

THREE MONTHS IN WEST NEPAL

BY JOHN TYSON

IN PARTS of West Nepal there survive to this day not single mountains but entire ranges about which no accurate information exists, and where no peaks have been mapped, climbed or even visited. My own introduction to West Nepal came in 1953 when W. H. Murray and I travelled through the outlying parts of Baitadi, Bajang and Silgarhi-Doti, circling the Api and Nampa massif and trying to unravel some of the topographical problems of the splendid Yokapahar Himal between the main Himalayan range and Tibet.¹

The countryside was one of great poverty, and this journey which lasted ten weeks persuaded me of the merits of the small, lightly-equipped party, able to live largely off the land without causing hardship to the villagers. With so many unclimbed summits on all sides, and such a dearth of scientific knowledge of the region, it seemed that the majority of West Nepal was still in the phase of reconnaissance mountaineering where the small expedition, often with scientific aims, comes most fully into its own.

Some ninety miles further east, where Nepal is at its broadest, lie the even more remote groups of the Sisne Himal, Patrasi Himal and Kanjiroba Himal, probably still the least-known ranges of the entire Himalaya. Prior to the 'opening up' of Nepal we have the records of only two parties in the vicinity of these ranges: in 1900 the Japanese Kawaguchi travelled through the district of Dolpo, which lies immediately to the east of the group, on his way north towards Tibet²; and in the years 1925 and 1926 two Indian officers of the Survey of India, Jugal Behari Lal and Lalbir Singh Thapa, passed to the south of the group supervising the triangulation work and some of the plane-tabling for the reconnaissance survey which covered almost the whole of Nepal. This survey, made with small resources and against time, was an astonishing achievement, and resulted in a reasonably good map of those parts which did not lie beyond the visibility of the triangulation.³

Since the opening up of Nepal to foreign expeditions several small

¹ See Mr. Tyson's article in *A.J.* 59. 421-7.

² Shramana Ekai Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet* (Theosophical Publishing House, Benares and London, 1909).

³ *Survey of India General Report*, 1926-7.

parties, mostly with scientific aims, have visited the southern and eastern fringes of these ranges. Notable among them were the plant-collecting journeys of L. H. J. Williams, W. R. Sykes and Oleg Polunin in 1952 sponsored by the Natural History Museum,⁴ and the visits of the Orientalists Tucci⁵ and Snellgrove⁶ in 1954 and 1956. From the mountaineering standpoint the only successful ascents in this entire area had been made in 1953 by Herbert Tichy of Vienna in the course of his remarkable journey across Western Nepal from Kathmandu to Pithoragarh.⁷ Stopping at Kaigaon with his four Sherpas he had made his way up the steep Jagdula Khola and climbed several fine peaks, including two to which he gave the names Dui Tal Chuli and Pasang Peak. The latter peak may be seen on the right of Plate 3.

The years 1958 and 1959 saw two expeditions which aimed to explore the Kanjiroba Himal from the district of Dolpo to the east. The Japanese expedition of Jiro Kawakita reached Phopa but was unable to cross the Langu (Namlang) River and had to be content with photographs of the breath-taking landscape to the west across this impassable gorge.⁸ The American expedition of the following year, concentrating on the Mukut Himal, found themselves with insufficient time for a serious study of the eastern approaches to the massif.⁹

It was against this background that at the end of March, 1961, James Burnet and I flew out to Delhi and boarded the train for Lucknow, Gonda and Nepalganj Road. Here on the Nepalese frontier our party assembled. John Earle, expedition quartermaster, who had travelled ahead of us with the stores, was found tired and perspiring in the Indian Customs shed, battling to clear our equipment out of India. Our Liaison Officer, Manik Tuladhar, also joined us here, together with the three Sherpas we had engaged from Kathmandu—Sirdar Ang Dawa, Mingma Tsering and Angtemba III. An unexpected fourth Sherpa, Angtemba the Cook, appeared later, so that we 'should not suffer from lackness of Sherpa'. He turned out to be the Sirdar's brother and a real 'old soldier'.

Although Nepalganj is one of the five recognised points of entry into Nepal we appeared to be the only expedition to have come through by this route, and our pile of crates, wireless and rifle were viewed with despondency. While the question of our entry was referred to 'higher authority', we optimistically began the task of finding ponies, and drew out enough money in Nepalese and Indian coin and notes to

⁴ *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol. XLI, pp. 37-43.

⁵ Giuseppe Tucci, *Preliminary Report on Two Scientific Expeditions in Nepal* (Rome, 1956).

⁶ D. L. Snellgrove, *Himalayan Pilgrimage*.

⁷ Dr. Herbert Tichy, *Land der namenlosen Berge* (Vienna, 1954).

⁸ *Japanese Alpine Journal*, Vol. LIV, pp. 76-116.

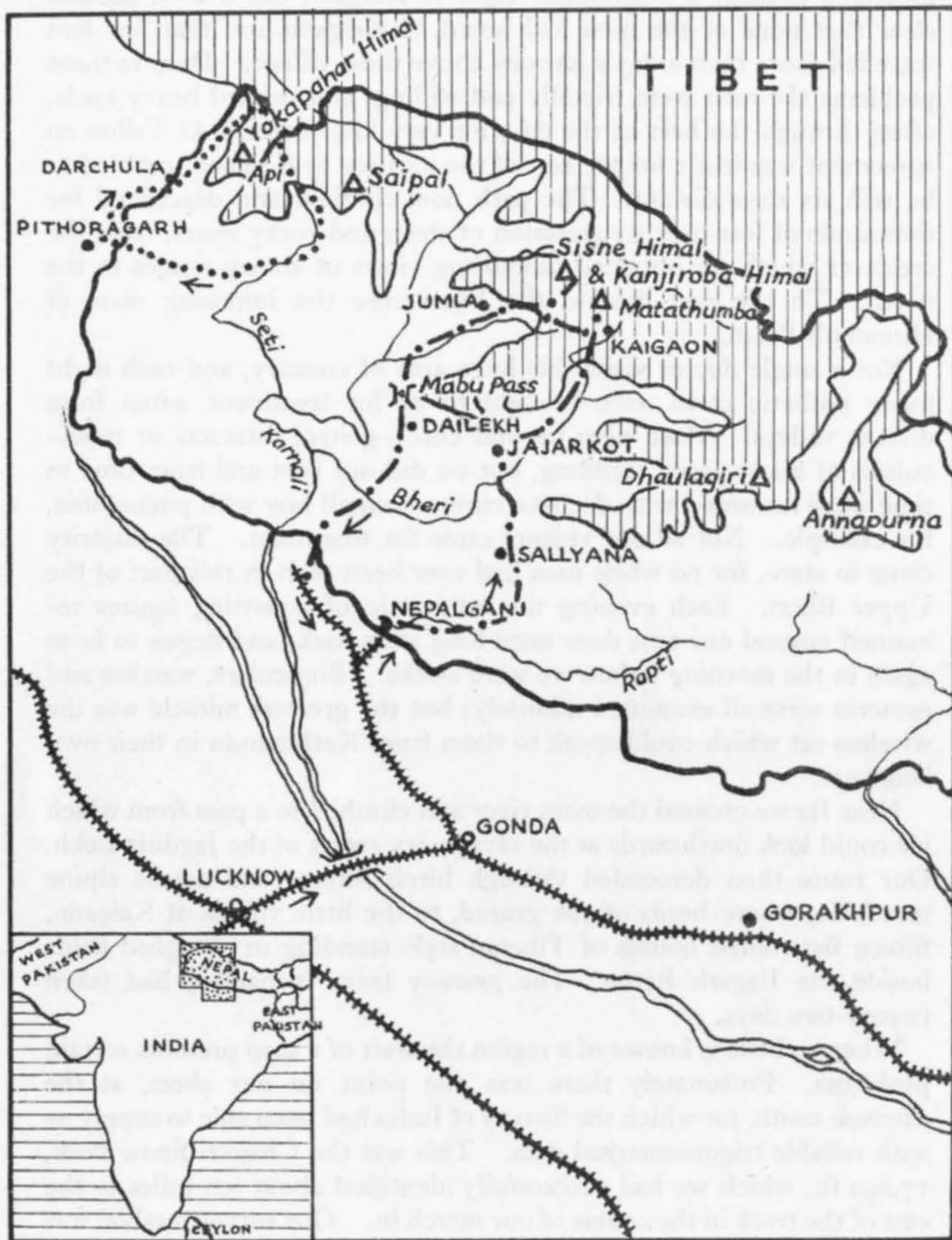
⁹ *American Alpine Journal*, Vol. XII (1961), pp. 249-262.

last the next three months. Significantly, no one in Nepal or elsewhere could tell us what currencies would be acceptable in the regions we proposed to visit. To the people of Kathmandu, Jumla, and indeed most of this side of Nepal, are regarded very much as the 'Wild West'. Nepalganj itself, only 400 ft. above sea-level, proved unattractive, dusty and excessively hot, and if the three frustrating days we were compelled to spend there passed reasonably quickly it was thanks to the kindness of Miss Tomaseck and the staff of the American Mission Nursery. They housed us and fed us, and put us in touch with many friends in Nepalganj.

Our main object on this expedition was the mapping of the ranges surrounding the Jagdula Khola and the climbing of some of these peaks. The ponies were laden not only with the usual mountaineering gear but also with several heavy crates containing the delicate survey instruments when on April 5 we set off eastwards across the monotonous and densely wooded plains of the Terai towards Sallyana, some six days' journey away. This part being notorious for dacoits preying on the baggage trains, our pony-men insisted that we travel armed until we had safely crossed the dusty Siwalik hills to the valley of the Babai. Here we camped among attractive but timid Tharu villagers. Beyond Tulsipur we turned northwards over the Mahabharat range, making our way through a varied landscape of terraced hills towards the fortress town of Sallyana where the Bara Hakim gave us all a most friendly reception. He had great plans for the development of his district: a High School had already been opened (as schoolmasters, we inspected it with great interest), and a hospital was being built. To emphasise the point, a helicopter with a load of building materials suddenly appeared overhead. There are no roads in the Province.

Three days beyond Sallyana was Jajarkot, the last settlement of importance on our route, and the final point to which ponies could be taken. Especially memorable on this stage was a high-level trek through forests of flowering rhododendron with glimpses of the whole range of the Dhaulagiri Himal floating above the afternoon heat-haze. Later the track dropped to the sultry Bheri valley carved from beds of conglomerate hundreds of feet thick. Near Jajarkot, we crossed over the Bheri, one of the great rivers of Nepal, by a steel suspension bridge bearing the name 'Henderson, Aberdeen'. It had been carried by coolies in 1927 across eighty miles of rugged country and erected here by Indian engineers.

From Jajarkot we followed the right bank of the Bheri northwards to Dali. From now on the villages became smaller, the country poorer and our progress slower. Generally messages had to be sent to several villages before porters could be found for the next stage. There was often confusion as to how far each stage should be. We would have



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..... J. B. TYSON'S 1953 EXPEDITION



LAND OVER 12,000 FEET

SCALE: 1 INCH TO 63 MILES

preferred to make a 'bandobast' right to Kaigaon but it soon became clear that none of the men had heard of Kaigaon and that few had travelled more than a day's journey above their village. Despite these problems the men were friendly and willing, and carried heavy loads, often through the heat of the day, for very low wages. At Tallon an agreement was made for the rest of the journey to Kaigaon, reputed to be still six days distant. The path now climbed and descended for thousands of feet over a succession of steep and rocky spurs, from the crests of which we obtained tantalising views of snowy ranges to the north. To the east beyond the Bheri rose the imposing mass of Hiunchuli Patan.

Not a single doctor visits this huge area of country, and each night many pathetic cases were brought to us for treatment, often from distant valleys. Most were beyond cure—goitre, cataracts or tuberculosis of many years' standing, but we did our best and from time to time were rewarded with decisive cures—a small boy with pneumonia, for example. Not all our visitors came for treatment. The majority came to stare, for no white man had ever been seen in this part of the Upper Bheri. Each evening the semicircle of squatting figures remained around our tent door until long after dark, and began to form again in the morning before we were awake. Binoculars, watches and cameras were all examined minutely; but the greatest miracle was the wireless set which could speak to them from Kathmandu in their own language.

Near Ila we crossed the main river and climbed to a pass from which we could look northwards at the savage, icy crests of the Jagdula Lekh. Our route then descended through birch forests and across alpine meadows, where herds of yak grazed, to the little village of Kaigaon, fifteen flat-roofed houses of Tibetan style standing in ploughed fields beside the Ilagarh River. The journey from Nepalganj had taken twenty-two days.

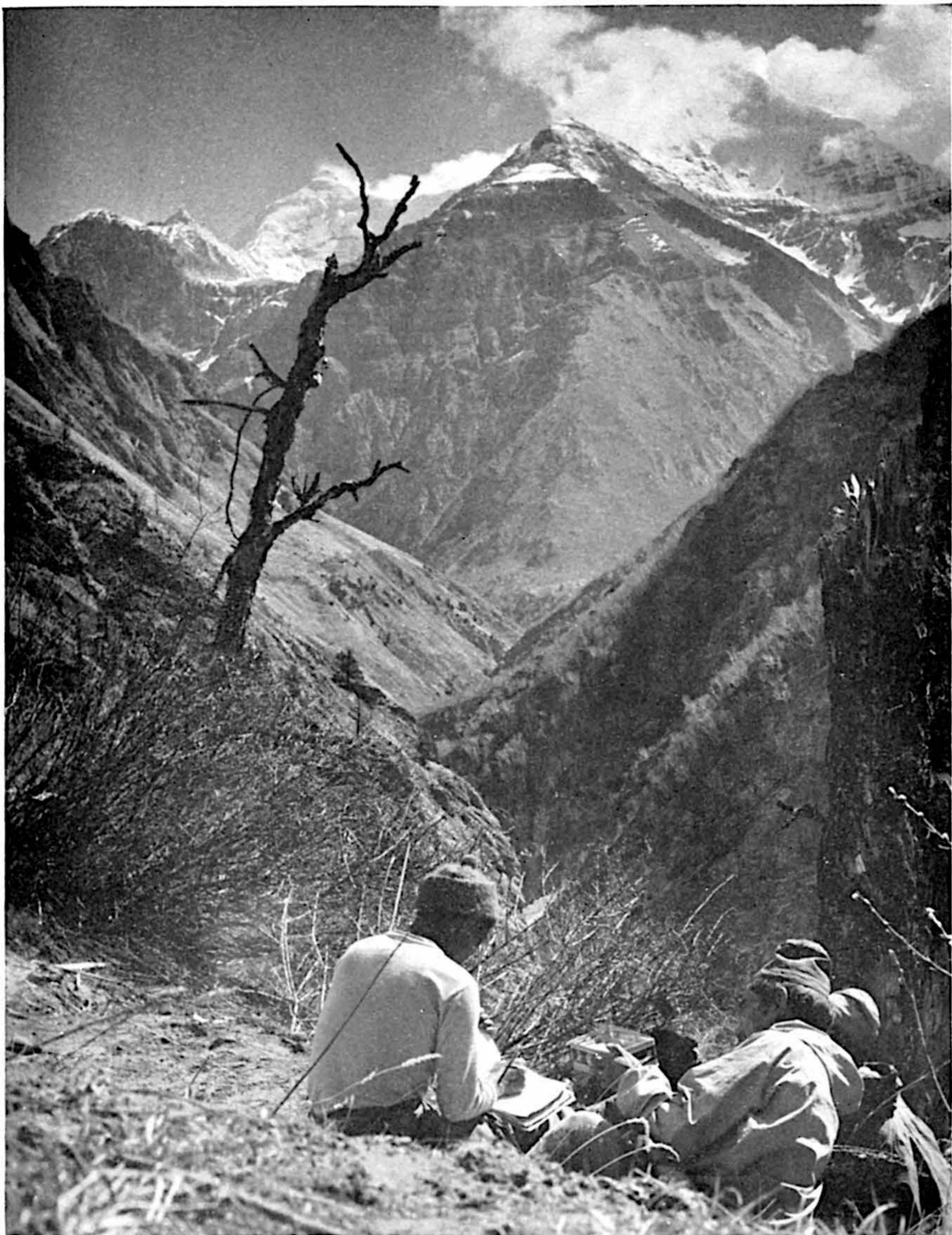
When so little is known of a region the start of a map presents certain problems. Fortunately there was one point on our sheet, at the extreme south, for which the Survey of India had been able to supply us with reliable trigonometrical data. This was the Chaukri Snow Peak, 17,892 ft., which we had successfully identified about ten miles to the east of the track in the course of our march in. Our survey method was to compute an 'astronomical' base line some seven miles in length, extending from a peak to the south of the Balangra Pass to the prominent rocky summit south-west of Kaigaon. Vertical angles between these two stations, and from each one to the Chaukri Snow Peak, gave the altitude of the two ends of the base line. The 'astrofix' method involved measuring by theodolite the altitudes of four stars in the four quadrants of the sky at precisely known times—hence the wireless.

It was at the end of April when Earle and I with two Sherpas were taking an astrofix, involving a night on the Kaigaon summit, that we had our worst experience of the expedition. Late in the evening a thunderstorm built up and the camp itself was struck, filling the tent with a powerful smell of cordite. Grabbing the Sherpas, we stumbled down a steep slope and cowered in the snow a hundred feet below the crest while the zips of our down jackets glowed and lightning played on the ridge above. We escaped with our lives, but the precious wireless set in our tent had been put out of action.

On May 4, Earle set up Base Camp on an alpine meadow two days' journey up the Jagdula Khola. Here Burnet and I later joined him after computing our base line and finishing some survey stations below, and during the weeks which followed the map progressed steadily. Our survey stations were mostly at heights of between 13,000 ft. and 17,000 ft. The climbs up to these stations, often through snow-covered forests of great beauty, were among the most enjoyable days of the expedition. The forests abounded in game—bear, bharal, wild goat and ram chukor. Rhododendrons and azaleas flowered side by side, and primulas, anemones and potentillas covered the open slopes. Some of our survey stations could be completed in a day; others took several days and involved high camps, splendidly situated with views extending over nearly half the length of Nepal. As an additional check on position, resections were taken from Dhaulagiri, Hiunchuli Patan, the Chaukri Snow Peak, and far to the north-west the peaks of Saipal. On clear days, the white dome of Api, 110 miles distant, was also visible and towards Tibet the range of the Yokapahar Himal which Da Norbu and I had attempted to cross during the monsoon eight years before.

One of our luckiest encounters was with Sotal Ram, a local shikari with an unrivalled knowledge of the forests and gorges to the north of Kaigaon. His younger brother, Krishnaram, also accompanied us frequently, and was one of our most reliable porters. While Earle and Burnet mapped the valley to the west of Base Camp, I set out with Ang Dawa and the shikari on a three-day reconnaissance up the Jagdula Khola. The valley divided into two branches, one draining the glaciers of the Sisne Himal and the other, eastern, one flowing down from the north of the Kanjiroba Himal. Between was the high snow peak seen in Plate 1 and conspicuous also in Tichy's pictures.¹⁰ On the second day Ang Dawa and I crossed to the east bank and climbed for 3,000 ft. for a view up the line of the valley towards the Sisne Himal. Progress along the steep, trackless and heavily eroded valley sides was desperately slow. Only on the decaying avalanche debris of the river bed, or in the river itself, could reasonable speed be kept up. I rejoined

¹⁰ Marcel Kurz, *Chronique Himalayenne* (Planche 54).



Photo, John Tyson]

PLATE I. SOME OF THE FINE ICY SUMMITS SURROUNDING THE JAGDULA KHOLA. VIEW TOWARDS THE NORTH-EAST FROM THE WEST BANK OF THE KHOLA.

[To face p. 126.]



Photo, John Earle]

PLATE 2. A SURVEY STATION ON AN EASTERLY SPUR OF THE PATRASI HIMAL.

the others, convinced that a route could be made up this gorge provided enough time could be spared.

One of the finest viewpoints was Earle's and Burnet's camp on an easterly spur of the Patrasi Himal, shown in Plate 2. To the north they could see and map parts of the complex glacier systems of the Sisne Himal, whilst southwards their uninterrupted view over the whole range of the Jagdula Lekh enabled them to examine and plan an interesting route there.

Tichy and his Sherpas had climbed two summits of this range in 1953. To the north of Tichy's 'Dui Tal Chuli' is a high peak dominating the side valley above our Base Camp and called by the natives 'Kansiroba', allegedly after a local god. Probably this peak gave its name to the so-called Kanjiroba Himal, of the Survey of India, but none of the natives on this side of the group apply the name to the range so marked on the Survey of India map; instead they call the whole group 'Sisne Himal'. The peaks of the Jagdula Lekh dominate Kaigaon on their southern side and thus have local names—those corresponding to Tichy's 'Dui Tal Chuli' and 'Pasang Peak' appear to be Dudh Kundali (Pond of Milk) and Ghyuthumba (Butter Mountain). To the east of Ghyuthumba is Matathumba (Mother Mountain), and in the middle of May the three of us with Mingma Tsering and the two Angtembas placed our Camp I on a northerly moraine of the Matathumba glacier.

Next day we carried Camp II up on to the glacier, and as we arrived before midday we were able to prospect the first part of the route which we had planned up steep snow to the col between Ghyuthumba and Matathumba. This col can be seen towards the right of Plate 3. Arriving at this col we found to our dismay that it was on a desperately narrow ridge with a sheer drop on the far side, and where we had hoped to climb eastwards along the main arête to Matathumba it was impossibly steep and thin. Feeling depressed, we returned to Camp II (Plate 4) and studied the North face of the mountain. At length we picked out a new route which we felt might go.

At 7.30 next morning, in the crisp, cold air, we set off, Earle and Burnet in the lead, myself following with Angtemba III and Mingma Tsering. We climbed steadily up steep snow-slopes with icy patches, passing as quickly as possible beneath the lines of séracs (Plate 5). A high wind was blowing and powdered snow hissed and poured down on us from the ice-cliffs. Above these cliffs a dangerous windslab forced us to the left up steep ice-slopes to the corniced North-east arête, which to our surprise and relief gave easy access to the summit. This was a perfect snow dome, and we asked Mingma Tsering to go first to the top, carrying the Nepalese flag (Plate 6).

Beside Base Camp were the ruins of a Tibetan monastery. According to Sotal Ram it had been destroyed last century in the Nepal-Tibet



Photo, Dr. H. Tichy, 1953]

PLATE 3. MATATHUMBA: THE ROUTE LAY THROUGH THE SÉRACS IN THE CENTRE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH TO THE ARÊTE A LITTLE TO THE LEFT (NORTH-EAST) OF THE SUMMIT.



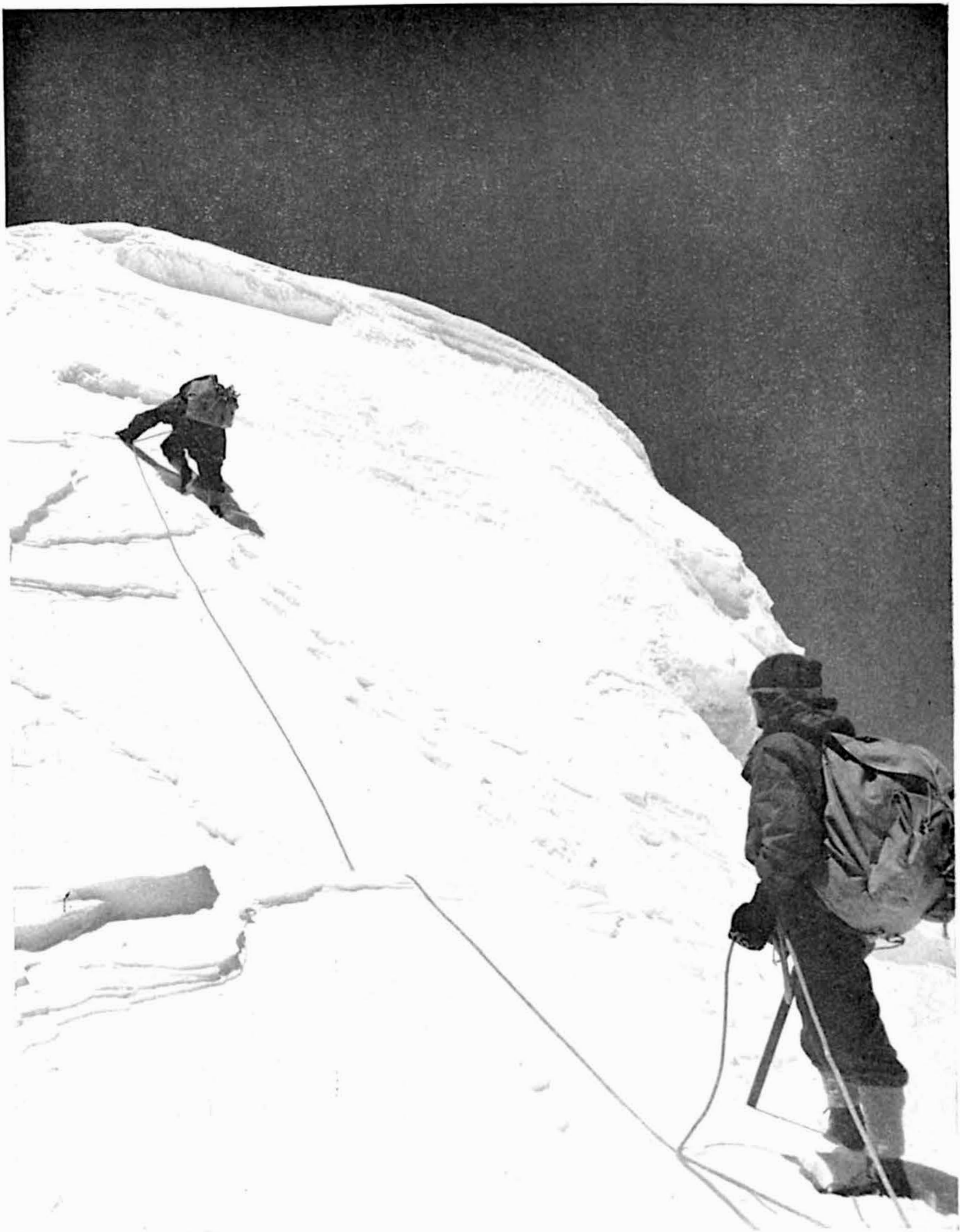
Photo, John Earle]

PLATE 5. MATATHUMBA: BELOW THE SÉRACS.



Photo, John Earle]

PLATE 4. PEAKS OF THE SO-CALLED 'KANJIROBA HIMAL' SEEN FROM THE JAGDULA LEKH. THE HIGH PEAK TOWARDS THE RIGHT IS THE GOAL OF THE LADIES JAGDULA EXPEDITION, 1962.



Photo, John Tyson]

PLATE 6. MATATHUMBA: THE LAST FEW FEET.

wars, but stories were told of a route across the mountains to Dolpo which the Lamas had followed. Such legends are widespread in the Himalayas, and none of the present inhabitants could point out the line of the supposed route.

Earle and Burnet were keen to examine the Jagdula gorge for themselves, and while I completed some survey stations they set out with a week's supplies to find the Lamas' route or to force a way up the gorge. In Earle's own words: 'Little did James Burnet and I realise, as we set out with four coolies and three Sherpas, what a frustrating and utterly exhausting week we were to have. The first day we made three or four miles, climbing along the side of the steep valley, 1,000 ft. or so above the river. The going was easy but awkward. Loose shale, tough stunted juniper and thorn bushes and interminable little side gorges made progress slow. The strain on our ankles was unpleasant as we moved across the slope, but by evening we came down to the snow-filled gorge of a side valley and camped in a delightful forest of silver birches near an overhanging cliff. During the evening James and I looked a little further up the main gorge. We did not find much encouragement in what we saw. The angle of the gorge steepened, and it was rock climbing for a lot of the way, in and out of the side gullies and on loose cliffs and shale. For a while we descended and went on to the snow-filled bottom of the gorge, under which we heard the roaring of the river. It did not look or feel too safe and we hastily climbed back again on to the rotten rock.

'Depressed by what we had seen, we decided the next day to follow the side valley and to try to get up to a col which we had noted earlier from a survey peak, and so by-pass the gorge and get into the main massif from the side. It was an exhausting day. We started early and for two miles it was the same story as the main gorge; loose shale and stunted bushes made the climbing in and out of the side gullies dangerous and slow. After traversing a rotten cliff face we reached the snows—soft and wet. At every step we plunged in up to the knees, sometimes even to the waist, and progress was painfully slow and breathless. The col appeared to get no nearer. I had given up looking at it, and was delighted at length to glance up and see we were almost there. With high hopes we kicked up the final snow slope and looked over. Three thousand feet of sheer, loose rock, covered with snow and ice, plunged down to another gorge even more unpromising than the one we had left, and still on the other side the great line of magnificent peaks.

'For the next three days we tried various ways to penetrate the gorge. The snow bridges on which we had walked two days earlier had collapsed in several places, leaving gaping chasms, at the bottom of which the brown waters frothed and raged. Our premonition of danger had been right. Trying to by-pass the valley bottom yet another

way, we were caught in a blizzard on the ridge, and spent an unpleasant hour climbing down a shattered cliff face, which was rapidly becoming covered in wet snow. But all our efforts were in vain. Although we were at it for eight or nine hours a day, we never made more than a mile, and returned each night exhausted to our camp.'

Our map data being now complete, it was time to decide whether to spend longer struggling in the gorge or to move rapidly to the western side of the Sisne Himal in the hope of further climbing before the monsoon broke. We chose the latter course, and within ten days were encamped at Maharigaon.

After the oppressive Jagdula Khola it was pleasant to walk on easy paths, to have company on the track and to find food in the villages. At Naphukona the path passed through an interesting and fine entrance-*chorten*, painted inside and on the roof with sets of twenty-one divinities. Near there we met a legal party on their way to try a murder case at Tibrikot. It was interesting to see that the party included a Counsel for the Defence, although the Prosecutor and Judge appeared to be one and the same man.

It was now the first week in June and already the monsoon was beginning; the air was damp and the peaks around us were wreathed in cloud. After exploring the head of the Maharigaon valley we crossed a col to the next one northwards on the Dalphu track, and entered a beautiful valley reminiscent in contour and colouring of North Wales. When we arrived the mist hung low above us and distant thunder rumbled. But luck was with us: suddenly the clouds parted for the first time in several days, and a snow peak of the Sisne Himal towered six or seven thousand feet above us. With field glasses we planned our route before once again the mists rolled across. The following day we camped as high as possible on its southern flank.

Next morning we awoke at 4 a.m., but our hearts sank as we heard the rain drumming on the roof of the tent. However, by 6 a.m. it began to clear and seemed fine enough to justify a start for the three of us and Mingma Tsering. The route led off up scree until we reached an 'Alpine' arête of good rock; but this soon changed into rotten, loose shale at a steep angle before we eventually worked our way onto steep snow and finally ice, up which we climbed rapidly in crampons. The summit was reached at 1.30 p.m., and our altimeters read 21,000 ft., though I believe this to be an overestimate.

On the way back to Maharigaon, Burnet stopped at the snowline to include in his collection of insects and plants for the British Museum many specimens of Hardwicke's Apollo butterfly and some of the blue poppies (*Meconopsis grandis* Prain) now in flower. Nearby grew clusters of a rare and undescribed species of yellow primula, of which some fine specimens were gathered.

The work was over, yet still more than three weeks separated us from Nepalganj and the plains of India. We had heard for weeks past about the 'town' of Jumla which had a main street and shops containing everything a 'sahib' could wish to buy, and certainly our brief stay there lacked nothing in hospitality.

Beyond Jumla our route followed the right bank of the Tila past the welcome hot springs of Tatapani, then across the river near Chilkha and on southwards over the 13,000 ft. Mabu Pass. As we reached the top of this towards nightfall a torrential monsoon downpour burst upon us from a ragged, black sky. The normal route became impassable and we plunged down in the twilight through dense bamboo jungle. It soon became obvious that the coolies were lost, and we all spent a miserable night on a ledge in streaming rain.

At Dailekh we were overwhelmed by the kindness of the Bara Hakim, Sri Jagat Bahadur Singh, and his English-speaking wife, who presented gifts of a fine kukri and leopard skin, invited us to meals and supplied our camp almost endlessly with roast chickens. The messages which he kindly sent ahead greatly eased our journey through the country under his control. Near Dailekh we met three cheerful Gurkha riflemen, laden with musical instruments, returning home on leave from Malaya. It seemed odd to be swapping stories with them of the jungles of Johore and Pahang, and stranger still to hear that next year they would be coming to 'The Blight'.

Only the Bheri now lay in our path, and the crossing was made by dug-out canoe. The skill of the fishermen's paddling astonished us as we whirled diagonally across the river swollen by monsoon rain. After three more days we came over the last crest and saw the plains of the Ganges stretching before us. In a few hours we descended the Siwalik Hills to the Terai, now marshy and humid. Here the system of carrying loads was to sling two crates to a pole and jog through the jungle at a near run; but the laws of these Tharu people permitted them to carry only from their village to the next, and progress was reduced to a few miles a day. Exasperated, we managed at last to get wooden carts pulled by water buffaloes, but even with them it was not easy going. Many of the little side streams of the Babai had become flooded, and more than once we had to leap out into the muddy water and tug and heave at the great wooden wheels to get the carts out on the other side of the ford, the buffaloes straining out of the mud like great primeval beasts.

In West Nepal there is none of the gradual return to sophisticated life which is such a pleasure in some parts of the Himalayas. There was nothing to show that our journey was at an end until a gap in the forest revealed a railway line and a siding of empty goods wagons. We were glad it was all over, and, though conscious of the tremendous amount to be done in West Nepal, felt not quite ready yet to go back again.