TO HIUNCHULI PATAN

By P. R. STEELE

(Two illustrations: nos. 13–14)

HIUNCHULI Patan is a small and beautiful mountain; the final wag of the tail of Dhaulagiri, which has been diminishing in height and grandeur westwards for sixty odd miles. The widely separated twin summits, steep faces and sharp ridges make Hiunchuli a most attractive problem to an alpinist. By Himalayan standards it is insignificant; a mere 19,411 feet.[1] However, its size is amply compensated for by a spectacular setting. Lying quite detached from any other visible giants, the mountain raises its head aloft, crowned by a snowy tiara, and majestically dominating the deep and wooded valleys that flow away from its feet to join the Sisne Khola. To the north lie the Kanjiroba Himal and a maze of small mountains that are the beginning of the Tibetan uplands. Southwards row upon row of green hills, the Siwaliks, roll towards the distant dust-haze that hangs over the plains of India. The fact that it has a name on the map, that I could find no evidence of its exploration, and that its size seemed to be within the scope of our small and amateur party, first drew my attention to Hiunchuli and crystallised our plan to visit it.

My wife Sarah and I had been working in a hospital in Katmandu during the monsoon months, when the plans for our trek were conceived. My wife was expecting a baby, but this we determined would in no way deter us. By some hard studying we had gained a reasonable grasp of the language, which became a great weapon in our favour. It was obvious that our resources would only permit a trek and in fact the 'purpose of visit' on our Government permit was stated as 'sight-seeing'. This had the inestimable advantage of our not requiring a liaison officer and not having to pay an expedition fee. In an aside to Sarah as we left his office, the chief of Protocol added 'only do not let your husband climb too high, Mrs. Steele'. We were decided on doing our two months in the mountains on the minimum encumbrance and with as little expense as possible. In these days when the Golden Age is passing, and public willingness and private funds are running short for the financing of large expeditions, the Shiptonian precept of small party mountain exploration must surely come into its own.

Being on the spot in Katmandu lessened our problems considerably. My ignorance of matters Himalayan was supplemented by our weekly visits to Colonel J. O. M. Roberts, who, himself planning a lone reconnaissance of Dhaulagiri IV, gave freely of his wisdom and experience.

[1] J. B. Tyson: personal communication.

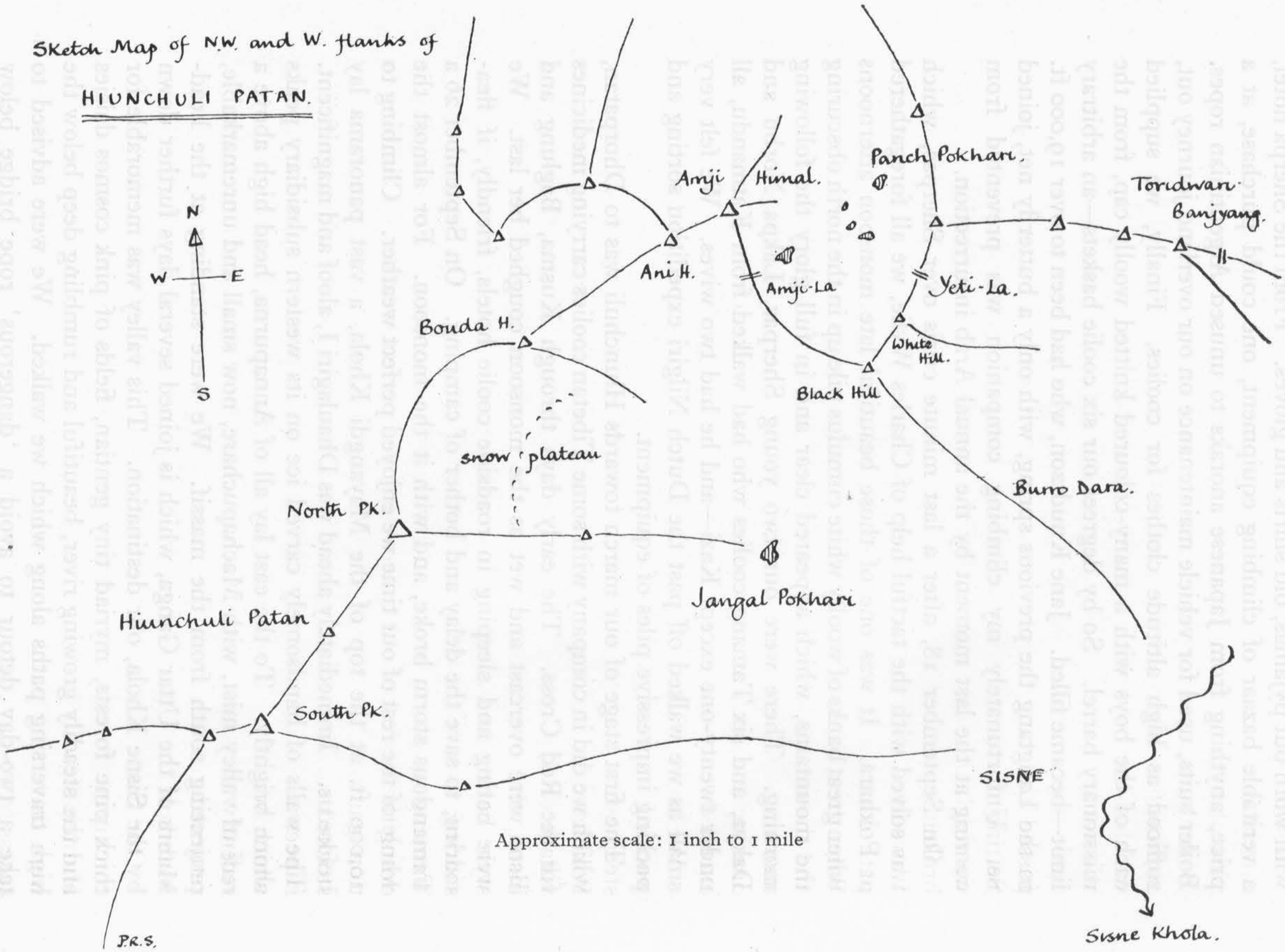
We were able to buy a certain amount of hard rations from parties returning after the spring, although we hoped to acquire our basic food locally in the hills. Friends going home on leave gladly dispensed with worn out pyjamas, old shirts and gloves. From the Sherpa hotel, a veritable bazaar of climbing equipment, one could purchase, at a price, anything from Japanese anoraks to unused Argentinian ropes. Boiler suits, used for vehicle maintenance on our overland journey out, sufficed as high altitude clothes for coolies. Finally, we supplied each of the boys with a many-coloured knitted woolly cap, from the missionary barrel. So by degrees our six coolie baskets—an arbitrary limit—became filled. Jane Knudtzon, who had been to over 19,000 ft. in the Langtang the previous spring, with only a butterfly net, joined us. Unfortunately my climbing companion was prevented from coming at the last moment by the annual Arab insurrection.

On September 18, after a last minute crisis over Sherpas, which was solved with the tactful help of Charles Wylie, we all foregathered at Pokhara. It was one of those beautiful late monsoon afternoons when great banks of woolly white cumulus pile up in the north obscuring the mountains, which appeared clear and in full glory the following morning. There were our two young Sherpas, Lakpa Norbu and Dakya, and six Tamang coolies who had walked from Katmandu, all under twenty-one except Kazi—and he had two wives. We felt very small as we walked off past the Dutch Nilgiri expedition sorting and packing impressive piles of equipment.

The first stage of our march towards Hiunchuli was to Dhorpatan, which we did in company with some Tibetan coolies carrying medicines for the Red Cross. The early days through Kusma, Baglung and Beni were overcast and wet as the monsoon coughed her last. We were eating and sleeping in roadside coolie hotels, friendly, if flea-ridden, to save the delay and bother of camping. On September 26 a tremendous storm broke, and with it the monsoon. For almost the whole of the rest of our time we enjoyed perfect weather. Climbing to 10,000 ft. at the top of the Mayangdi Khola, a vast panorama lay before us. Immediately ahead was Dhaulagiri I, aloof and magnificent. The walls of handsomely carved ice on its western subsidiary peaks shone brightly. To the east lay all of Annapurna, head high above a ruff of valley mist, with Machapuchare, now small and unremarkable, projecting south from the massif. We were standing at the head-waters of the Uttar Ganga, which is joined several days further down by the Sisne Khola, our destination. This valley was memorable for thick pine forests, myriad tiny gentian, fields of pink cosmos daisies and the steadily growing river, beautiful and rumbling deep below the high traversing paths along which we walked. We were advised to take a two-day detour to avoid a 'dangerous' rope bridge below

Sketch Map of N.W. and W. flanks of

HIUNCHULI PATAN.



Approximate scale: 1 inch to 1 mile

Sehragaon. We concurred with this, but the girls, wiser on the return journey, found it exhilarating being swung across the river on a flimsy wooden seat.

Rounding a shoulder before dropping down to the Sisne Khola we caught our first sight of Hiunchuli Patan. Having no preconceived idea of what we would find, it was most exhilarating and gratifying to find ourselves confronted by such a lovely mountain. All the approaches looked formidable except possibly the North-east ridge which, however, took on a more severe angle the closer we approached. We waded the Sisne Khola at Gongagrali and climbed to a village 2,000 ft. above the river where we did our customary evening clinic and passed the night. From now on we were treading 'new' ground. Setting off along a slender and slippery path the following morning, we reached a point after two hours where we were confronted by steep, broken, grass-covered rock for 100 ft.; the sort of ground one expects on Lliwedd. Lakpa and Dakya, having crossed it carefully and found the path continuing, returned to help the girls; while the Tamangs, with Babu their leader in front, danced gingerly across with their 80 lb. loads and the certain knowledge that a slip would have speedily landed them into the river below and the hereafter. This 'mauvais pas' was only one incident typical of many others in which these admirable boys excelled.

We took another day and a half, climbing along this beautifully wooded valley, to reach the Bhotia-style village of Sisne, below the steep western flank of Hiunchuli. Nearly three weeks after leaving Pokhara we camped on a grassy knoll a quarter of a mile above the village on the eve of Dashera, the big Hindu festival. For want of a bison, the Tamangs produced a ram, which Babu in true Gurkha style beheaded with one blow of a kukri—his subsequent prestige soaring accordingly. That night our camp was gay with feasting, Tamang songs of very basic wit, Sherpa dances and Sarah and myself doing the Charleston. Food was plentiful, contrary to all our information gained about West Nepal. The recently harvested maize was stocked on all the flat roof tops and we were buying potatoes at five rupees a coolie basket load. We were above the rice-growing level, which was just as well because Sarah being three months gone had recently grown to loathe the sight of it. Four of the coolies now returned to Dhorpatan to collect the Tibetan loads, while Kazi and Mahila III remained at camp.

Our first day's reconnaissance, climbing the ridge above our camp, convinced me that it would be no easy matter to reach the foot of Hiunchuli, let alone climb it. The valleys draining from the mountain were deep with thickly forested slopes. Above the tree-line, barring access to the open ridge tops, was dense bamboo jungle, which turned

us back disconsolate and arm-weary after an hour's fruitless hacking with a kukri.

The following day the boys and I moved three hours up the valley with an old shepherd, Burro, who had promised to show us a path up to the high grazing grounds on the next ridge to the north. Having found a site on a pleasant alp, Dakya and the coolies returned to Sisne to bring up the girls and the rest of the camp. Lakpa, Burro and I climbed steeply for two hours coming out on to a high ridge free of jungle which plainly led towards the northern end of Hiunchuli—the key to the approach. We lay contentedly in the sun, while Burro grunted and persevered with chewing the wrapping paper to reach the barley sugar within. We returned to camp and prepared to spend a week away. Sarah and Jane would stay to guard everything; the two Tamangs would carry for the first day and then return; Lakpa, Dakya and I would go on to Hiunchuli.

It was a long arduous day up 'Burro Dara' but in full view of the mountain, which regularly became enveloped in cloud soon after mid-day. After a miserable, waterless night on the ridge we rose to find Hiunchuli magnificent and sparkling in the morning sunlight. We dropped to a stream in a basin on our right and after a good breakfast sent off the coolies.

We continued climbing towards a distant col on the skyline on easy-angled snow, after crossing a tricky rock spur, made the more difficult by our heavy rucksacks. From the col we looked down into an attractive cwm where there were several small lakes and a mountain shaped like Great Gable opposite, and flanking Hiunchuli. To the north-east, ringing the area, were towering cliffs of rotten limestone, as it were barring the way to Tibet. A few yards on the other side of the col we came across a line of large foot-prints evidently pointing in a downward direction. They must have belonged to an animal the size of a bear and caused great excitement and not a little consternation with the Sherpas. The name Yeti La was given to the place and the boys kept their box of matches in constant readiness to strike and throw in the face of the advancing beast—the only sure way to escape its clutches, I am told, and incidentally a handy way of transferring malaria from oneself to the Yeti.

A more difficult descent brought us down to Panch Pokhari (five lakes), where we camped as snow began to fall heavily. I usually had the better insulated middle position in the tent, a dubious advantage because of the closer proximity to Dakya, who, charming fellow that he was, had a highly developed Tibetan horror of washing. Lakpa, an excellent cook, regarded his post as carrying the privilege of an outer berth, so I had little choice.

As the sun rose and melted the mantle of our freezing morning

Photo: P. R. Steele]

SOUTH-EAST FACE OF HIUNCHULI PATAN.

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half-light, we looked out of the tent to miles of Kanjiroba rolling away in the distance. We were going to attempt the mountain we had seen from the Yeti La in the hope of getting some good views of Hiunchuli. We crossed towards the lower slopes and started up on a mixture of rock and snow. As we climbed, the angle increased and we cut steps in crisp, packed snow for about 1,000 ft. Incidentally, I never regretted leaving crampons and pitons behind in Katmandu as a premeditated curb on our activities. The Sherpas had in fact little experience with rope and axe though they learnt quickly and were very sure-footed.

After five glorious hours we reached the summit, almost the same height as Popocatepetl, the last mountain I had climbed, now diametrically on the opposite side of the world. We were given a glorious view of the pyramidal North face of Hiunchuli—a vertical, fluted ice-wall, flanked by two knife-edge ridges. That to the north-west was corniced, overhung and was quite out of the question. The North-east ridge which we had seen previously, though much steeper than I had thought, would be possible, but it involved a difficult bergschrund and a short, steep ice-wall to reach the arête. It was obviously out of the question for us. We ate rum fudge and chocolate while I took bearings and estimated our height—between 17,500 and 18,000 ft. The boys named it Amji Himal—Doctor's Peak. By late afternoon we were back at Panch Pokhari very satisfied, a little sad over Hiunchuli, though content with Amji.

The remainder of our time was passed in making sorties to gather information to build up our sketch map and confirm the approach to the northern end of the mountain. I am sure the best way will be along Burro Dara, either over the Yeti La or between the Black and White hills to Panch Pokhari; across the Amji La and dropping down to skirt round the foot of Bouda Himal on easy ground to reach the snowfield. From here the ridge is approachable with more or less difficulty. Needless to say the 1927 map is very inaccurate in these higher regions.

Our food was running low so we recrossed the Yeti La and raced back to our camp. It had been an unforgettable few days shared in all contexts with two very good companions.

We now decided to split. I thought Sarah would find it very hard going to the north of Dhaulagiri with long marches and with the nights getting very cold, so she and Jane set off to return to Pokhara by our outward route with Mahila I, II and III and Kazi.

I crossed the Toridwari Banjyang with Lakpa, Dakya, Babu and Sahila, and after three days marching we reached the Barbung Khola at Dunhai. We were held up for a day outside Tarakot where, all attempts at conservative treatment proving useless, I was forced to operate on a man who was extremely ill with a strangulated inguinal hernia. The circumstances and my resources at best were 'jangali'.

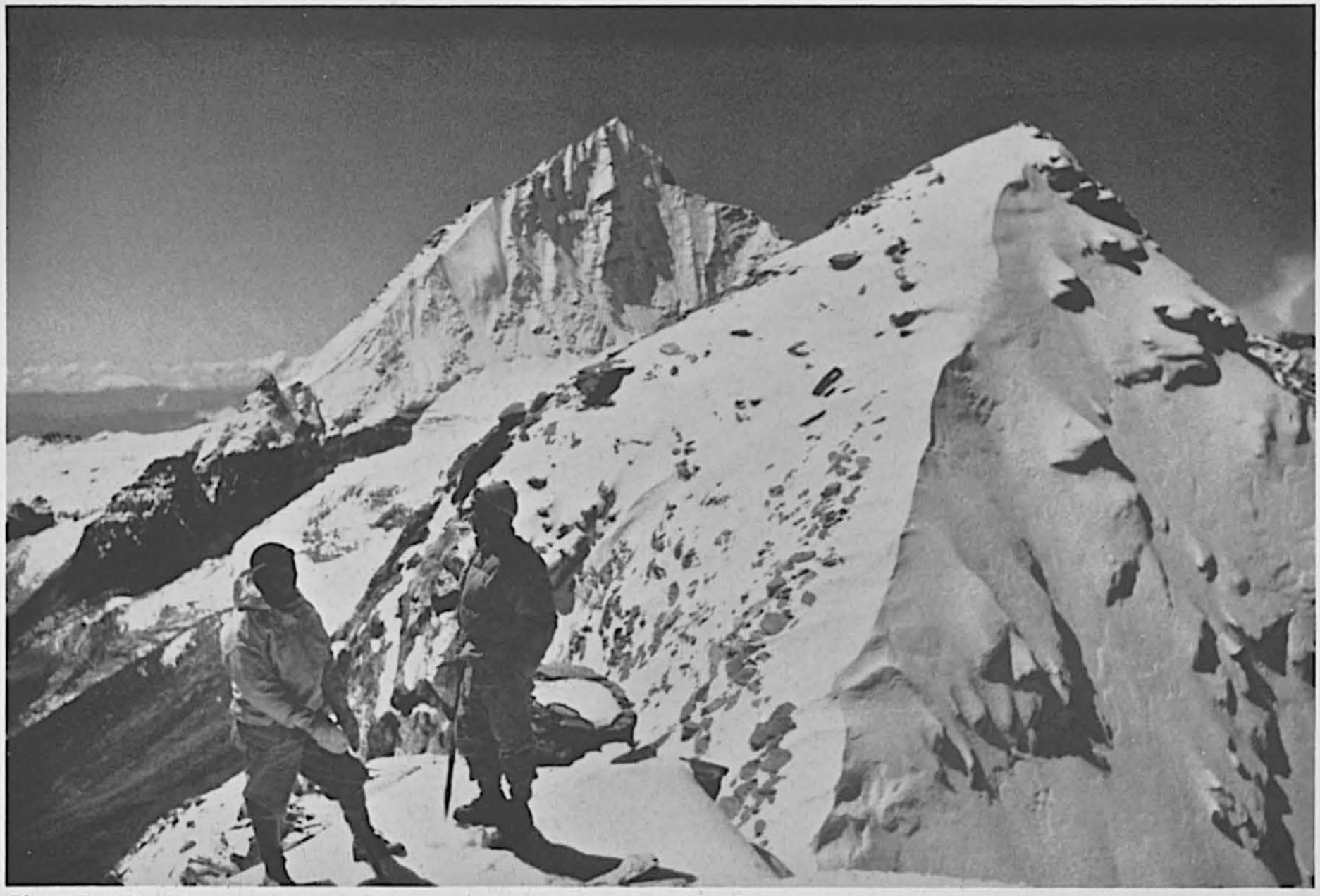

Photo: P. R. Steele]

NORTH-EAST FACE OF HIUNCHULI PATAN, FROM AMJI HIMAL.

(No. 14)

With my stitching set, some morphia and a pint of rakshi as anaesthetic, my spot-trained assistants and I set to work on the floor of the Lama's tent. Some hours later to my great relief the obstruction was patently relieved and the patient improved. With winter approaching I could not stay and give post-operative care, but next day I left the patient with detailed instructions and enough drugs to cover him for a fortnight. We then pushed on to Mukut.

We crossed the Mu La on November 1, the Tamangs going like Trojans though resentful of not being allowed to smoke until we should reach the lower lands again. We took three days from Mukut to Jomosom where we were royally entertained by the Dutch back from their notable success on Nilgiri I, and where we digressed for pony joy-ride-cum-pilgrimage to Muktinath. Then, being very fit and anxious to see my wife, I shouldered my 40 lb. load and reached Pokhara at mail runner speed three days later.

For just on £100 each we had spent a supremely happy two months trekking, perhaps most satisfying of all for having made eight very good and loyal friends.