

AMA DABLAM, 1959

*(Being the substance of a talk given to the Alpine Club on
Monday, December 7, 1959)*

By J. H. EMLYN JONES

OUR attempt on Ama Dablam in the spring of this year ended in tragedy and for those of us who took part in the expedition the memory of the climb is clouded by the death of two of our number who lost their lives near the summit of the mountain. Nevertheless, we think there are certain positive achievements to record and I hope that these will become apparent as the story unfolds.

The striking view of Ama Dablam from the south-west is well known to all readers of Sir John Hunt's account of the successful ascent of Everest in 1953. The mountain was first suggested to me as a feasible climbing proposition by Dr. Charles Evans, who himself had looked at the South-east ridge of the mountain from the vicinity of the Mera Col. In the only available photograph taken from that quarter¹ the upper part of the mountain is obscured by cloud and the lower part barred by a steep rock step of about 500 ft. Ama Dablam is, of course, a most impressive mountain when viewed from any quarter. It rises to a height of 22,494 ft. a few miles south of Everest on the south or left bank of the Imja glacier and separated from Everest itself by the vast wall of the Lhotse-Nuptse ridge. It has four main ridges, one of which, the Western ridge, rises over a small un-named satellite peak standing above the village of Pangboche. At the foot of the North ridge which drops very steeply for the last 1,000 ft. is a small col and to the north a striking little rock peak, Ambu Gyabjen (c. 18,250 ft.), which was ascended for the first time on April 12, 1953, by Sir John Hunt and the late T. D. Bourdillon.

An examination of further photographs, particularly some provided by Sir John Hunt, taken during the second acclimatisation period in 1953, and by John Jackson, who had spent some months in the area in 1954, showed that the North ridge and the South-west ridge though steep did not look so impossible as the other two ridges. In particular, the North ridge levelled out towards the summit and the last 1,000 ft. of ascent appeared to be at an appreciably easier angle. Working out a possible route from photographs became increasingly interesting and I

¹ See *The Ascent of Everest*, p. 140.

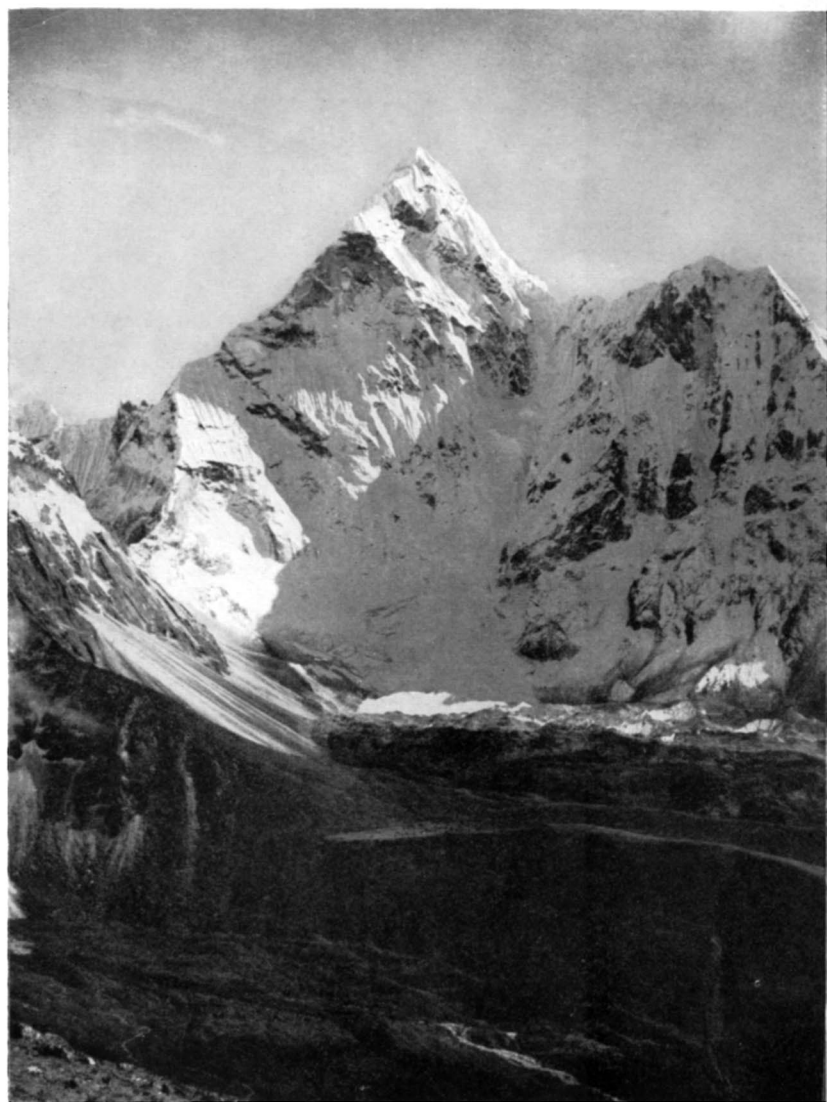
finally came to the conclusion that a spur which rose from the north-east to join the shoulder of the North ridge above the steep drop to the North col offered the most likely way to the summit.

Our preparations took shape during the latter half of 1958. Permission was obtained from the Nepalese Government and at the same time I learned that Alfred Gregory was himself taking a party to the mountain in the autumn of that year, with a view to exploring the South-west ridge.² We called our expedition the British Sola Khumbu Expedition and we had in mind that if his autumn attempt were to be successful we would then turn our attention to some of the other magnificent mountains in the Sola Khumbu region.

The party finally consisted of six members from the United Kingdom. G. J. Fraser and E. A. Wrangham, both members of this Club, had been on the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club Expedition to Rakaposhi in 1954 and had considerable experience of climbing in this country and in the Alps. M. J. Harris was one of the leading mountaineers of his generation and had been a member of the British party which climbed in the Caucasus in 1958, where, with G. C. Band, he had completed the first ascent of the South-east buttress of Dych Tau and the third ascent of the North buttress of Shkara. Mike was not a member of the Alpine Club, but in fact we completed his application form at Base Camp and sent it back by runner. His candidature was passed by the Committee, but news of his death was received before he was actually elected to the Club. Dr. Frederic Jackson, also a member of the Club, was a cardiologist and it was hoped that in addition to his role as a member of the climbing party he would be able to carry out some cardiological research both on members of the expedition and on members of the Sherpa community. A Transrite battery-operated cardiograph was lent to the expedition by the Cambridge Instrument Company and although this instrument had subsequently to be abandoned at Camp II on the mountain, a large number of electro-cardiograms were taken and have added to knowledge of the behaviour of the heart at high altitudes. Mrs. Nea Morin, an ex-President of the Ladies' Alpine Club and of the Pinnacle Club, had extensive experience in the Alps extending over twenty years or more, but this was her first visit to the Himalayas. I had previously been to Nepal with H. W. Tilman and his party in 1950 when we had explored the approaches to Annapurna II and IV.

The Mount Everest Foundation provided us with a handsome grant and we also received financial assistance on a generous scale from the Medical Research Council and the Newcastle Regional Hospital Board.

² Mr. Gregory's party reached a height of about 20,000 ft. on the mountain, but were turned back by difficult climbing and by the low temperatures with which the mountaineer has to contend during the autumn.



Photo, New Zealand Himalayan Expedition, 1954]

AMA DABLAM FROM THE NORTH-WEST

It is true to say that without this assistance the expedition would not have been possible.

The party assembled in Kathmandu on March 25, 1959. Jackson and I flew to Bombay and accompanied the stores overland and the other members of the party flew in direct to Kathmandu. There we picked up our four Sherpas, Dawa Tensing, Urkien, Annullu and Pemba Tensing, all experienced men who will be well known by name to members of this Club. We also engaged three Sherpa orderlies, Nima Dorje, Pineri and Pasang Chitar. These were young Sherpas with limited expedition experience, but they proved extremely useful to us and the two first-named stayed with us throughout the expedition.

At Kathmandu we also met the Liaison Officer provided for us by the Nepalese Foreign Office. He was Lieut. Gadul Shumshere J. B. Rana, a young Regular Army Officer, who proved to be extremely useful and reliable and a great help to the expedition throughout. Our coolies, seventy-two in all, were recruited through the Himalayan Society, which had recently been set up in Nepal, and on Easter Sunday, March 29, the party set out. We were accompanied as far as Bhadgaon by Lt.-Col. J. O. M. Roberts, Military Attaché at the British Embassy, whose assistance had been invaluable to us throughout the planning of the expedition and also in Kathmandu itself where he had made many of the necessary administrative arrangements before our arrival.

Our march followed the route taken by earlier parties to the Everest region and as we travelled eastwards across the grain of the country our mountain legs grew stronger as the ridges grew steeper. From time to time the snows of the main Himalayan range appeared on our left-hand and we were able to make out the outlines of mountains hitherto known to us only by name, amongst them Gauri Sankar, Numbur and Karyolang.

We crossed the Dudh Kosi on Friday, April 10, by means of the temporary winter bridge which is washed away each year with the coming of the Monsoon, and turned northwards towards Namche Bazaar, which we reached on the 13th. A little further on below the village of Kumjung we halted for a day, paid off our Kathmandu coolies and engaged local Sherpas for the remaining carry to Base Camp which we hoped to set up at the foot of the North-east spur of Ama Dablam.

The party was in good form and had been going well, although Mrs. Morin had had trouble with a knee which she had sprained shortly before leaving England. It had stood up to the journey well and in fact had been largely cured by the sixteen-day march across country. For the first time the party was surrounded by the high peaks of the Himalayas with Ama Dablam forming the centre piece above a nearer ridge upon which the outline of the Thyangboche monastery could be made

out. A short day on the 15th took us to the monastery, where we were entertained by the head lama and also by the head lama of the Rongbuk monastery who had crossed with his family from Tibet over the Nangpa La a few days before. It was here that we learned vague rumours of trouble in Tibet, but although we were at this point a few miles from the frontier there was very little precise information. Dr. Jackson and Mrs. Morin had stayed behind at Kumjung to carry out part of the medical research programme, but the rest of the party pushed on, and on April 17 found an ideal site for our Base Camp immediately at the foot of the North-east spur at a height of about 16,500 ft. We were exactly on schedule and the morale of the party was high. We were ten minutes from the foot of our spur on a little alp immediately under the foot of Ama Dablam and surrounded on two other sides by ice peaks encircling the head of a side valley leading down to the main Imja glacier. Across the glacier rose the great wall of the Lhotse-Nuptse ridge and over the top stood the summit pyramid of Everest.

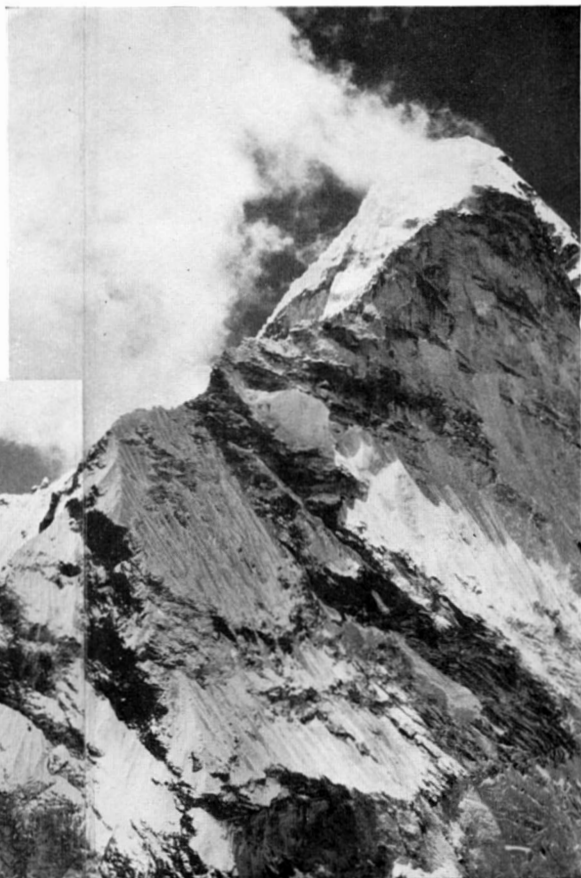
Some members of the party suffered from altitude headache and after a few days Fraser and Wrangham descended to the main Imja valley where they spent three nights at that lower level. During this period, Harris and I, with Dawa Tensing, completed the ascent of Ambu Gyabjen where we found the small summit cairn erected by Hunt and Bourdillon six years before. From the summit ridge we got excellent views of the North ridge of Ama Dablam and although no insuperable obstacles appeared it was obvious that it would not be possible to test the route without, in Dr. Longstaff's words, rubbing our noses on it. On April 24 Harris and I carried out a first reconnaissance of the lower part of the North-east spur and succeeded without much difficulty in arriving at a prominent notch about one-third of the way up the ridge. The rest of the party arrived that day at Base Camp and were encouraged to see the two of us appearing a thousand feet or so up the mountain.

From the first notch the general line of the route seemed to be clear. The first problem was a steep 400-ft. rock buttress consisting in its lower section of overlapping slabs which provided a series of small overhangs. Above the buttress a second notch appeared to offer a possible camp site. There followed a short broken section and then a steep corner of light grey rock which we called the Grey Corner and above this point it appeared possible to keep just to the left of the edge of the spur, branching left at the top and up a snow couloir to the shoulder of the North ridge. At this point the ridge turned left-handed and continued over two rock towers about 400 ft. high and then steeply up a narrow rock ridge to an upper shoulder crowned by a prominent cap of ice.

4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

THE NORTH RIDGE AND NORTH-WEST SPUR OF AMA DABLAM SEEN FROM THE SUMMIT OF AMBU GYABJEN.

1 | 2 | 3 |



7
6
5
4

3
2
1

KEY TO ARROWS:

- 1. FIRST NOTCH
- 2. CAMP I
- 3. GREY CORNER
- 4. CAMP II
- 5. CAMP III
- 6. CAMP IV
- 7. SUMMIT PARTY LAST SEEN

The next section consisted of a long castellated ice ridge bearing left-handed which at its far end abutted against the snow or ice slopes of the summit cone. The route thus followed throughout its length the crest of the ridge or just below it and would therefore remain free from avalanche danger, at any rate until the summit slopes were reached. Our subsequent experience proved that the lower two-thirds of the route which consisted almost entirely of rock climbing was remarkably safe from objective danger, apart from two sections where the rock itself was loose and there was a certain amount of stone-fall caused by members of the party in their own movement.

The rock buttress above the first notch was first turned by Harris and Fraser by a route on loose rock and snow to the right of the crest. This section was probably as difficult as anything on the mountain and its completion represented an outstanding feat. Having reached the top of the buttress they were able to abseil down its entire length, finding a convenient perch on the crest of the ridge providing a good stance and belay at the half-way point. We subsequently fixed ropes on this section and on the steeper section above the lower slabs installed a 60-ft. rope ladder which proved invaluable in getting the loads up. Owing to the numerous overhangs it was virtually impossible to haul loads over this section and they were all carried on the back as far as the perch. For the second half of this section an aerial ropeway was erected up which the loads were hauled through space to the second notch where platforms for three tents were constructed amongst the boulders. Here we established Camp I at a height of about 17,850 ft. Harris and Fraser had previously found a route up the Grey Corner beyond and on May 1 Fraser and I occupied Camp I. The following day we pushed on up the ridge, climbing the Grey Corner and reaching a point just below the shoulder from which we could satisfy ourselves as to the feasibility of the route beyond. During the next few days the build-up of stores to Camp I continued in which heroic work was done by Jackson, Wrangham and Mrs. Morin and the three Sherpas, Annullu, Urkien and Pemba Tensing. Camp II on the shoulder was occupied on May 5 by Harris and Fraser, a small platform being cut out of the ice, level with the lip of the rock ridge underneath, at approximately 19,200 ft. On May 7, Harris and Fraser made their way upwards along the ridge, finally by-passing the two rock towers on the left and setting up Camp III on an ice platform sticking out at the side of the ridge at the foot of the 45° section (height approximately 19,850 ft.).

A feature of the route was the almost complete absence of potential camp sites. At virtually no point on the mountain, certainly up to 21,000 ft. was there a level section capable of accommodating a single tent and when camp sites were with some difficulty prepared it was

never possible to move more than a yard or two without being properly safeguarded. Camp III was in a fantastic situation. From it one looked up at the 45° rock ridge which was bounded on its right by the vast upper precipice of the North face of the mountain which appears to be practically vertical. By standing alongside the tent it was possible to look over the ice crest and straight down to the fields around Dingboche.

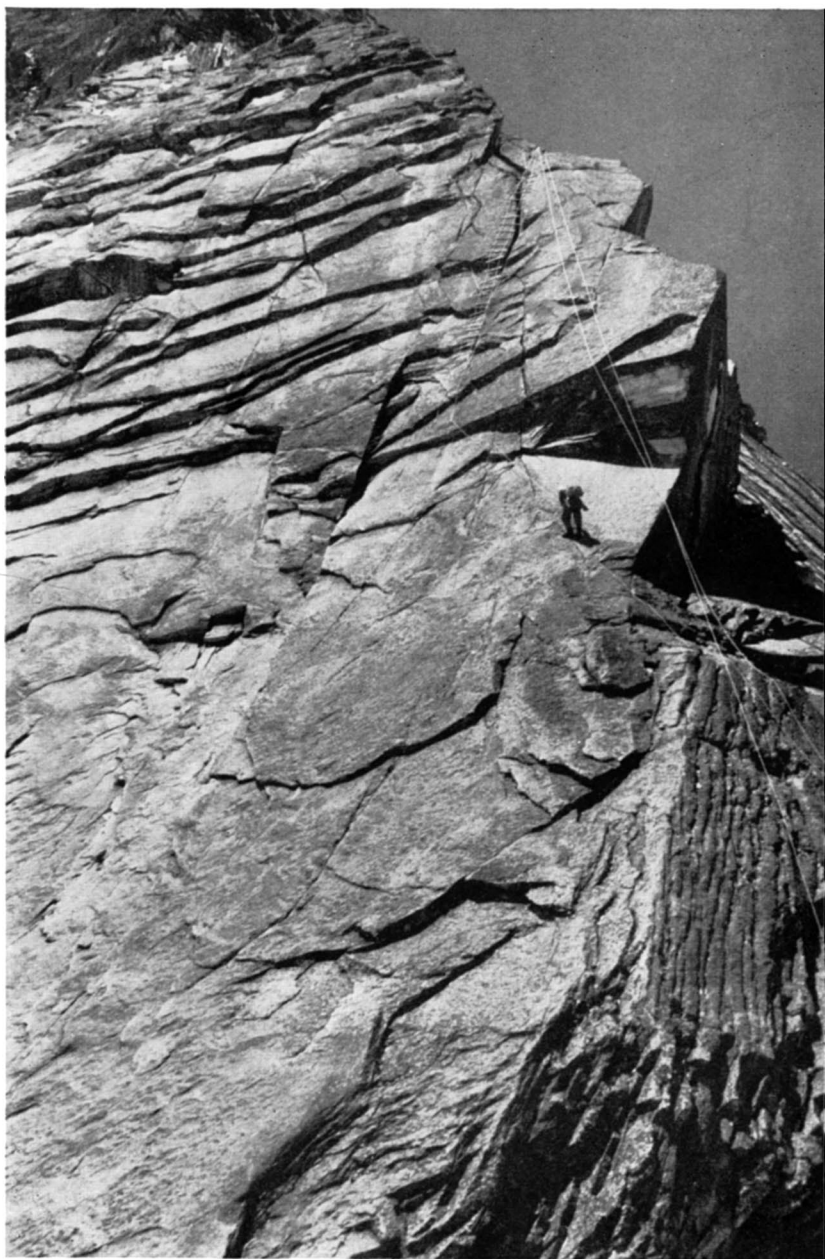
On Friday, May 8, whilst Camp II was being consolidated, Harris and Fraser pushed on to a point near the top of the 45° ridge, but as Fraser was not feeling too well they decided to return and on the following day came all the way down to Base Camp, bringing down with them the support party at Camp II.

This halt in our advance was timely as the weather remained unsettled for the following few days and our doctor examined Fraser and diagnosed a bronchial infection.

I should, perhaps, mention at this stage that although we did not intend to use oxygen on the mountain we had some light-weight Normalair cylinders with us at Base Camp for medical use. In fact they were not required as Fraser's complaint responded to treatment and he was passed quite fit again after four days.

On Wednesday, May 13, Harris, Wrangham, Urkien and Annullu started again up the mountain and were followed by Fraser, Jackson, Pemba Tensing and myself two days later. On Sunday, May 17, Wrangham and Harris were at Camp III and the rest of us at Camp II. Here electro-cardiograms were taken of the whole party, but unfortunately some irregularity appeared in the case of the Doctor and although he had no symptoms he was obviously worried about the cause. Whilst Fraser and the Sherpas went on to Camp III I stayed another day at Camp II, but as Jackson's heart was still not normal on the following day I decided that he ought really to descend.

He went down to Base Camp with Pemba on the 18th and on that day, with Annullu, I re-joined Wrangham and Urkien at Camp III. Harris and Fraser had left that morning carrying a light-weight assault tent with a view to setting up a further camp at the top of the 45° slope, or beyond if they could make it. On an earlier reconnaissance they had found a possible platform near the top of the ridge, but they hoped it might be possible to go further and to find a suitable site on the far side of the castellated ice ridge beyond. From that point, at a height of about 21,000 ft., they hoped that they might be able to climb the remaining 1,500 ft. to the summit in one day or, if not, to prepare the route on one day, return to camp for the night and continue the ascent on the following day. The weather had been set-fair for some days and they had taken with them food sufficient for six days. The final decision as to whether to go on or not was, of course, to be taken by



ROCK BUTTRESS BELOW CAMP I, SHOWING ROPE LADDER IN POSITION

them on the spot and in the light of the difficulties remaining, but they were both extremely experienced and seasoned mountaineers and could be relied on not to push their assault beyond the limits of prudence.

In the event, they pitched Camp IV below the top of the 45° slope and we saw them the following day crossing over on to the ice ridge where they disappeared on the far side at about 11.30 a.m. They appeared to be taking their tent on with them and in fact established Camp V some way along the far side of the ice ridge.

At 2.30 p.m. on the afternoon of May 20 we saw them cutting steps over what appeared to be a final ice tower on the far end of the ice ridge, giving access to the summit slopes of the mountain. At this point we estimate that their height was about 21,500 ft. They would thus have less than a thousand feet to go to the summit and at first we thought that they might go on that day. In fact, they re-appeared within a few minutes and re-descended to Camp V.

This incident is not without significance in view of what happened later. If the going had been straight-forward from the point at which they turned back they might well have thought it wise to return to camp and make an early start on the morrow. Alternatively, they might have considered the way impossible and given up the attempt. But if the next section had required further preparation there would, in fact, have been plenty of time for them to put in an hour or so's work that afternoon.

It was therefore with considerable excitement that we saw them again the following morning, May 21, at 8.30 a.m. reaching the top of the same ice tower. From our position at Camp III it seemed as though by working their way out of sight to the right they would soon set foot on the easier, more rounded, summit slopes and we began to think that the mountain would be climbed. About mid-day the summit clouded over and we had no further sight of them. We had half-expected some shouts from them on the way down, but only sensed a slight feeling of uneasiness when we heard or saw nothing more of them that day.

During the course of the following day our uneasiness gradually turned to despair. From the elation of a probable victory our spirits progressively sank until by the evening we knew that an accident had occurred. Mike Harris and George Fraser never re-appeared and we shall probably never know whether, in fact, they reached the summit of Ama Dablam. I do not think that they were beaten by sheer technical difficulty. Perhaps an avalanche or a slip, more probable on the descent, carried them away at a moment when the summit cloud had limited their visibility and hidden from them the safest route down. From the point where the accident occurred they must have fallen down into the North-west cwm of the mountain as we scoured the nearer, north-eastern slopes of the summit with glasses and found no sign of them.



DESCENDING THE SLABS OF THE ROCK BUTTRESS EN RAPPEL

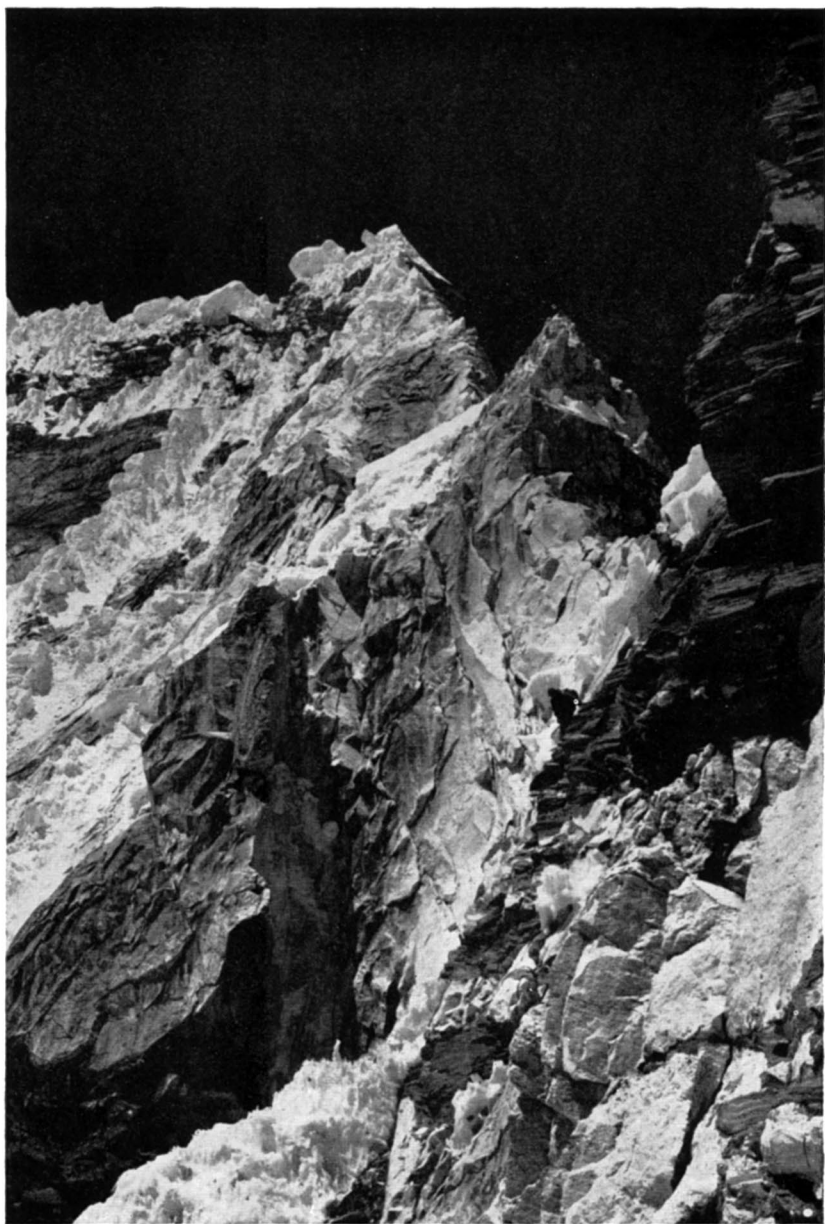
In order to institute a search party it would be necessary to descend the mountain and pass round the foot of Ambu Gyabjen to get up into the North-west cwm. The following day the weather broke and, as the four of us turned to descend from Camp III, we ran into a raging blizzard. The descent of 600 ft. to Camp II took us the whole day and I was in an extremely weak condition when we finally reached Camp II. My fingers and toes were completely numb and my fingertips were slightly frost-bitten. Wrangham and the Sherpas were magnificent, climbing steadily and surely in these appalling conditions and Urkien produced mugs of tea within a few minutes of our arrival at the camp.

The storm raged throughout the following day and we were unable to leave our tents. We now know that this was the beginning of the Monsoon and except for two or three short intervals Ama Dablam remained in storm during the rest of our stay. On May 25 the day started with sun and we continued the descent. The sky clouded over almost immediately, but we eventually got down to Camp I and found the rest of the party waiting for us at the notch below the camp. We finally reached Base Camp at about 7.0 p.m. in a more or less exhausted condition.

The weather continued bad and Base Camp was almost permanently under snow. Occasional glimpses of the mountain showed that our ridge was plastered with ice and it was with some difficulty that we evacuated the stores from Camp I. Camp II had to be abandoned and with it the electro-cardiograph. The morning of May 30 dawned fine and Wrangham and Mrs. Morin set off soon after 5 o'clock in order to carry out a search in the North-west cwm. After rounding Ambu Gyabjen to the north they had views for a short time of the summit of the mountain from that side, but the weather again clouded over and although they made their way up into the cwm to over 17,000 ft. they saw no trace of the accident.

We erected a cairn at Base Camp to the memory of Mike and George and started for home without any further evidence to enable us to decide what had happened, or whether the summit had been reached.

Ama Dablam remains a magnificent mountain and we think that our route provides a magnificent route to the summit. That section of it which is known to us is nowhere easy, but with the exception of the rock buttress leading to Camp I is nowhere exceptionally difficult. From the first notch onwards the parties moved one at a time, except for a short section above Camp I and another immediately above the Grey Corner. Of those of us who went to Camp III all the Europeans had led or come down last over all sections of the route and so had Urkien, who developed during the course of the expedition into a rock



DESCENDING FROM CAMP III. THE CAMP WAS BEHIND THE PROMINENT ROCK PINNACLE ON THE CREST OF THE RIDGE.

climber of the highest class. Similarly, Dr. Jackson on various occasions led or came down last from Base Camp to Camp II.

We cannot be sure what lies beyond the top of the 45° rock ridge, but here the climbing is on ice and snow, and conditions will probably vary from year to year. Those of us who have come back believe that the route beyond leads to the summit and we like to think that Mike Harris and George Fraser found the way there.

TECHNICAL NOTE

1. From Base Camp (height approximately 16,450 ft.) follow the crest of the moraine to the point where it joins the foot of the North-east spur (10 minutes). Walk and scramble up easy ground to the foot of the first steep rock section (500 ft.). Traverse downwards to the left, cross a small couloir (100 ft.) and climb a little rock buttress on the far side (fixed rope; 100 ft.; Grade III). Traverse back to the right across the top of the couloir over large boulders to the first notch (about 1,000 ft. above Base Camp).

2. Climb the slabs above the notch starting on the right-hand side and moving diagonally left (100 ft.; IV) and climb the steeper crack above to perch on the crest of the buttress (100 ft.; VI without ladder). A fixed rope of 200 ft. is required for this section (pitons in place) and in addition there is a rope ladder for about 60 ft. of the crack. Ideally this ladder should be extended to 100 ft.

3. Continue up the crest of the ridge, steep at first (V; pitons, étriers, fixed rope) to second notch, Camp I (200 ft.). Platforms for three tents (height approximately 17,850 ft.).

4. Continue over easier ground to the foot of the Grey Corner (300 yds.). Climb the corner, starting on the left, and traversing right at about 120 ft. and continue to a stance at a point where the light grey rock turns to dark grey (200 ft.; fixed ropes; IV; loose rock).

5. Step delicately left on to a sloping block and round the corner on to the crest of the ridge (20 ft.; fixed rope; IV sup.).

6. Continue upwards on easier ground keeping left of the crest and roughly parallel to it up a sort of rocky couloir (400 ft.).

7. Traverse left up a snow couloir (IV) and then right-handed to join the crest of the ridge where platforms for Camp II can be prepared in the ice (250 ft.; height approximately 19,250 ft.).

8. The North ridge proper here turns off to the left. Follow the narrow crest of the ridge for approximately 100 yds. and continue an ascending traverse on the left below two prominent rock towers (600-700 ft. of climbing; loose rock) and climb steeply up about 100 ft. to regain the rocky crest of the ridge.

9. Continue along the ridge by climbing the steep tower ahead, moving left after a few feet, to Camp III (100 ft.; fixed rope; VI; height 19,850 ft.).

10. The 45° rock ridge. Follow the crest of the ridge (passages of IV and V; 1,200 ft.). Small platform for one tent (height approximately 20,850 ft.).

11. Traverse left beneath ice cornice to join crest of castellated ice ridge (300 ft. approximately).

12. From this point the route follows the far side of the castellated ice ridge and re-joins the crest of the ridge near a prominent ice pinnacle (approximately 500 yds. ; height approximately 21,500 ft.).

13. From the far side of the ice pinnacle it should be possible to follow an ascending traverse to the right leading to the easier slopes giving access to summit (22,494 ft.).

In all a minimum of 3,000 ft. of manila is desirable for fixed ropes, rope ladder and abseil ropes.