A ROMAN FLAG ON SARAGHRAR PEAK

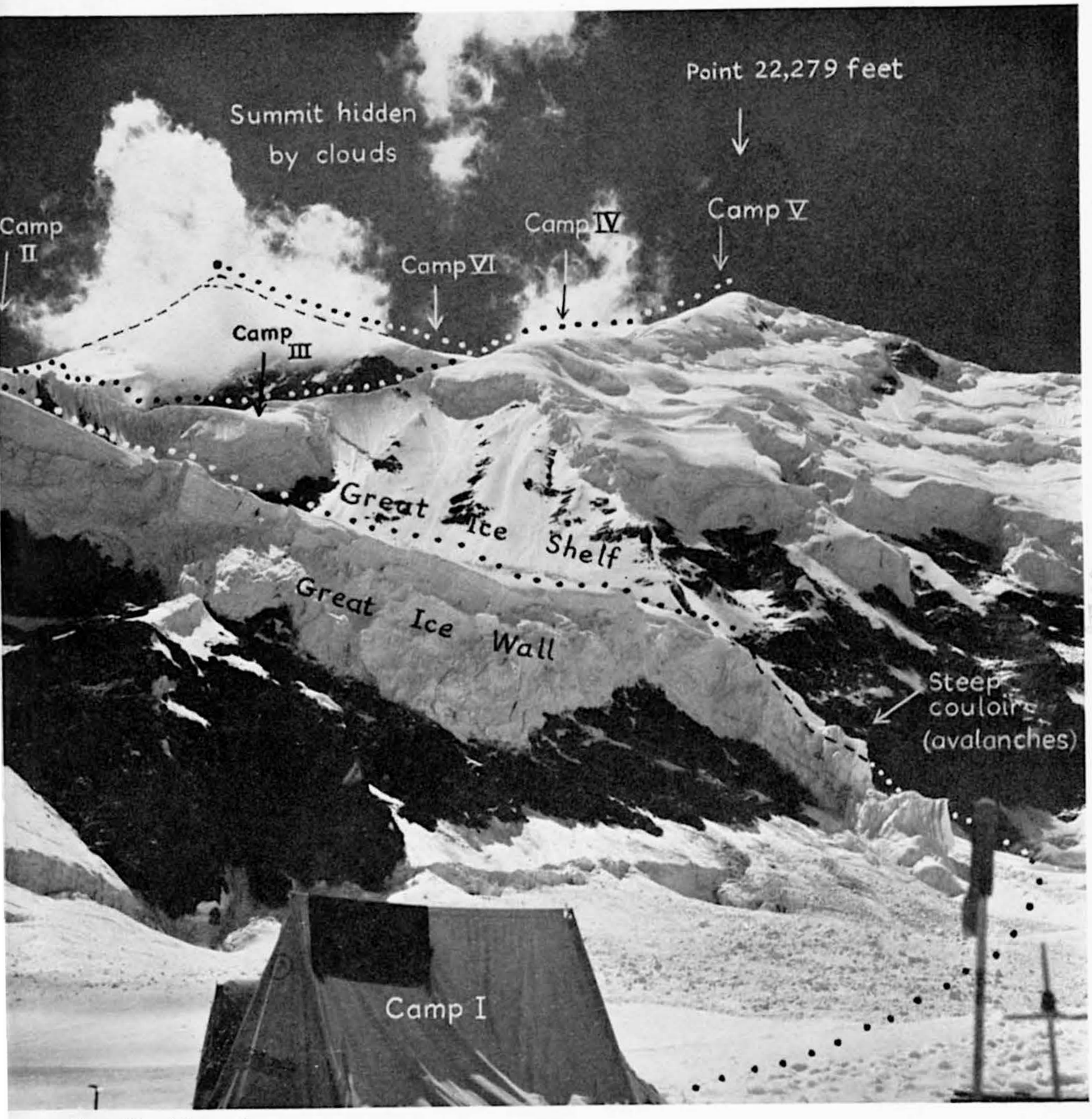
By FOSCO MARAINI

SOMEHOW or other it is rather difficult to associate the idea of modern Rome with mountain climbing: the Alps are far away and an enjoyment in the ruder pleasures of nature seems slightly disconcerting in a world so highly polished by centuries of urbane civilisation. Rome makes you think of palaces, or great baroque churches, where the last descendants of feudal lords mingle with monsignori and abbots in the pageantry of a life belonging to centuries quite distant in time from our own. Then there is the rather scandalous aura of international politics and of cinema stars. We get further and further away from rocks and glaciers, from lonely nights in a small tent, from avalanches and storms!

Yet—is it a love of contrast?—Rome has a large number of climbers, and there is an important group of young people who take their passion for mountaineering very seriously. Some malignants say that a real Roman belongs to the rarest species to be found today in the capital of Italy. Perhaps they are right; a city with 170,000 inhabitants in 1870 cannot have bred two millions in ninety years! 'Therefore all these immigrants from the North and from the South are bound to bring with them traditions and tastes which are quite different from the local ones.' I suppose there is some truth in this argument after all. The fact, however, does not change; Rome is an active mountaineering centre.

One day, a few years ago, two Roman climbers, Paolo Consiglio, 33 and an architect, Franco Alletto, 34 and a building contractor, having visited most of the classical mountain groups in the Alps, started talking about an expedition to the lesser-known districts of America or Asia. At first it looked more or less like a dream; and many of their friends called it a joke. But such ideas have a strange way of growing, and soon people in the know were speaking of 'our expedition' as something quite definite in outline and certain to take place.

Maps, the *Alpine Journal*, the *Himalayan Journal*, *la Montagne*, *Die Alpen*, *la Rivista del CAI*, were all examined, carefully read, pulled to pieces during long winter evenings: finally the Hindu-Kush mountains, on the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan were chosen. The advantages of such a choice seemed to be many: the altitudes of the mountains are respectable, yet they are below the limit which imposes a heavy organisation on the club and requires quite exceptional performance from the climbers; the whole region is not much known and many important



Photo, Fosco Maraini, 1959]

SARAGHRAR PEAK.
POINT 22,279 AS SEEN FROM CAMP I.

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mountains have not even been attempted; the monsoon only rarely reaches the higher ranges, giving one the advantage of long spells of good weather; access is fairly short and open.

This plan for an expedition became something more than a dream when Count Alessandro Datti, President of the Rome section of the Italian Alpine Club, took up the idea with much enthusiasm and started an active drive to raise the necessary funds. A permit had meanwhile been secured from the Pakistan Government. Among the various peaks mentioned in the request the Pakistan authorities allotted us Saraghrar Peak (24,170 ft.); so that was going to be our goal.

The mountain had been attempted in 1958 by a British Expedition lead by Mr. Ted Norrish. Unfortunately the death of one of the party, P. S. Nelson, brought the enterprise to an end before the summit could be reached. We promptly wrote to Mr. Norrish asking for information and received from him the fullest, most kind assistance regarding every possible detail of itinerary and organisation. There remained however one doubt. Was the Western approach, attempted by Mr. Norrish and his companions, the best one? From what we could understand, reading descriptions and examining photographs, it seemed to offer some serious difficulties. Should we not attempt to find a way from the North? We agreed to leave the decision to the very last; possibly after undertaking a series of brief reconnaissances on the spot.

In May 1959 everything was ready. In our first plans we had started speaking—as one usually does—of a 'very light' team, with 'as little equipment as possible', but slowly the proportions had grown larger: six[1] of the best climbers (all strictly amateurs) were chosen among the members of the Rome section of the Italian Alpine Club after many tests and scrutinies; Dr. Franco Lamberti-Bocconi, a medical graduate and a very keen mountaineer, was added to the list; I was invited to take the lead of the whole party because of my previous experience with expeditions and travel in Asia. Thus it was a group of eight men, with nearly five tons of equipment, that left Ciampino by air for Karachi at the end of June 1959.

At Peshawar we met our liaison officer, Capt. Shahpur Khan, who spoke very good English and became at once a friend of ours. The presence of a man of such different background and outlook in a party of climbers from Europe, America or Japan often presents very difficult problems of human relations; in some expeditions things work out satisfactorily, in others they do not. Unforeseen circumstances and incidents on the way may cause clashes among men who are usually most level-headed. In 1958, during the Italian expedition to Gasherbrum IV, our experience in this respect had been unsatisfactory. It was with a great sigh of

[1] Franco Alletto, Paolo Consiglio, Giancarlo Castelli, Betto Pinelli, Enrico Leone and Silvio Iovane.

relief that I noticed sincere feelings of friendship growing up between Shahpur and ourselves. At Peshawar we also met Mulai Jan, from the village of Tirich, who was going to be our *sirdar*.

We left Peshawar with two vehicles (a truck and a station wagon) early in the morning of July 2. One of the pet theories of my companions was that 'it will only take us a short time to reach some suitable place for a base camp'. Knowing how things work out in the remoter parts of Asia I was not so sanguine. With some good luck the trip from Peshawar to Chitral, across the Lowari pass, can be done by jeep in one day: but this preliminary part of our journey took us over a week! It is true that our expedition was by now a heavy one, but things would not have been so bad had we not run into a spell of monsoon storms.

The way from Peshawar to Chitral is over 200 miles long and runs over roads of varying quality, some good, mostly mediocre, in parts very bad. Starting out from Peshawar we crossed the fertile plains round Mardan; then we entered the Tribal Area (a sign said, among other things, that no foreign woman could be allowed entry 'without a responsible male escort') and slowly climbed towards the Malakand pass. Up to Chakdara the road was metalled and very good, then we entered the State of Dir and the time-clock seemed to be set back at least a century. Most often we seemed to be following a mere dirt track: bridges were quite rare and small rivers had to be crossed by wading through them. Officials became particularly suspicious and we had to show our passes and permits many times. Men looked more and more fierce; all were heavily armed with weapons of every possible age, length and efficiency, from matchlocks to submachine-guns.

The monsoon suddenly overtook us in the very heart of Dir State. Rain fell heavily and rivers became dangerous. While crossing a minor tributary of the Panjkora, our lorry got stuck among some boulders. We had barely unloaded our baggage when the waters suddenly became swollen—it was more an 'avalanche of water' than anything else—and the vehicle was washed away like a toy, in front of our eyes. After this accident we had to remain for two days in the Levy Fort at Rabat as most roads and rivers were impassable. Eventually we found another truck and managed to reach Dir.

Beyond Dir one crosses the Lowari pass (10,200 ft.) into Chitral. By now, most probably, the road which was then under construction has been completed. In 1959, however, only an adventurous jeep could make it; we had to transfer our loads to donkeys and mules for a two-stage journey. Trucks were available again at Ashiret for the remaining thirty miles to Chitral.

After some unexpected adventures we had now reached the capital of Chitral State, a small town pleasingly set among the trees and fields of a green oasis, surrounded by awsome hills of barren brown or grey stone.

In the distance appeared Tirich Mir (25,263 ft.) a majestic mountain all covered with ice and snow. At Chitral we were received with the warmest hospitality by the Additional Political Agent, Mr. Syed Imran Shah, who gave us much help in preparing our caravan.

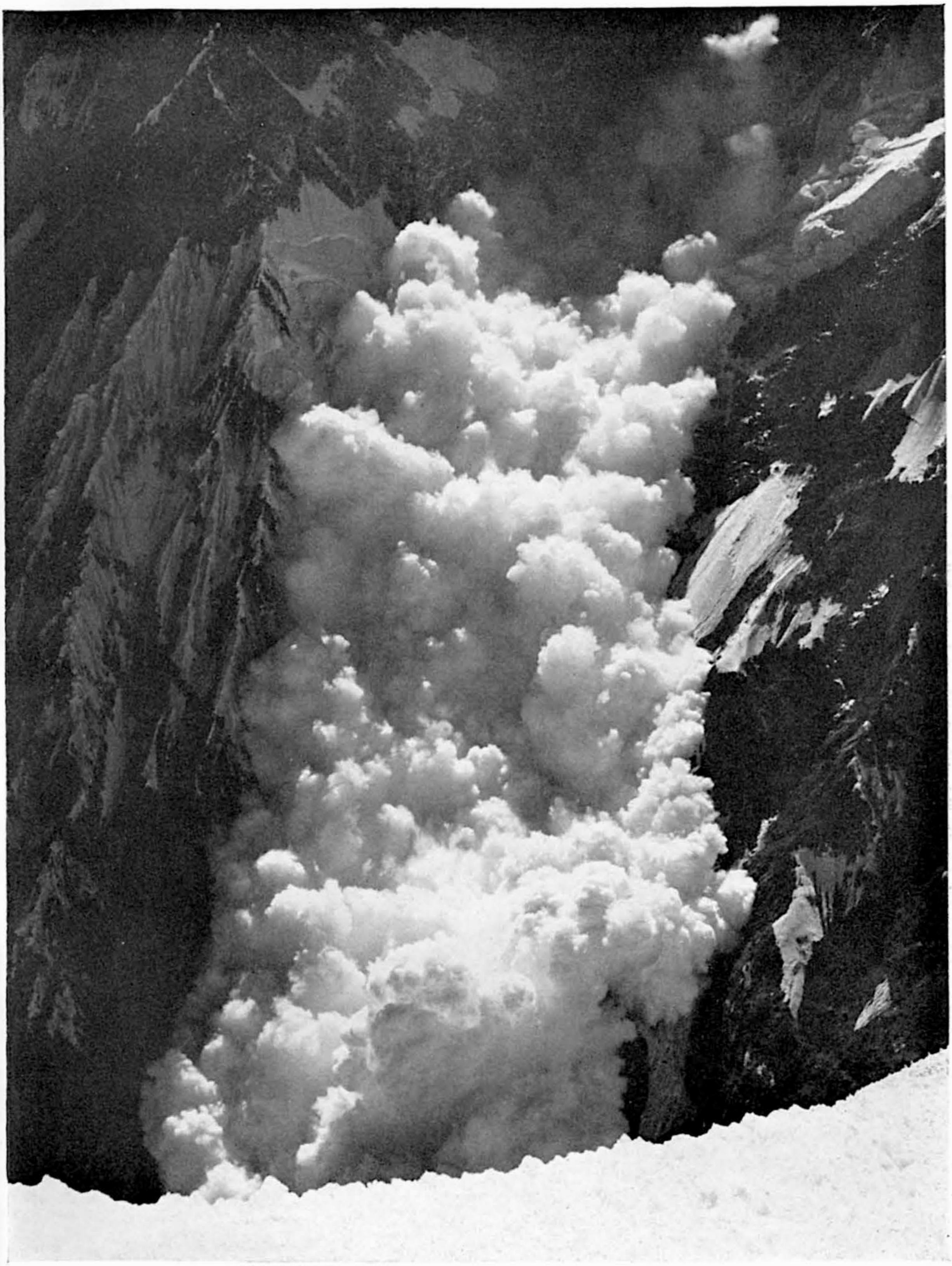
'From here on it is bound to be only a few days to the base-camp,' said some of my companions; and I wished very much they might be right! Up to Drasan (four stages) most of our equipment was carried by donkeys; from there on we had to use porters (about 150 of them). Information by previous travellers regarding the Chitralis as porters was not very good, but to our relief we found them fairly strong and reliable.

At Drasan we met most of our high-altitude porters who started at once their duties by helping us to reorganise the caravan. We were now at least ten days late on schedule, so we decided to give up our visit to the Rosh Gol, and the North-western approaches of Saraghrar; we would proceed directly to the unknown North-eastern side of the group.

At Washich (three stages further up) half of our party, with some sixteen porters, went ahead to study the mountain at closer quarters and to discover a suitable place for a base camp. This advance party followed the Ziwar Gol, a very narrow valley, practically without a path, up to Gram-Shal, where the Ushko and Niroghi glaciers come to an end. On further examination the Ushko glacier seemed to offer no real difficulty, but the outlying ridges of Saraghrar fell to it with very steep rock faces or ominous ice-falls, much too difficult or dangerous for loaded porters to climb. So the Niroghi glacier was chosen and word was sent to the main body of the expedition to follow. Word was also sent not to reach Gram-Shal by way of the Ziwar Gol, because some parts of the track were too risky for our heavily loaded men.

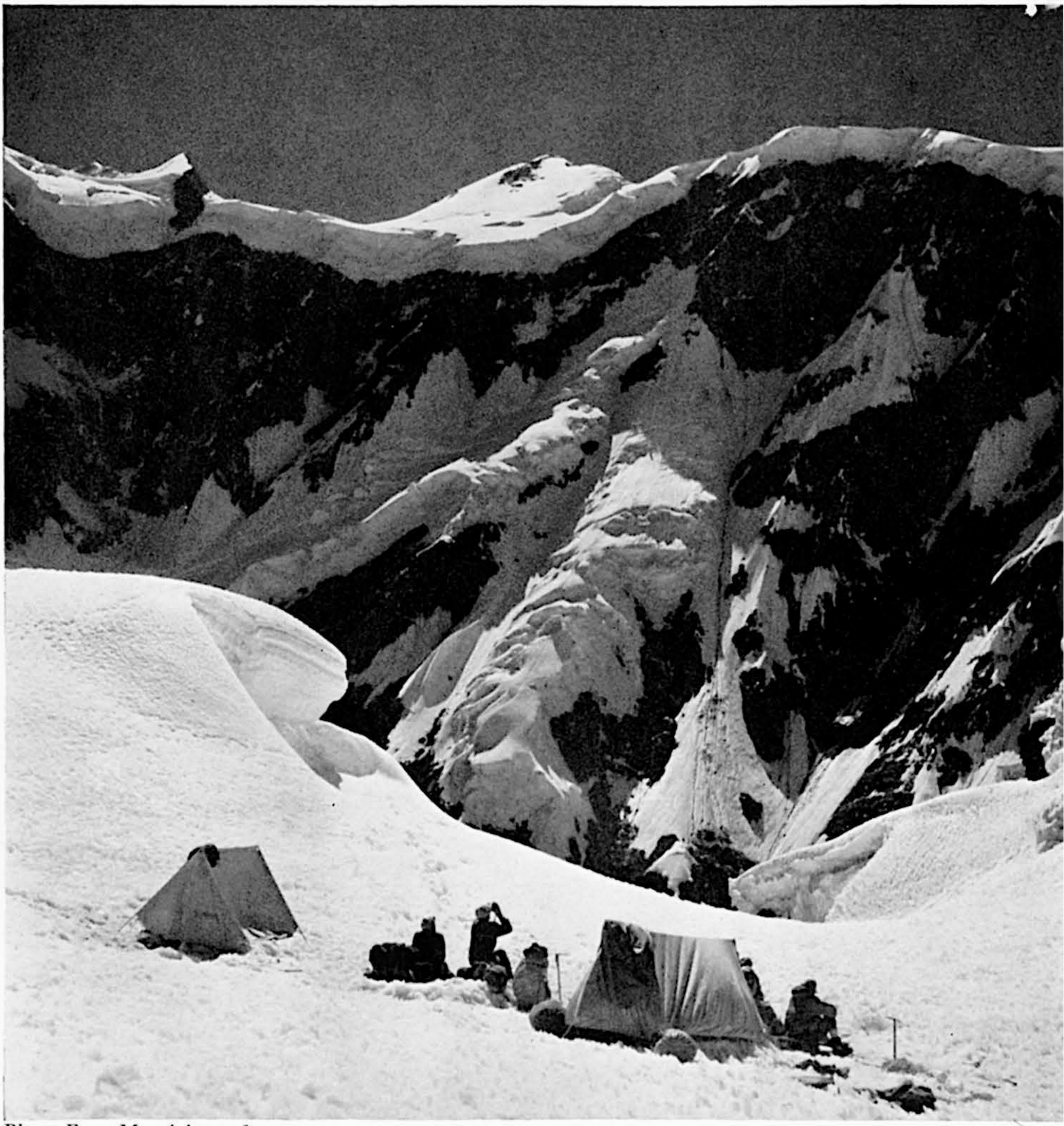
Nobody among the local people seemed to know much about the higher reaches of these valleys; fortunately we found a good guide in Paklawan of Washich, a small blond man with blue eyes, rather old but very energetic and much respected by the villagers. He suggested we reach Gram-Shal across the Dukadak pass (about 15,000 ft.). This pass turned out to be very steep, full of snow, and quite as difficult as the Ziwar Gol, if not worse; I suggest that any other expedition trying to reach Gram-Shal should avoid it. In fact now a fairly good path has been left by our porters and runners, going and coming up the Ziwar Gol, during the whole summer of 1959, so the main objection to that course has lost its meaning.

The weather, just before we reached the Niroghi glacier, turned bad for a couple of days and we had some trouble with our porters. Over seventy of them left us, so we were compelled to use the remaining ones in relays to carry all our loads to the place which had been chosen for the Base Camp, near the head of the Niroghi glacier, at about 14,500 ft. By the time we were really and finally settled it was the 25th of July!



Photo, Fosco Maraini, 1959]

SARAGHRAR PEAK.
COLOSSAL ICE AVALANCHE FALLING FROM HANGING GLACIER ON NORTHERN WALL OF SARAGHRAR, AS SEEN FROM CAMP II.



Photo, Fosco Maraini, 1959]

SARAGHRAR PEAK.

THE SUMMIT OF SARAGHRAR (24,170 FT.) WITH NORTHERN WALL, AS SEEN FROM CAMP II.

Even the most optimistic of my companions now fully understood that in Asia, you cannot look at a map and measure kilometres or stages as you would in the Alps.

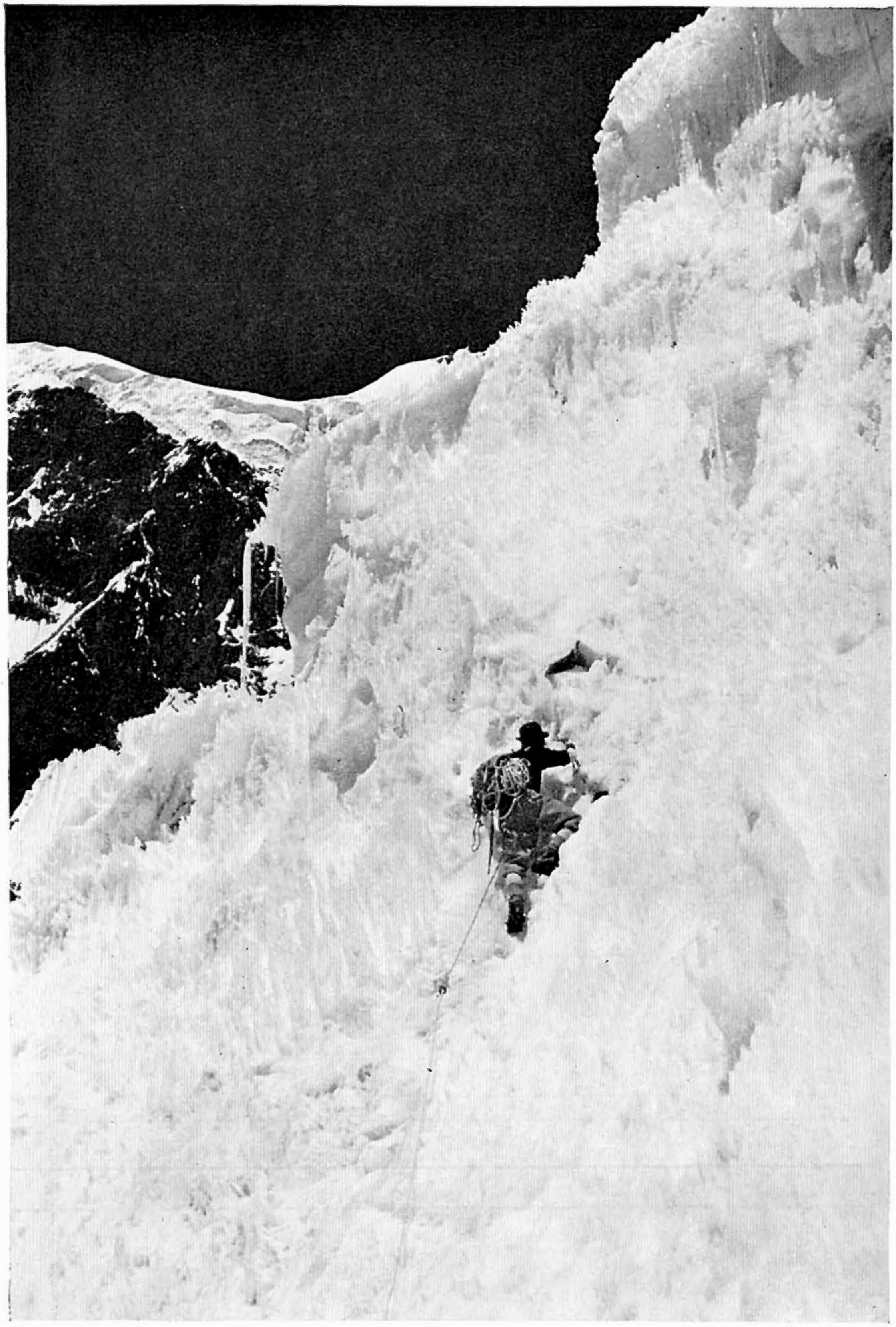
After two days spent reorganising equipment, food, services, and getting acclimatised to the height, we started exploring our mountain. Down from the Ziwar Gol it had appeared, to the first and smaller party, as an imposing dome, possibly quite easy: hence a wave of sudden enthusiasm. But now the more we saw of Saraghrar the worse it seemed to look. The mountain is built like a great castle: a long and irregular plateau lying between 23,000 and 24,000 ft., is surrounded on most sides by a series of very high, nearly vertical faces of rotten black rock studded with hanging glaciers. The plateau supports a number of minor turrets, pyramids, domes, ridges; the highest of these is the real summit, but for a long time we were not at all certain which might turn out to be the loftiest peak! Our discomfiture grew worse as horrid avalanches of ice and snow came thundering down the faces of the mountain at every hour of day and night (see photograph).

The high black precipices, surrounding the ice-fields below the summit, were interrupted in some places by great buttresses, with minor summits of their own; our only hope was to find a way up one of these ridges. For two weeks we tried various courses, always having to give up because of one reason or another; at one time it was extreme length, at another exposure to possible avalanches, and in most cases combined steepness and difficulty too great for loaded porters.

It was only on August 6 that we could launch a real attack on the mountain, following the Roma glacier[2] and the great South-east buttress leading to point 22,279 ft. Camp I (17,000 ft.) was placed at the head of the Roma glacier (we only discovered later that it stood on top of an immense crevasse in the ice, hidden by much snow!). The tents of Camp II (18,500 ft.) were set near a minor summit of the buttress. The stretch between these camps was not very difficult, but a gully of ice and snow one had to follow to reach the 'Great Ice Shelf' (see photo), turned out to be rather steep and constantly threatened by the fall of avalanches of ice from hanging glaciers above. Fortunately we had no accidents; only once a large avalanche fell just a few minutes after a party had been on these slopes while climbing towards Camp II.

Beyond Camp II the buttress turned into a ridge of ice and snow, practically horizontal, offering serious difficulties in more than one place. Here was the key to the whole ascent. Nearly a week passed before Alletto and Consiglio, Pinelli and Castelli, working in turns, could open a way for the porters and leave a long series of steps in the ice, together with many pitons and fixed ropes. This part of the climb

[2] We named Roma glacier an important branch, about three miles long, of the upper Niroghi glacier.



Photo, Franco Alletto, 1959]

SARAGHRAR PEAK.
ICE WALL BETWEEN CAMPS II AND III.

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Photo, Fosco Maraini, 1959]

SARAGHRAR PEAK.
A PARTY ON THE RIDGE BETWEEN CAMPS II AND III.

was most spectacular; the amount of snow and ice on the mountain was prodigious and the tropical sun wrought it into those strange forms we generally associate with the Andes or with the mountains of tropical Africa (see photographs).

I have mentioned the fact that the bad weather of the monsoon season was not supposed to reach the Hindu-Kush. This turned out to be perfectly true, at least in 1959. The sun went on shining relentlessly in a blue sky, to the utter ruin of our faces and eyes, but saving us the uncertainty of mist and storms. We could often see a wall of great rolling clouds come up slowly from the South, but it stopped abruptly before reaching the main ridge. Continuous good weather is a great boon for an expedition and I am sure that our final success was also due to these extremely favourable conditions.

On August 13 Camp III was placed at 19,000 ft., and a few days later (August 17) Camp IV at 20,500 ft. The main difficulties had been won by now and the way to the upper plateau lay open along some steep slopes of snow. Would the porters follow along the ridge? The poor Chitralis had been so very badly described to us by most authorities that we feared greatly they would refuse to move. To our great relief they turned out to be porters of no mean capacity. They were not Sherpas, to be sure, but I would rate them in no way inferior to the Baltis of the Karakorum mountains; in fact, as high altitude porters, they were notably better.

When Consiglio and Leone on August 18, reached point 22,279 ft. (of the Survey map) and placed Camp V, we were practically sure that the final success was near. Most difficulties seemed finished. From there on the easy snows of the plateau led straight to the summit, about 1,700 ft. higher. It was only a question of general health and altitude.

Fortunately at least four men of our party were in good shape. So two groups—Alletto and Consiglio on the first rope, Castelli and Pinelli on the second one—started out on August 23 from Camp V to place a small tent, somewhere along the plateau, for the final assault. Alletto and Consiglio passed there a very cold night on August 23; Castelli and Pinelli returned to Camp V.

The day after, Castelli and Pinelli departing very early from Camp V managed, late in the morning, to join Alletto and Consiglio who had started from Camp VI. Both parties reached the peak of Saraghrar shortly before three in the afternoon. The day was glorious, as usual, and we all followed with our field-glasses, from Camps II and III, the last stage of the climb. The assault had taken fully 18 days (August 6–24) to come to a successful ending; this was a great moment for all of us.

'The entire climb took place on ice and snow,' said Franco Alletto when we met two days later, 'we never touched rock from Camp I to

Photo, Franco Alletto, 1959]

SARAGHRAR PEAK.

CAMP III AND RIDGE BETWEEN CAMPS II AND III. THE ICE TOWER AND ICE RIDGE, THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF THE ASCENT, CAN BE SEEN JUST ABOVE THE RIGHT-HAND TENT.

the last step up the mountain, yet the actual summit turned out to be a rather narrow ridge of broken slabs. The view made us gasp with amazement; Tirich Mir (25,263 ft.), Istor-o-Nal (24,271 ft.), Noshaq, all appeared quite near, the first billows of an infinite sea of mountains. Far away we saw Nanga Parbat, perhaps the great peaks of the Karakorum, and certainly the highest Pamirs, the colossi of Russia in Central Asia. We also got a good view, at last, of the Northern Cwm, up which Norrish and his companions had valiantly fought to open a way, until they were turned back by poor Nelson's accident. It looked formidable. Perhaps, after all, our choice was best, however long, complicated and dangerous the way. Our return to Camp VI was fairly easy and uneventful.'

We had all hoped very much that Paklawan, our guide from Washich turned high-altitude porter, could reach the summit with one of the two parties. He had climbed up to Camp V in very high spirits, but unfortunately became ill there and was unable to leave with Castelli and Pinelli on August 24. Later we were accused by the porters, as happens to most expeditions, of having 'prevented a Pakistani from reaching the summit, so as to keep all the glory for ourselves'. Nothing could be more absurd! Leading to a difficult summit someone who is not a real climber, or at least has only just learnt the elements of mountaineering, does not detract 'from the glory', on the contrary it makes the success much more noteworthy. We did all we could to take one of our Chitralis to the summit, quite aware that it would have meant a lot for the success of our expedition in Pakistan; but 23,000 ft. seemed to set a limit to the capabilities of all the porters.

As for our liaison officer, Capt. Shahpur Khan, he was unfortunately ill during most of the summer with recurring attacks of dysentery. He climbed with much courage and endurance to Camp III, but the bad state of his health obliged him to descend to lower altitudes.

The return of the expedition took place in good order and—to our great relief—without any accidents, even of a minor sort.