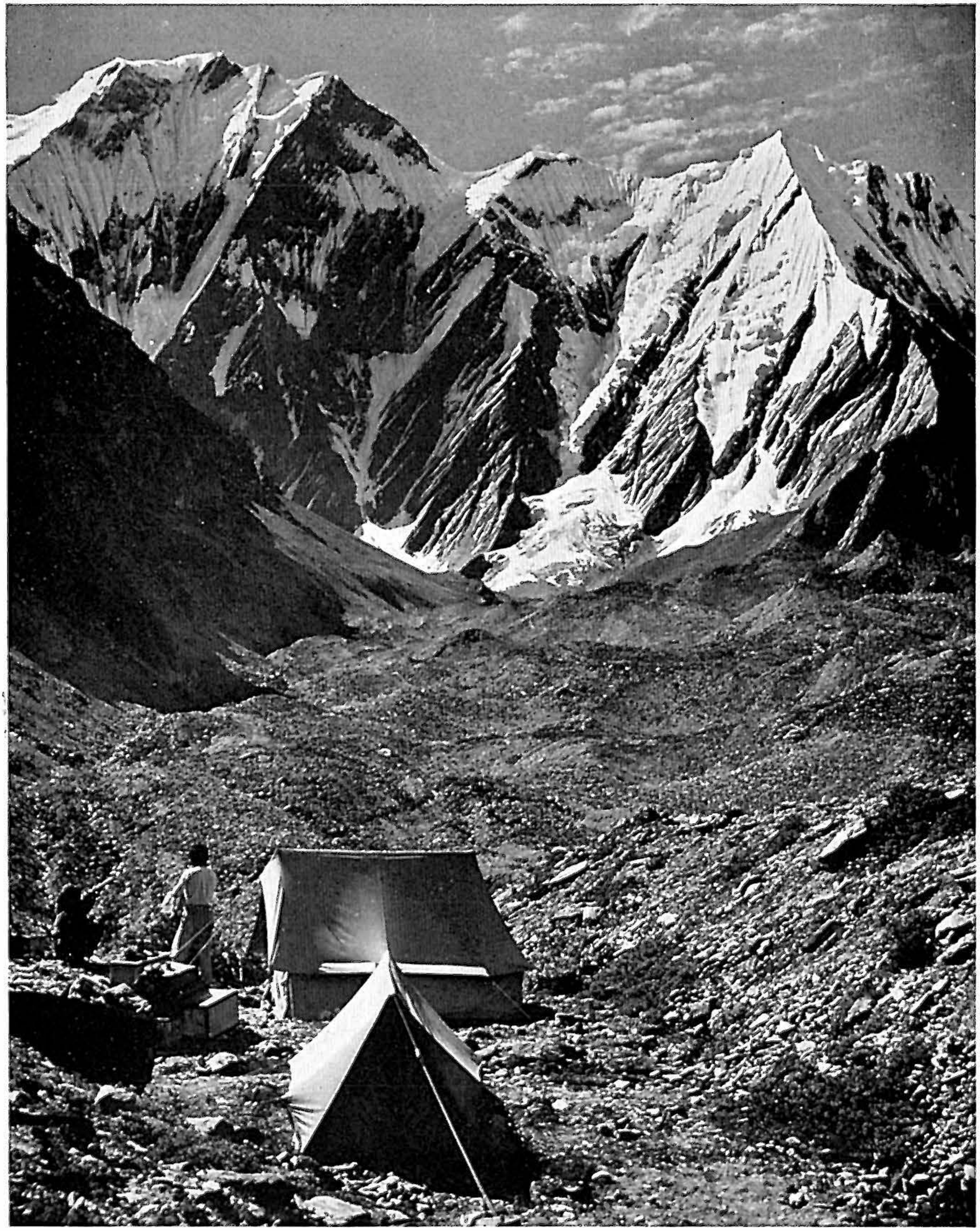
lies to the south of Api. Legends of this sort are widespread in the Himalaya and often have a basis of fact. It was worth trying to find a route.

With two days' provisions Sherpa Da Norbu and I made our way up the Nampa valley through thickets of birch and juniper to the open hillside above. Red and yellow potentillas and tall purple geraniums covered the meadows. Swallowtail butterflies, resembling our own fenland species, raced over the hillsides in powerful flight. From this viewpoint we could look down on the strange ice-formations below. Our route lay along the north side of the valley, 1,000 ft. above the main Nampa glacier. Ramifying gullies seamed the hillside. Late in the evening we tried to descend to the glacier to camp and set off down a steep spur which ended in a precipice. After wasting over two hours in attempts to negotiate it, we were forced to climb back. It was now dusk and a mist had come down. We made another attempt to descend, groping downwards in the fading light, and again found ourselves among steep cliffs. As we settled ourselves on a ledge the wind rose and it began to rain. Benighted here in a storm, high among the cliffs of a remote Nepalese valley, I think this was as lonely a night as I have ever spent.

It was a grey dawn. The wind had lessened but it was still raining and a low mist hid the range from us as Da Norbu and I found a route down on to the glacier. In the hope of a brief clearance, we followed the northern branch of the glacier to the entrance of its highest cwm, but, like Longstaff, who had reached this point in 1905, we saw nothing. With our limited supplies, we could not afford to wait, so we retraced our steps down the Nampa Khola and two days later were back at the Kali river. We camped near the village of Changru.

It was now necessary for us to leave this corner of Nepal as soon as possible. No pass has been found, and the route by which we had entered would by now be cut by rivers swollen with monsoon rains. At this moment we were graced by a stroke of good luck. Our camp was visited by the headman of Changru and his followers. They wanted to help us in any way possible, so in broken Hindustani and with much gesticulation we presented our problem. There was just one possibility of a way, we were told. By heading eastwards from Changru past the Bhotia village of Tinkar to the summit of the Tinkarlipu Pass we could follow a very rough route near the Zaskar Range to the Urai Lagna, a 19,400 ft. pass, and from there descend into the valley of the Seti River. In this way the barrier range, which they called the Yokapahar Himal, could be turned at its northern extremity. We would be travelling in uninhabited regions. Taking a stick the headman drew the route in the sand and we studied it carefully. Though the boundary with Tibet is undemarcated, the watershed of the Zaskar Range is in this region usually regarded as the frontier. We had to travel from one pass to the other without entering Tibet. With Chinese communist troops in strength at Taklakot mistakes on our part might have grave results.



Photo, John Tyson.]

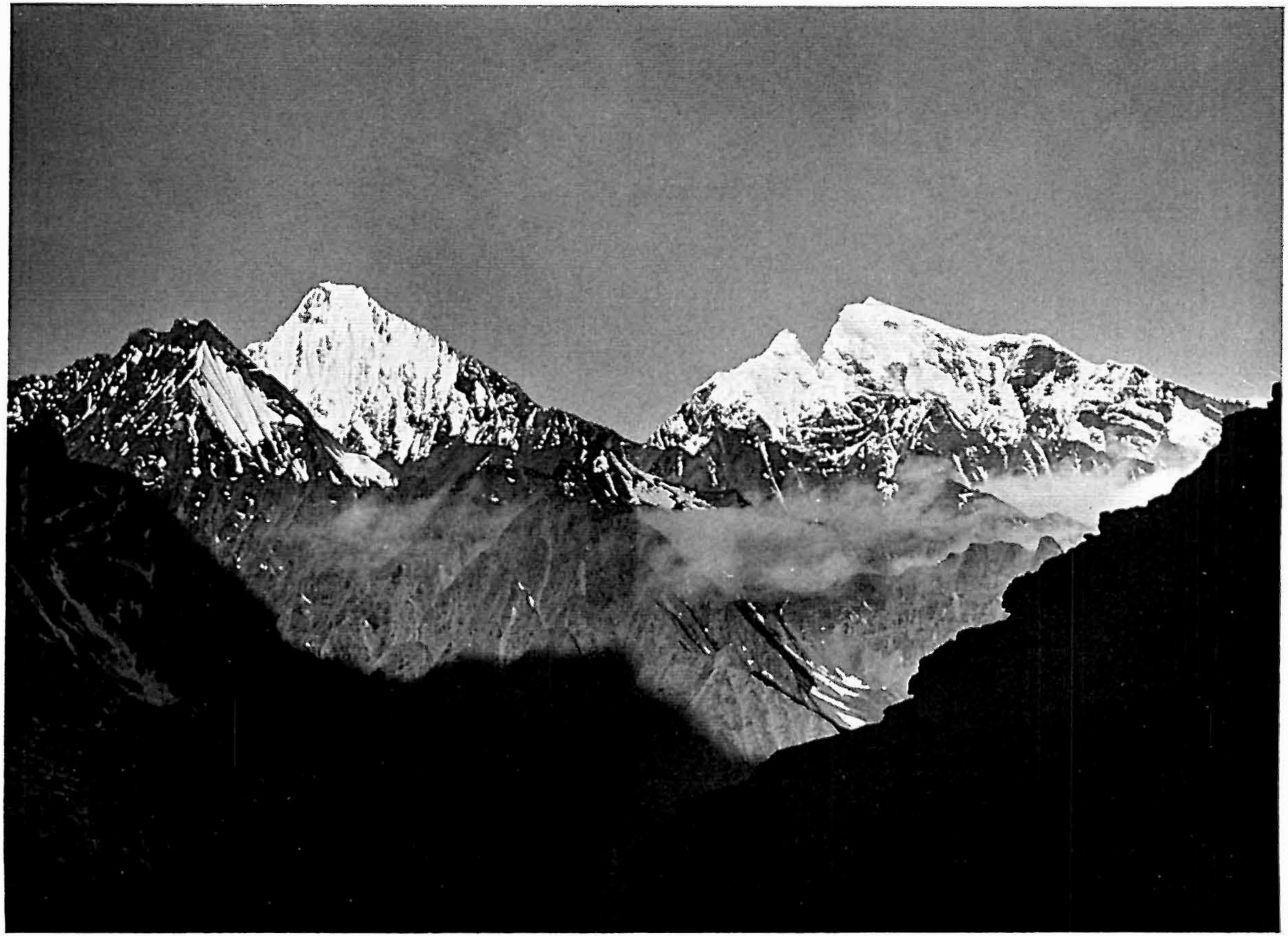
PLATE II.—THE HEAD OF THE YOKANADI KHOLA.

Without further delay we engaged a dozen local porters, bought food for ten days and set out for the Tinkarlipu Pass. That evening we stopped at Tinkar, the last village in Nepal, and pitched our tents beneath fluttering Buddhist prayer-flags. But something was amiss. In place of the usual spontaneous greetings we found many of the people sullen and unfriendly. During the evening they frightened our men with stories of armed Chinese who would fire on our party at the pass. The reason soon became evident. They were angered at our employing coolies from the foot of the valley when Tinkar men were available. Next morning our porters announced that they would go no further than the pass. Argument and persuasion were useless. The Tinkar men watched developments with ill-concealed satisfaction.

Another valley joined ours two miles east of Tinkar. This was the valley of the Yokanadi, which would lead us towards the centre of the range of Yokapahar Himal. Perhaps the pass of the legend was to be found here, so we decided to look. Here we would be far from the Tibetan frontier, but our coolies soon found other causes for complaint and it was clear that trouble was in store. Progress became slower and slower until finally, after a stormy scene, they dumped their loads beside the glacier and departed, leaving us to our own devices. This was our finest camp. A great peak of the Yokapahar Himal filled the entire head of the valley (Plate II).

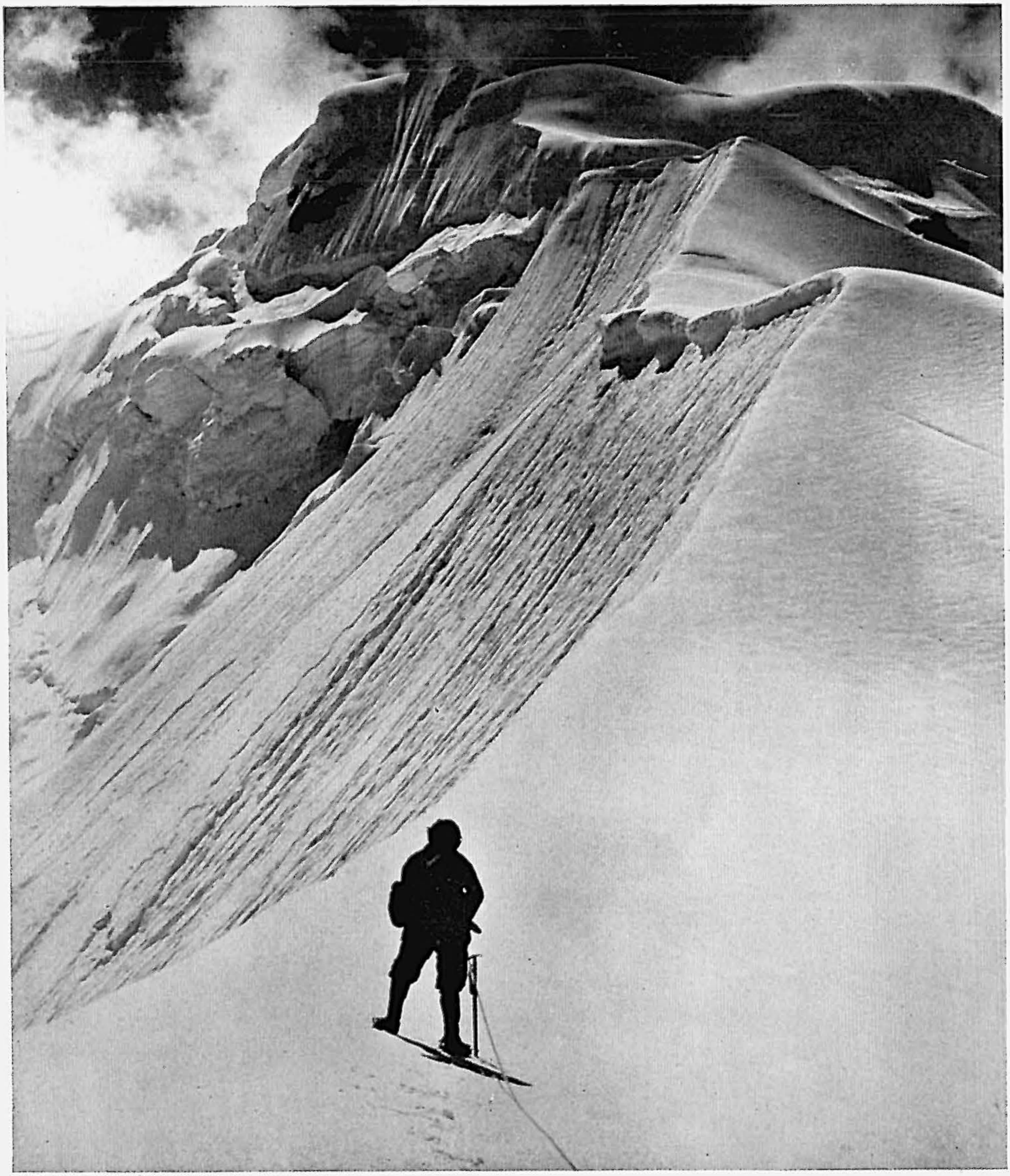
While Murray was confined to his tent with fever, Da Norbu and I set out with five days' provisions to explore the northern glaciers of the Yokanadi Khola. During our climbs we obtained magnificent views of the Api group, now frequently clear of monsoon cloud. The upper part of Api looked climbable from this angle, provided the north-west ridge could be gained from the Nampa valley (Plate III). In addition we were able to identify the elusive Nampa (Gansser's ' Chisel Peak ') which we had earlier searched for unsuccessfully, and we also sketched on the map most of the main glaciers and peaks of the Yokapahar Himal. Placing a tent at 17,500 ft. Da Norbu and I made four attempts to gain the crest of the range. Finally from a 20,000 ft. peak (Plate IV) we looked over to the Seti Valley, but it was filled with monsoon mists. Everywhere we found the same thing—dangerous snow and ice slopes at formidable angles. This was no route for our laden porters.

We rejoined Murray, who had now recovered, and began the task of ferrying stores back down the valley. As we had failed to cross the range the frontier route was now the only way out. Our head Sherpa, Nima, went to try to come to terms with the Tinkar men, while we anxiously awaited the outcome. Five of them agreed to come with us. They had shrewdly judged the depth of our purses and the pay they demanded was high but we had no choice. To transport all our gear we needed more men than this so we had to split the party. Nima who, unlike us, could travel through the restricted zone of India, would take down the balance of our stores on yaks and meet us in three weeks' time back in Nepal at Chaubisho to the south of Api.



Photo, John Tyson.]

PLATE III.—NAMPA (LEFT) AND API FROM THE NORTH-EAST.



Photo, John Tyson.]

PLATE IV.—A NAMELESS PEAK IN THE YOKAPAHAR HIMAL.

On July 5, we took the track towards Tibet. As we gained height the whole array of the Api range and the Yokapahar Himal was revealed before us (Plate V). We gazed in wonder at the scene before turning northwards to the soft blues and browns of the Tibetan landscape.

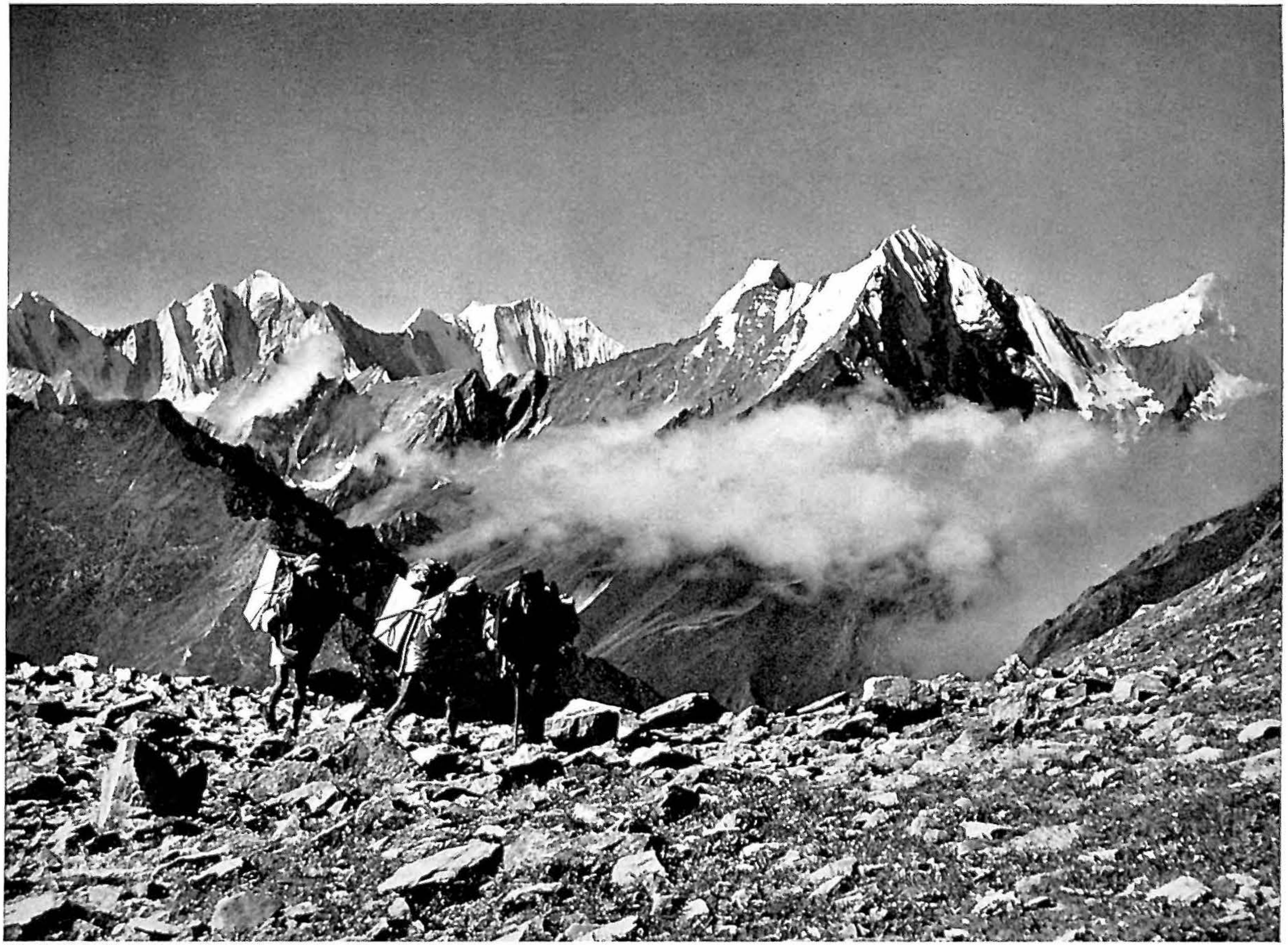
From this point we were advised by the Tinkar men to travel only by night, in order to avoid the possibility of a ' frontier incident.' We lay concealed until dusk and then followed a *nala* to the east for several miles. During the following day we slept in a high corrie, climbing to a viewpoint in the evening. Storm clouds were gathering over Lake Manasarowar and lightning flickered around a great unknown range to the north-east. The coolies, Hindu and Buddhist alike, prayed to Mt. Kailas, dimly visible on the horizon. Our longest march lay ahead. The lamaseries of the Karnali valley were fading into gloom and Gurla Mandhata, highest Tibetan summit, held the last rays of sunshine, as we descended to the north-east.

It was a starry night and no lamp lit our way across the dry stony wilderness. For several hours we marched eastwards, then rested beside a track. Suddenly a wild shouting and a clatter of hooves filled the night. Grabbing loads we raced for cover up the hillside and cowered among the bushes wondering what fate was in store for us, but to our great relief the sounds soon receded into the distance. According to the Sherpas there had been only one horseman. He had been drunk and his shouts were to frighten away devils. The coolies readily agreed with this theory and there was general laughter, though suitably muted ; all conversation was now in whispers.

For the rest of that night we continued on our way, climbing and descending the northern spurs of the Zaskar Range. Then, after a day's rest, we followed the track to the 19,400 ft. Urai Lagna. As we looked down at the cloud-filled Seti valley, rain began to fall. We were no longer screened from the monsoon. That evening we reached the tiny Tibetan trading post of Saipal, some miles inside Nepal. The few Bhotias who were sheltering in tents from the torrential downpour gazed in astonishment as we passed.

From alpine meadows where herds of yaks grazed we descended into the rain-filled gorge of the Seti. Blue poppies grew among the cliffs. The coolies were not disposed to linger and in two days of forced marches we reached Dhuli (10,000 ft.) the highest permanent settlement in the valley. Here we could obtain such luxuries as chickens, eggs and potatoes. The villagers, accustomed to trading by barter, were unfamiliar with money and suspicious of our rupee notes.

All around us soared great peaks of the Api and Saipal groups but we saw nothing. Our meeting with Nima at Chaubisho being shortly due, we could wait no longer, and headed south for the foothills, glad to leave the cold mountain mists behind us and return to the tropical forest. At Chainpur we turned north-westwards for Chaubisho, still a week's journey away. That evening we discovered to our horror that we were already at Chaubisho ! It turned out that there were two places of the same name, the one we were at being the more important.



Photo, John Tyson.]

PLATE V.—PEAKS SURROUNDING THE NAMPA KHOLA FROM NEAR THE TINKARLIPU PASS.

[*To face p.* 426.

There was no sign of Nima, and we envisaged the unpleasant prospect of marching in the rain between the two, searching for him until our funds ran out. In the morning we set off anxiously for the other Chaubisho to the south of Api, our arranged place of meeting. A few minutes later to our intense relief we met Nima and his coolies on the track—one of many hill paths linking the two places.

For nine days our path was to the westwards, through a maze of steep wooded hills. Throughout this time we had no accurate knowledge of our position, but knew that we must eventually strike the Kali River and India. On July 29 the great gulf of the Kali opened in front of us, and next day we crossed the frontier at the Jhulaghat bridge.

That same evening we were back in Pithoragarh, our starting-point. During our ten-week circuit of Api, we had travelled in unknown country and had acquired a detailed knowledge of the region. Yet our most lasting memories will not be of mountains but of the people of this land, especially the Sherpas and Dotials, whose courage and loyalty compelled our respect and admiration.