

DHAULA HIMAL

BY J. O. M. ROBERTS

(Six illustrations: nos. 7-12)

IT may be a relief to some to read about one mountain which was not climbed. The big battalions march up the Himalayan highways, glancing neither to the left nor right, and to the sound of hammering the citadels fall. Those that prophesied that the climbing of Everest and a few of the other giants would free Himalayan climbing of the trammels of ambition and altitude have not so far been proved right. Parties have grown larger rather than smaller, and individual peaks in well known areas are climbed while large tracts remain virtually unexplored. Of course all climbers are entitled to follow their own preferences in this matter; the trouble is that some never see the high Himalaya for the mountains.

The lure of altitude remains and there will always be a highest unclimbed mountain. But anyone who would like to see his name attached to a twenty-five thousander had better hurry up, as, east of the Karakoram at any rate, the supply is running short. Gurla Mandhata, Gosainthan and, most fascinating of all, Namcha Barwa are out of bounds to most of us. For the rest there are, in Nepal, the Dhaulagiri Himal group, Peak 25,705 between Himalchuli and Manaslu, Gyachung Kang (25,990 ft.), and Kambachen (25,782 ft.), which seems more or less detached from the rest of Kangchenjunga.¹ Lhotse, too, has a number II but whether it qualifies as a separate mountain is a matter of opinion.

Dhaulagiri Himal, Dhaulagiri Himal—both forms are geographical conveniences, unknown to the people who live at their feet. Since 1961 when the Indians were charged the '8,000 metre' government royalty for their expedition to Annapurna III I have employed the shorter spelling. In 1954 we had poked around north of the range and climbed Putha Hiunchuli (23,750 ft.). Then I was able to write: 'the main ridge of the Dhaulagiri Himal comprises three peaks of over 25,000 ft., possibly the last of the giants of the Himalaya not yet reconnoitred even in main outline'. Amazingly, this was still true of the South and South-west flanks of Dhaulagiri IV (25,064 ft.) in 1962. This number four of the family is about 500 ft. lower than the number two and, although it has no side to compare with the splendid Mukut (East) face of Dhaulagiri II (25,429 ft.), it is a finer individual mountain.

¹ Ngojumba Ri (25,720 ft.), 'a modest prominence' in the ridge west of Gyachung Kang, is still unclimbed. See *A. J.* 68. 39.—D.F.O.D.

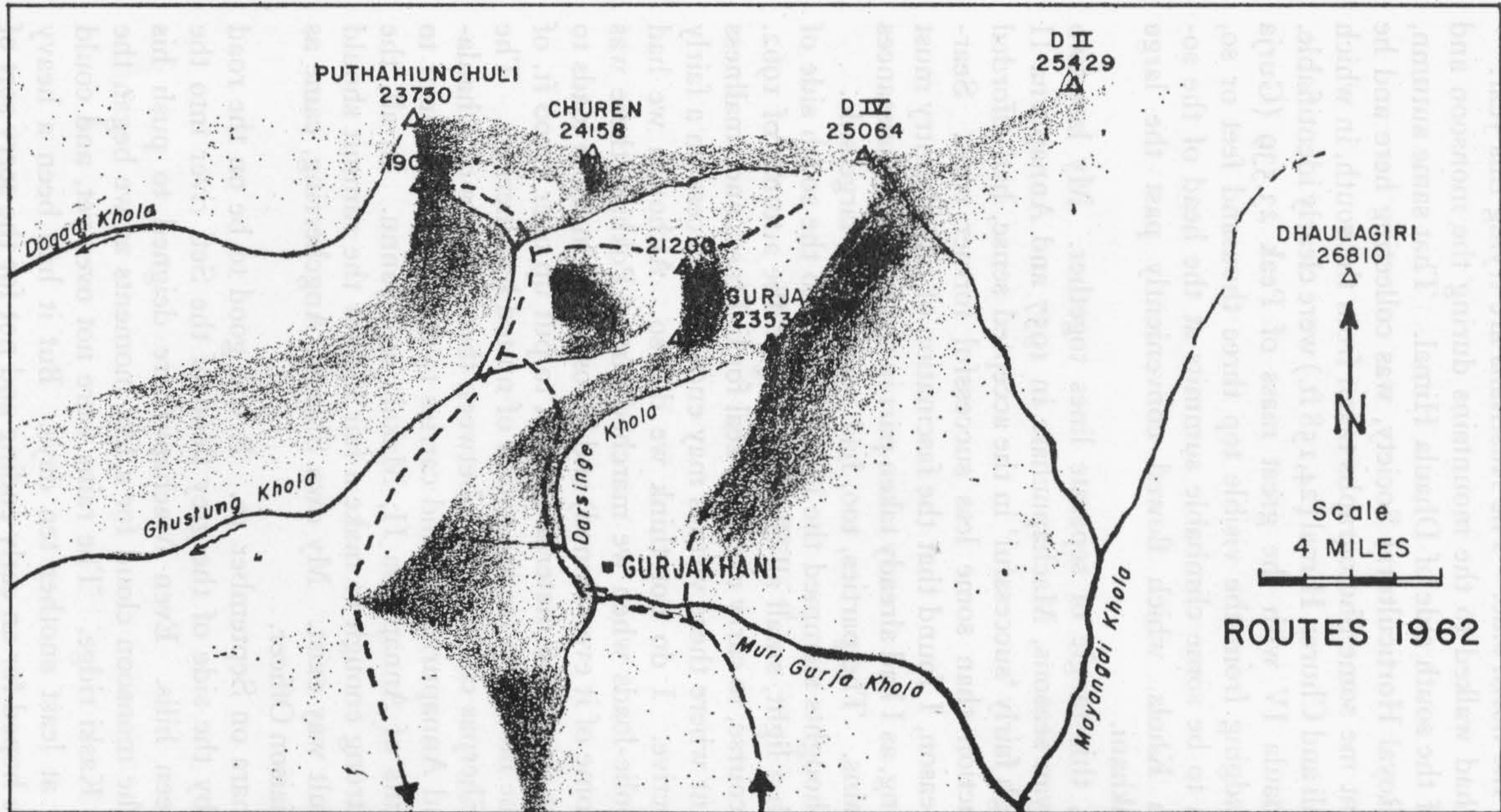
Dhaura III (25,271 ft.) is nothing but the western prolongation of II. Both could be climbed from the same high camp, if this could be established, on the north side. The Austrians are trying this year.

In 1954 we had walked to the mountains during the monsoon and seen nothing of the south side of Dhaura Himal. That same autumn, Sykes, of the Royal Horticultural Society, was collecting here and he later kindly sent me some photographs taken from the south, in which Putha Hiunchuli and Churen Himal (24,158 ft.) were clearly identifiable. I muddled Dhaura IV with the great mass of Peak 23,539 (Gurja Himal), but, judging from the visible top three thousand feet or so, there did seem to be some climbable summits at the head of the so-called Sauwala Khola, which flowed conveniently past the large village of Gurjakhani.

To tie, now, this tangle of separate lines together. My last two proper Himalayan seasons, Machapuchare in 1957 and Annapurna II in 1960, although fairly 'successful' in the accepted sense, had afforded me less satisfaction than some less successful former trips. Searching for the reason, I found that the fascination of new country must have been lacking, as I had already taken part in the first reconnaissances of both mountains. The parties, too, had been on the large side.

From such thoughts stemmed the idea of going to the south side of Dhaura IV with a light, small all-Sherpa party in the autumn of 1962. It is stupid, of course, to carry excess of zeal for lightness and smallness beyond the point where these virtues may endanger success on a fairly ambitious objective. I do not think we did so. Although we had only twenty coolie-loads when we marched out of Pokhara there was enough food (some of it even tinned) and kerosene oil in those loads to sit out a modest siege, and material enough to put up over 1,500 ft. of fixed rope on the mountain (to the sound of muted hammering). The four climbing Sherpas could muster between them ascents of Dhauragiri, Nuptse and Annapurna IV, and carries to the top camps prior to successful ascents of Annapurna II, Makalu and Jannu. In all, the party seemed strong enough to make a fair bid for the summit should a not too difficult way exist. My own Sherpa, Angcherring, came as the Nepalese Liaison Officer.

We left Pokhara on September 10. It was good to be on the road again walking by the side of the grey flood of the Seti river into the brown and green hills. Even Machapuchare deigned to push his head through the monsoon cloud for a few moments as we began the climb onto the Kaski ridge. The rains were not over yet, and could hardly end for at least another ten days. But it had been a heavy monsoon, so we hoped for an early ending and not for the sorry sort of season which goes dribbling on well into October. But worse than the rain was the heat of the sun, when it did come out, in the stifling



DHAULA HIMAL

DIAGRAMMATIC SKETCH MAP TO SHOW DRAINAGE OF SOUTH WESTERN FLANK OF DHAULA HIMAL COMPILED BY JAMES ROBERTS FROM OBSERVATIONS MADE SEPT. - NOV. 1962 REDRAWN BY RAM LAL SHRESTHA. POSITIONS OF NAMED PEAKS FROM SURVEY SHEET 62 P.

trough of the Kali Gandaki. So on past Baglung, westwards into the Mayangdi at Beni and at last the long climb up to Takum and the higher, cooler air.

The river of Gurjakhani is the Murigurja Gad, and it flows into the Mayangdi below Muri village in a deep gorge. There is no way there. Instead one continues up a small tributary of the Mayangdi to Lumsum village at 7,000 ft. and then crosses a ridge of about 11,000 ft. to Gurja, directly to the north. Lumsum we reached on the seventh day from Pokhara, and that afternoon the rain stopped and the clouds slowly slid away, leaving a clear, deep blue sky. By the next morning the slippery ribbon of a path had dried out to some extent and the crossing of the pass made a pleasant walk, up through pine woods and past patches of alpine flowers. That evening we camped down by Murigurja river, and walked into Gurjakhani at breakfast time on September 18. We camped beyond the village and paid off our porters. The country was delightful, pine woods and green alps. But the high mountains to the north were hidden, and we had had only fragmentary views during the walk in. The first stage of the expedition was over but we still had to find our mountain.

According to Sheet 62 P of the old quarter-inch to one mile survey this would present no particular problem. A couple of miles west of Gurjakhani was the Sauwala Khola, flowing down in a large loop from the north-east from a glacier between Churen Himal and Peak 23,539 (which I called Gurja Himal). And at the head of this glacier would be Dhaula IV.

It is well known, of course, that the 1924-26 survey of Nepal is, generally speaking, highly inaccurate in its portrayal of the northern regions, and for good reason, as the survey was carried out under peculiar difficulties. And I, more than some people, had had the opportunity of comparing the map with the ground in various parts of the country. Yet partly because of the neat and careful drawing (compared to some of the obvious approximations north of Pokhara), partly because of the apparent ease with which the block of country behind Gurjakhani should be surveyable from the south, I had for some days a quite misplaced faith in the accuracy of this portion of the map. Some of the locals, lacking the advantages of a modern education and the ability to read Sheet 62 P, declared that the way into the mountains lay up a river two or three days' walk to the west of Gurjakhani.

The weather did not help. Two fairly fine days gave tantalising glimpses of bits of steep and uninviting mountainside: the summit of Gurja Himal, a great, sprawling mass of a mountain: a shapely rock and ice cone to the west . . . was this Churen? . . . it looked too low. Then the rains came back and bucketed down for the next three days. The morning of September 24 dawned heavily overcast, but as rain



Photo: James Roberts]

DHAULA IV (25,064 FT.) FROM THE WEST, SHOWING MAIN GLACIER AND ICE-FALLS. SLOPES OF GHUSTUNG HIMAL ON RIGHT, WITH GLACIER USED FOR ASCENT. HIGHEST POINT REACHED ON DHAULA IV WAS THE SMALL PYRAMID WITH FACE OF HORIZONTAL STRATA IMMEDIATELY BELOW SUMMIT.

(No. 7)

refused to fall there was nothing for it but for Nawang Dorje, Ang Pema and myself to hump tents, some climbing equipment and four days' food up into the clouds.

By this time we had found out that the name Sauwala Khola was applied locally to a very minor stream flowing through the Gurja woods, and that there was in fact a river, called Darsinge Khola, which flowed on the approximate course of the Sauwala of the map. But this Darsinge seemed hardly big enough to drain all those mountains (funking a slippery single log bridge, I had one day managed to hop across from boulder to boulder, dry shod), and the head of the river, such as we could see of it, looked more of a cul-de-sac than a highway into the mountains.

We camped at 12,800 ft. directly north of Gurjakhani and sat out a twelve-hour rain and hail storm. Early the next morning there was a temporary clearing and I hastened higher with Nawang Dorje. Alas for our hopes, the top of the Darsinge was soon revealed as a precipice a couple of miles long and about 5,000 ft. high, its source some dribbles down the wall fed by lumps of hanging glacier. We rushed ill temperedly down back to Gurja with three days' uneaten food. The locals smiled as, sopping wet, I stalked past them working in their fields, 'Where have you been, Sahib? Why have you come back so soon?'

On the morning of September 26 the monsoon ended in classic fashion with a rattling storm and heavy snow-fall down to 14,000 ft., and the following morning we set off westwards, meekly following twenty-three men of Gurjakhani and a sheep. The first day we camped low, on the tree line, the next day they took us up a ridge bounding the Darsinge, then over a 14,500 ft. pass now deep in snow, and down a thousand feet to a small river, the Thar Khola. Here the Gurjakhani men left us to our own devices. This was not yet the river of our search, but during the day the pieces of the puzzle had begun to fall into place. The peak to the west of Gurja Himal had revealed itself as a shapely twenty-one thousander (we later climbed its higher, northern summit) scarcely indicated on the map. From the pass we had seen Putha Hiunchuli and Churen. A couple of miles down south from our camp there were the signs of a much larger river, flowing down in a gorge from the north-east. This, we had been told, was called the Kaphe Khola. The relative positions of Putha Hiunchuli, Churen, Dhaula and Gurja Himal might be correct on the map but the drainage was all wrong, their waters flowed westwards into the Ghustung, and not east past Gurja into the Mayangdi. Our pass was on the watershed of two of the great geographical divisions of Nepal, the river basins of the Karnali and the Gandaki. Meanwhile, Dhaula IV was still to find.

Two days later Nawang Dorje and I traversed out of the valley of



Photo: James Roberts]

THE MORE DISTANT VIEW OF THE DHAULA IV GROUP FROM THE SOUTH-WEST: DHAULA IV, GHUSTUNG NORTH, GHUSTUNG SOUTH, GURJA HIMAL.

(No. 8)

the Thar Khola into the lower flowing Kaphe, trying to keep our height. Then up to a spur to the west, from where we looked down at last on the glacier for which we had searched in vain above Gurja. My four-line-a-day diary noted 'with N.D., to ridge 16,100: step-cutting. Early cloud and snow-showers—saw parts of D IV, obstacles formidable, light rain p.m., saw several herds of bharal.' There did seem to be an awful lot of unstable-looking ice attached to the mountain we had at last found, and I pondered, as sometimes before, on the advantages of making the pursuit of the wild blue sheep of Tibet (or some suchlike beast) the excuse for visiting these mountains rather than this chancy climbing business.

Our next move was clear, and we spent the first day of October relaying everything down to a camp at the Thar Khola-Kaphe Khola confluence. This at 13,200 ft., we somewhat euphemistically called the 'Rest Camp'. The following day Mingma, Pemba and I left the other three to finish the relays and made a camp on the south lateral moraine of the D IV glacier at about 14,500 ft.

As we walked up the Kaphe (a real glacier-stream this, deep, blue-green and unfordable), we had good views of Putha Hiunchuli and Churen Himal and the col between them. A glacier flows from these two mountains more or less straight down into the Kaphe. The much larger and longer Dhaula IV glacier comes in from the west, ramming into the side of the Putha-Churen glacier about a mile above their common final snout.

The clouds were down on Dhaula IV when we camped, having turned west, round the corner, from the river. The next morning was, as always now, fine. That evening I wrote 'on closer examination D IV looks promising.' Twenty-four hours later, 'outlook gloomy.'

The optimistic note was struck after we had gained our first clear view of the mountain that first morning. The top 5,000 ft. or so did not look too bad: below there was a lot of ice-fall and hanging ice, but surely there must be some way through to the clearer upper slopes. To the right of Dhaula IV, as we looked up the glacier, a mile-long ridge with a summit at each end obscured Gurja Himal. This mountain I later called Ghustung Himal; and its right-hand, south, summit was the twenty-one thousand footer we had admired from Gurja. The north summit, overlooking the Dhaula IV glacier basin, seemed the higher.

We made an early start the following morning and moved quickly up the rock-strewn slopes of the glacier. At about 15,700 ft. we came to a two or three hundred-foot step of ice-worn rock and ice-fall barring direct access into the basin. At first a way went easily enough through the lower portion of the ice-fall, but then the line of weakness petered out under house-high séracs. Off to the right, under the slopes of

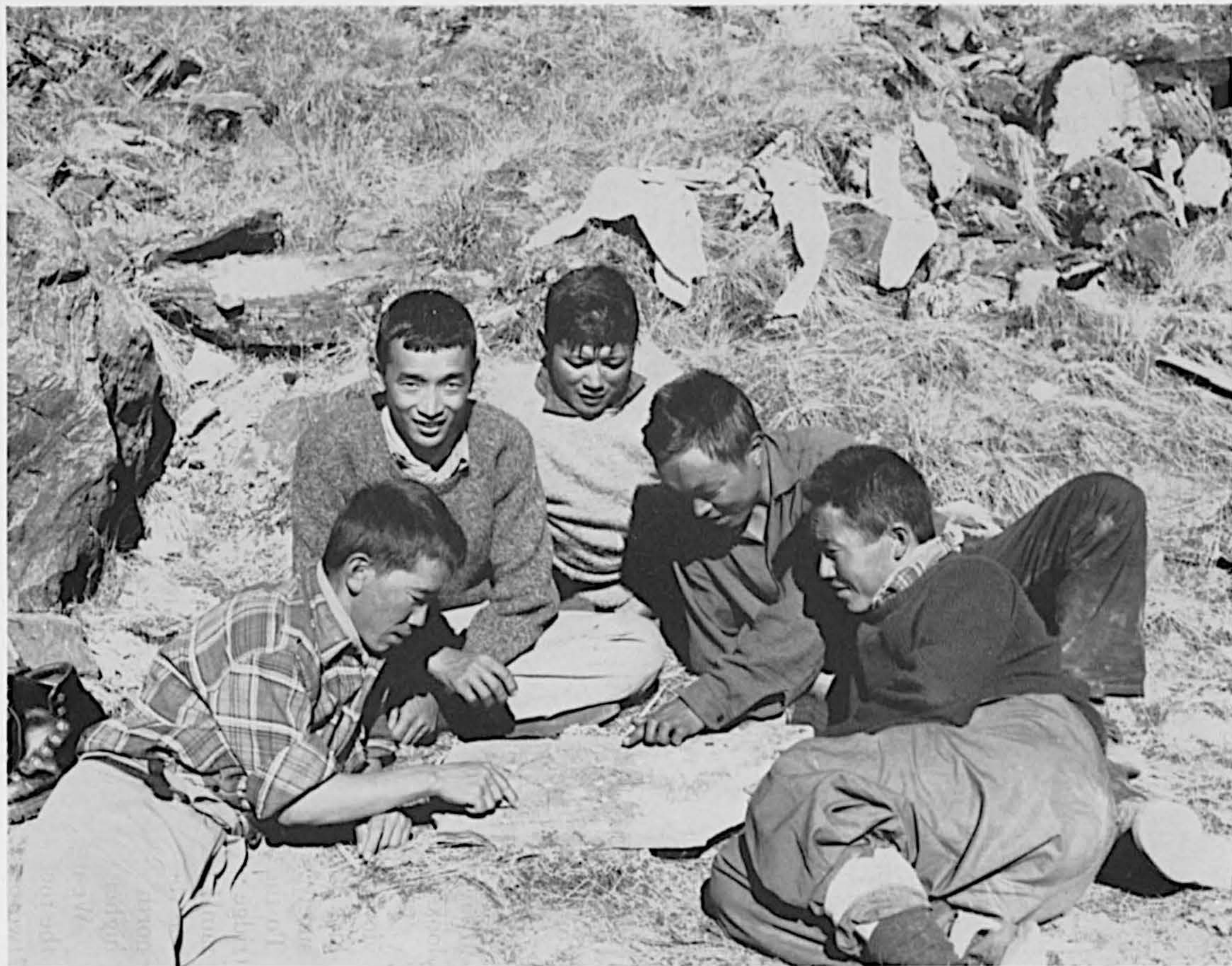


Photo: James Roberts]

THE SHERPAS. LEFT TO RIGHT: NAWANG DORJE, ANGCHERRING (LIAISON OFFICER), PEMBA TENSING, ANG PEMA, MINGMA TSERING.

(No. 9)

Ghustung North, I spotted a way up rocks, here bare of ice. A cone of avalanche debris gave lodgement onto a shelving rock slope with one steepish step. The Sherpas did not like the look of the avalanche debris, which was in fact quite small and local, and went off together to explore a route through the ice-fall while I sat and watched. When I saw them returning I scrambled up the rock step, where they rejoined me. The way then went up snow-slopes and traversed left below some ice-cliffs, which strangely enough did not seem to worry the Sherpas.

We were into the basin and our height was about 16,100 ft. I was not certain I cared for the place. Except where the main, and uninviting, ice-fall flowed down from the top of the mountain, the walls of the cirque round us were precipitous and festooned with hanging ice-cliffs in varying apparent degrees of instability. The slopes below Churen Himal were especially steep and here, and also by the side of the big ice-fall, an avalanche came off every ten minutes or so. A direct approach to Dhaulā IV was obviously too dangerous to be seriously considered, but the southern wall of the cirque was more promising: still steep, but rather less overhung, no avalanches and little debris at the foot. In particular I examined a long, narrow slab of glacier-cum-ice-fall which adhered to the northern rock face of Ghustung North.

But on the whole the outlook was, as I later recorded that evening, 'gloomy', and as we turned to the descent I had two worries in my mind. I was not looking forward to the descent of the rock step which was more or less vertical for twenty feet and guarded from above by a mass of unstable stones and boulders. And I also felt that this might be the end of our 'attempt' on Dhaulā IV and good-bye to the upper D IV glacier. Our climbing rope helped to solve my immediate problems. This was a brand new 120 ft. length of nylon full weight which, together with some other items of equipment cunningly concealed in a folded anorak, had considerably increased my personal weight at London airport earlier in the year. And it was not one of your ordinary nylons, either. Coloured with splashes of scarlet it had a dignified, blood-stained appearance as if an intrepid, but gloveless, second had had to allow the entire length of the rope to run through his hands before holding (one hoped successfully) his falling leader. Above the rock step we drove in a piton and attached the rope to it. We slid happily down the rope and ran down the glacier. There could be no question of abandoning this handsome article of equipment. We would now have to return to the basin.

Meanwhile the others had established a base camp at about 13,700 ft. by a small lake, an hour's walk down the glacier. Here we rejoined them on October 5. I decided now to attempt the ascent of Ghustung South, which would give us at any rate one good summit and also a view into the upper basin of the D IV glacier, above the ice-falls,



Photo: James Roberts]

FORE-SUMMIT OF GHUSTUNG NORTH, SHOWING THE GLACIER ROUTE FOLLOWED BETWEEN CAMPS I, II AND III. (CAMP II BELOW OPEN SLOPES: CAMP III OVER SHOULDER TO LEFT.)

(No. 10)

without having to run the gauntlet of the cirque. But first Angcherring had to descend for mail to Gurja. So during the next few days, while Mingma and Pemba began the establishment of a Camp I on Ghustung South, Nawang Dorje, Ang Pema and I went off to climb a small snow peak of about 19,000 ft. immediately to the south of Putha Hiunchuli. This would give us a more distant view of Dhaulā IV and also allow a closer examination of this side of Putha Hiunchuli, which I was keeping as a second string to D IV. I thought of a second ascent by a new route or, perhaps, a traverse.

We camped by a pleasant lake at 15,600 ft., again at the foot of a rock wall at 17,500 ft., and reached the summit on October 9. We were all together in Base again on October 10. In some ways these few days were decisive. Putha Hiunchuli offered no attractive alternative and, seen from a distance, the ice-cliffs of the cirque seemed less menacing. Dhaulā IV bathed all day in the sparkling autumn sunshine, looked friendly and beckoning. Also an examination through binoculars of the top thousand feet or so of Ghustung South showed that it, too, was not completely free of danger. If we were going to be hit on the heads by lumps of ice let it be somewhere on the way to Dhaulā IV and not on an outlier. I broke the news to Mingma and Pemba that their carries towards the South peak would have to be retrieved and announced that a cautious advance toward Dhaulā IV would commence forthwith.

From the top of our small peak we had seen that the glacier descending from the North flank of Ghustung North into the Dhaulā IV glacier basin smoothed out at a height of about 18,000 ft. and seemed to offer a way round the shoulder of Ghustung towards the upper basin. What we could not see was the group between this shoulder and the upper part of Dhaulā IV. There might here be a complete cut-off or there might be a way onto the mountain. The least we could do was to go and see.

The route we used between Camps I and II is shown in one of the photographs. The western edge of this glacier or ice-fall which trickles down the rocky northern flank of Ghustung Himal is undercut, forming the ice-cliffs which threatened the route beyond the rock step. As a precaution we put Camp I in the middle of the glacier below the rock step, and I gave instructions that below the ice-cliffs men would move well spaced out. These instructions the Sherpas generally ignored when I was not with them.

At the foot of the hanging glacier on the level névé floor of the basin, apparently beyond the threat of the ice-cliffs, was a large rock on which we would sit to change into high-altitude boots and put on crampons, leaving them there if on the way down. The ascent of the glacier entailed a good deal of step-cutting and we fixed about 400 ft. of



Photo: James Roberts]

PUTHA HIUNCHULI (23,750 FT.) FROM ABOVE CAMP II.

(No. 11)

rope on the steeper sections. After three days' work Pemba Tensing, Mingma and I established Camp II at 17,700 ft. on October 18.

The next morning we continued up more open and easier slopes and began the traverse round the shoulder of Ghustung Himal towards the upper basin of the Dhaulā IV glacier. We had already got rather further than I had at one time expected and I was prepared to find a formidable chasm between Ghustung and the summit block of Dhaulā.

Mingma was leading and he paused as he reached the corner. I pushed past him. Gentle slopes ran down to the base of Dhaulā IV. The way was open.

The at one time incredible had happened, and back at Camp II that evening I worked out a programme for a summit attempt. Mingma and Pemba went down to Camp I on the morning of October 20 with instructions to send up Nawang Dorje and Ang Pema at once with more food and fuel and to follow themselves the next day.

The two Sherpas were rather silent when they arrived up and after a time it transpired that a large avalanche had come off the ice-cliffs early that morning sweeping the route for two hundred yards above the rock step and burying 'crampon rock' deep in ice-blocks. Three pairs of boots and crampons had been lost and, alas, the red-splashed nylon rope which we had removed from the rock step. Luckily we had some spares. We had steered a fortunate course between tragedy and comedy, for had we all been at Camp I at the time of the avalanche we would have lost all our crampons. As it was, Angcherring was now without a pair and would have to remain below.

Nawang Dorje, Ang Pema and I now established Camp III at 19,200 ft. in the upper basin and on October 22 we climbed to the summit of Ghustung North. I put the height at 21,200 ft. and the Southern, Gurjakhani, summit at 21,100 ft. The almost level but narrow and corniced intervening ridge is about a mile long and near the middle is perhaps fifty feet higher than the Northern summit.

I was still optimistic about our chances on Dhaulā IV, and indeed there seemed to be two possible routes. A steep shoulder ran up from the level basin onto the South ridge of the mountain, connecting it to Gurja Himal, and the ridge, once attained, seemed to offer a feasible route to the summit. Alternatively one could follow a shelf of snow and ice running right across the West face and then finish the climb on the northern side of the mountain.

The route onto the South ridge would involve a great deal of work on steep ice and the fixing of much more rope than we now had left, and I judged it beyond the capabilities of our small party. Mingma and Pemba had now arrived at III and the next day they went down to clear Camp II finally, while Nawang Dorje and Ang Pema began to make the route across the ice-shelf.

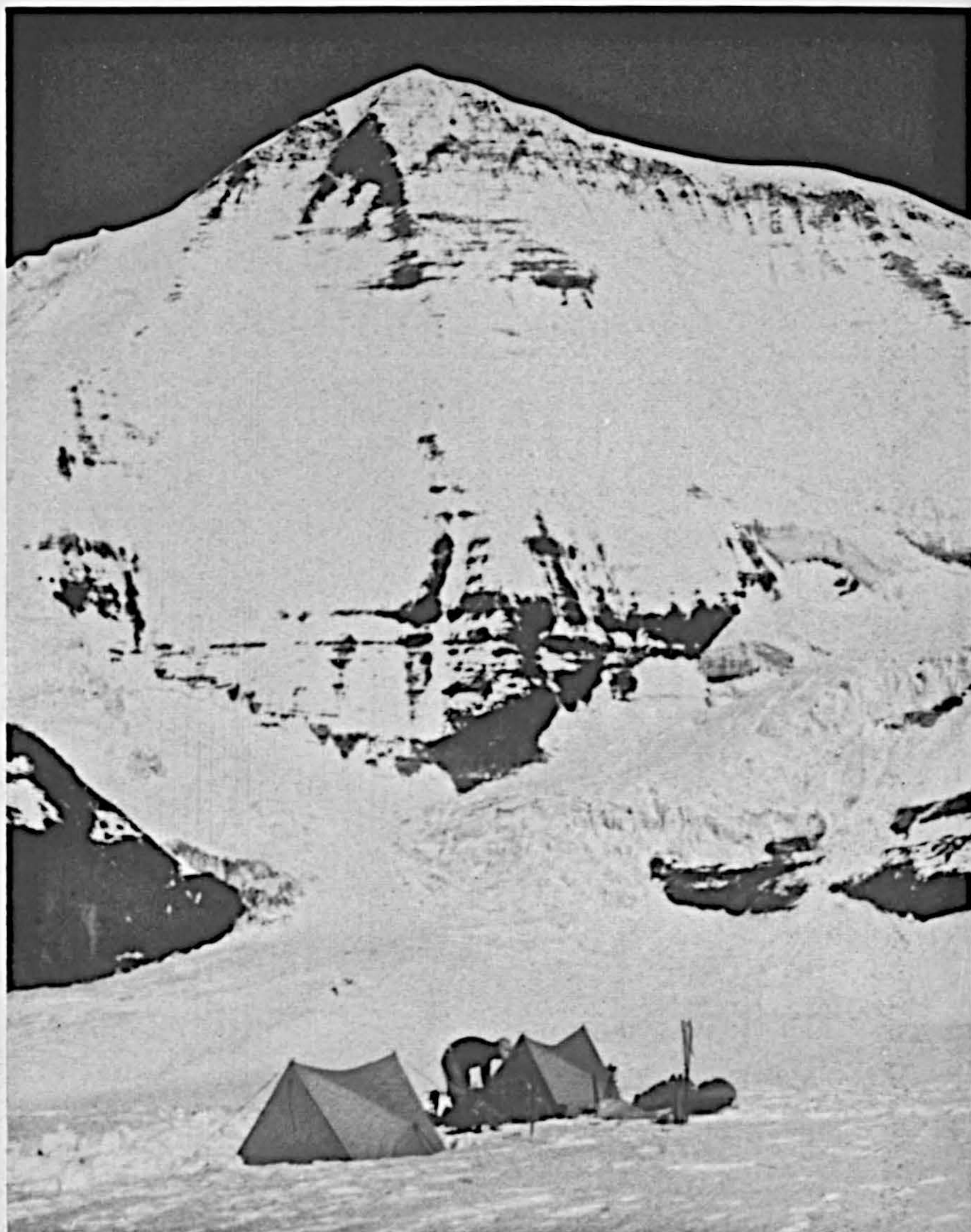


Photo: James Roberts]

DHAULA IV: CAMP III AT THE FOOT OF THE SUMMIT PYRAMID

(No. 12)

Watching them through binoculars that morning and afternoon my hopes slowly sank. The elation of getting through the defences of the cirque had blinded me to the fact that there were still six thousand feet of mountain to climb, and that there were dangers above, as well as below. Watching the two little figures embarking on the traverse I could now see that I had hopelessly misjudged the distance across the West face, and that the shelf was itself overhung by ice-cliffs. I was relieved when they got back to camp.

I decided that we would have to give up. The other two arrived up with a third figure. Angcherring had felt frightened by himself in Camp I and had come up to Camp II alone and without crampons. Words failed me.

On October 24 I descended with Nawang Dorje and Ang Pema to Camp I, while the other three repeated the ascent of Ghustung North. Angcherring had relieved Nawang Dorje of his crampons, with the result that I had to cut steps most of the way down below Camp II.

During the next few days we cleared everything down to the Rest Camp and then lower, down into the woods by the Kaphe Khola. We camped there while two of the Sherpas went to fetch porters to take us back to Pokhara. All day long, that wonderful autumn, the mountains remained clear. Had we given up too easily? I felt we were impostors, sitting down there in the pleasant woods with October not yet finished. Then I remembered the numbing cold of those shadowed west and north slopes, and the avalanche. Perhaps, after all, we had been lucky. We knew the way now, and we could come back together again another year.