THE HIMALAYAN SCHOOLHOUSE EXPEDITION, 1963

By J. G. WILSON

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(*Three illustrations: nos. 9–11*)

The 1963 Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition[1] (sponsored by Field Enterprises Ltd., Chicago) was basically an expanded continuation of an aid programme to the Khumbu area, the heart of Sherpa-land, which Sir Edmund Hillary began by building a school in Khumjung in 1961. The main objects of the expedition were, therefore, not mountaineering but school-building and the construction of a water-supply for Khumjung village. From this angle the expedition was very successful. A school was constructed and staffed at both Pangboche and Thami (both now have about fifty pupils), and placed under the jurisdiction of the head teacher at Khumjung School (now nearing seventy pupils). The new schools, on which local materials were used as far as possible, turned out to be very handsome stone and wood buildings with aluminium roofs, despite the bungling efforts of several amateur builders. Our success was mainly due to the uncanny ability of Murray Ellis to improvise his way around questionable material and other people's mistakes. Then the Khumjung water supply, a more dramatic and immediate help to the people of the village, caused tears of joy when the first water gushed out of the pipe just beyond the highest houses.

While there were the inevitable ups and downs in all this activity, and while the details of it are too long and complicated for an Alpine Journal article, it should be emphasised that this part of the trip, the main part intention-wise, was also the part which provided the most satisfaction to all members. For my part, to make my first visit to this land in conjunction with a programme of aid, was to realise a long-time ambition and one which was more attractive than if the expedition had been purely engaged in climbing. Important, too, was the work of Drs. Michael Gill and Philip Houghton who set up a clinic in the area and treated enormous numbers of people.

Nevertheless we did take time off for assaults on two peaks, Taweche (21,390 ft.)[2] and Kangtega (22,340 ft.), and I would be less than honest

[1] The members of this expedition were: Sir Edmund Hillary (leader), Murray Ellis, Dr. Philip Houghton, Dr. Michael Gill, J. G. Wilson (New Zealand); David Dornan, Tom Frost (U.S.A.); Desmond Doig, Bhanu Bannerjee (India).

[2] The R.G.S. map gives 21,463 ft. for the height of Taweche. Kurz, *Chronique Himalayenne*, also gives this height (6,542 m.).—Editor.

if I did not admit that a trip to the Himalayas with no climbing involved would have disappointed, no matter how worthy the rest of our activity.

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If one climbs purely for enjoyment, then the Himalayas are definitely out. When one has fought the good fight with dysentery and disease on the march in, the rewards on the mountain turn out to include perpetual daily snowfall, monotonous preparing, improving and re-establishing fixed routes for loads, and debilitating, energy-and-enjoyment-robbing altitude sickness. But there are to my mind two rewarding types of climb. One is the climb done in fine weather on a route well within one's capabilities, which but mildly tautens the nerves, gently exercises the body, delights the senses with beautiful views and delectable moves, and is sheer enjoyment throughout. The other is sterner stuff—the new route, or perhaps the bad weather descent, which stretches skill to the uttermost, heightens nervous tension to the limit, provides a constant feeling of uncertainty and danger, and leaves one not so much with joy as with the fierce, exultant satisfaction of a difficult and dangerous encounter with oneself which has not been funked. Many climbs, of course, are a mixture hard to analyse. On a difficult Himalayan peak, however, there is no doubt at all which predominates. There are moments of carefree joy on easy but interesting pitches in rare moments of sunshine—but basically it is the bitter struggle and the fierce retrospective satisfaction wherein lies the appeal of this climbing.

Perhaps I interpolate too much from one experience. But if Taweche is any indication at all, then I stick by this statement. Taweche is one hell of a mountain. When our mountain sirdar, Ang Temba, who has been on Everest, Kangchenjunga (for which he was awarded a Tiger Badge), Dhaulagiri, Makalu and Annapurna II amongst others, says that Taweche is easily the most difficult mountain he has been on, then, even though his statement may be guilty of exaggeration engendered by his then uneasy position above the spectacular route to Camp Two, it is still pregnant with meaning. So too is Mike Gill's conviction that for difficulty the climb on Ama Dablam two years previously does not compare. I am writing these words when, beaten and battered by weather and mountain, we prepare for a last desperate assault after being turned back once a bare 200 ft. from the top by an unjustifiably dangerous corniced ridge. So I, too, am almost certainly guilty of exaggeration. But never have I imagined a more consistently unrelenting mountain, in terms of weather and difficulty. There are no easy routes on the peak, and on our route, which we are tolerably sure is the only possible one, there are no easy stretches. And the weather has been perpetually awful.

This is not to say, even should the whole thing end in failure, as

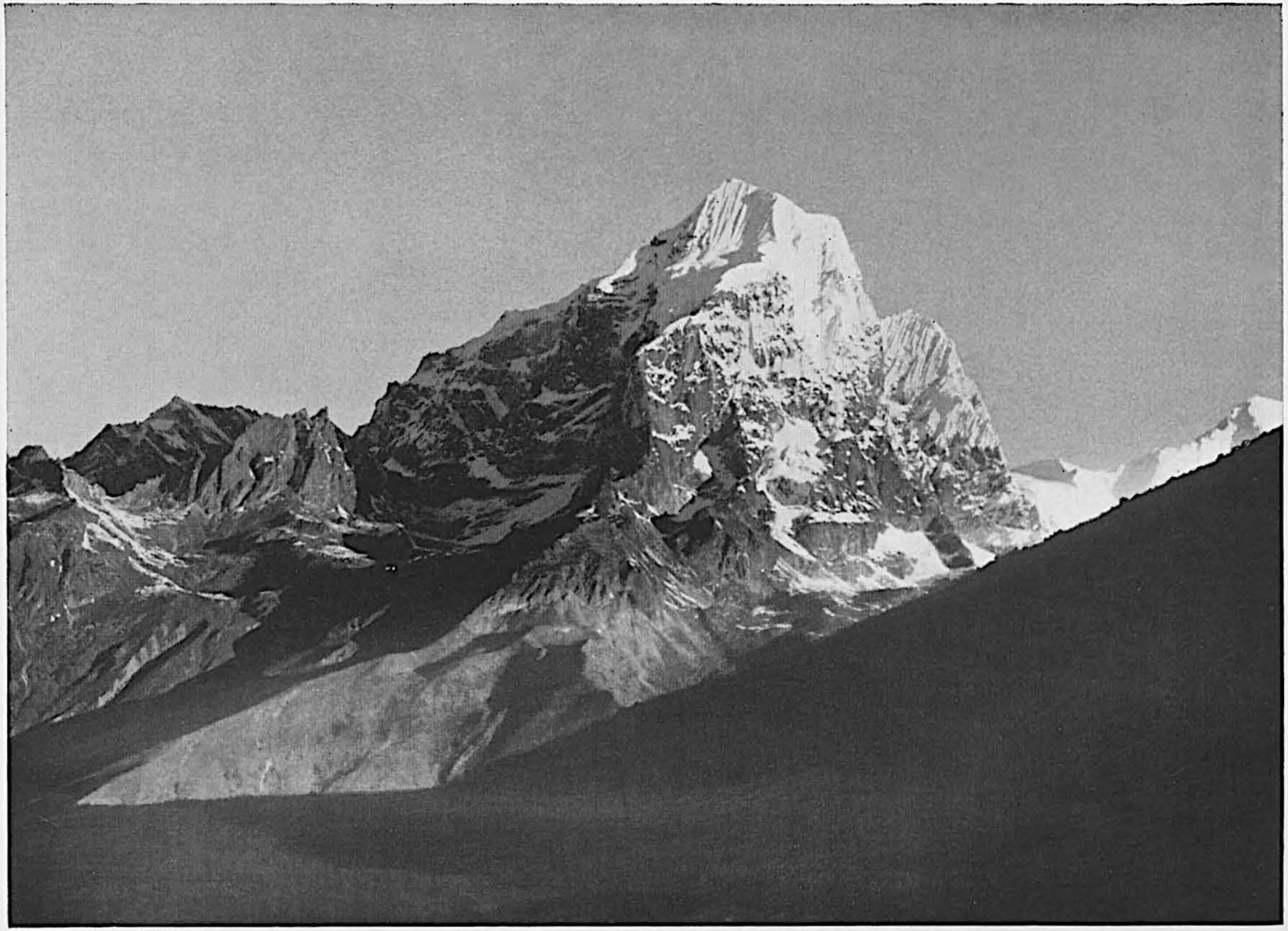

Photo: M. B. Gill]

TAWECHE, FROM 17,000 FT. IN THE MINGBO VALLEY. THE ROUTE WAS UP THE SUN-LIT FACE ON THE RIGHT TO THE SNOW RIDGE JOINING THE SUMMIT RIDGE.

(No. 9)

appears very likely at present, that I regret the experience for a moment, or go back on the joy I felt when Dave Dornan (of America) and I, by virtue of our status as the two useless philosophers in a party of much needed engineers, doctors and linguists, were selected for the initial probe. We feel, if the pride may be forgiven, that we have put up as reasonable a show as is possible for us, in the face of difficulty and danger, and therefore have already gained a considerable measure of satisfaction. And, though the whole party is basically crying out to return to the warmth and comfort of our camp at Khumjung, we can still (just) muster the determination to have a look at the second and less feasible alternative route from our assault camp to the summit.

Dave and I moved up to a temporary 16,000 ft. Base Camp in a yak pasture on April 13, 1963. We acclimatised by attempting, and thereby disproving as a load-carrying route, the direct approach to the South-east ridge, a pinnacled rock ridge leading to a huge almost sheer rock buttress. It goes without saying that it snowed during our attempt, and the descent from our highest point of 18,200 ft. was not assisted thereby. After a day of continual snow, we shifted camp to the frozen lake under the North-east face of this same South-east ridge. Peter Mulgrew, in November, 1960, when a member of Ed Hillary's Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering Expedition, had reconnoitred the lower stretches of this face, and reported a possible route to the upper part of the ridge, and thence to the high snow plateau which undergirds this side of Taweche's summit pyramid. The face, a 3,000-ft. expanse of mixed rock ribs and snow gullies, certainly looked climbable, but whether we could establish a route for loads up it, we did not know.

Next day we received our first and last break of the entire climb. On a fine morning, while Dave (who has rock-climbed extensively in the States) and Sherpa Ang Temba headed off up a rock face which my New Zealand eyes regarded with considerable disfavour, Sherpa Pemba Tarke and I went in another direction, and to our joy found Pete Mulgrew's easy snow route to the snow-field about one third of the way up the face. Reaching this snow-field with the sun, by some celestial error, still shining, we swung left and ascended some 600–800 ft. of moderate rock rib—until the snow hit us, one of the rare moments of really pleasurable climbing, as the rock was steep but firm, and the altitude not yet excessive. Dave and Ang Temba also reached the snow-field, after some harrowing climbing, but were pleased to approve our route as the better one, and to agree also that the rib we had ascended offered the best hope of access to the ridge.

So far, so good. But the effect of the ceremony of placation at Pangboche monastery before we left (Taweche is the local god of Pangboche, and gifts of money and ceremonial scarves were necessary) seemed now to wear very thin. The daily snowfall arrived progressively earlier, and

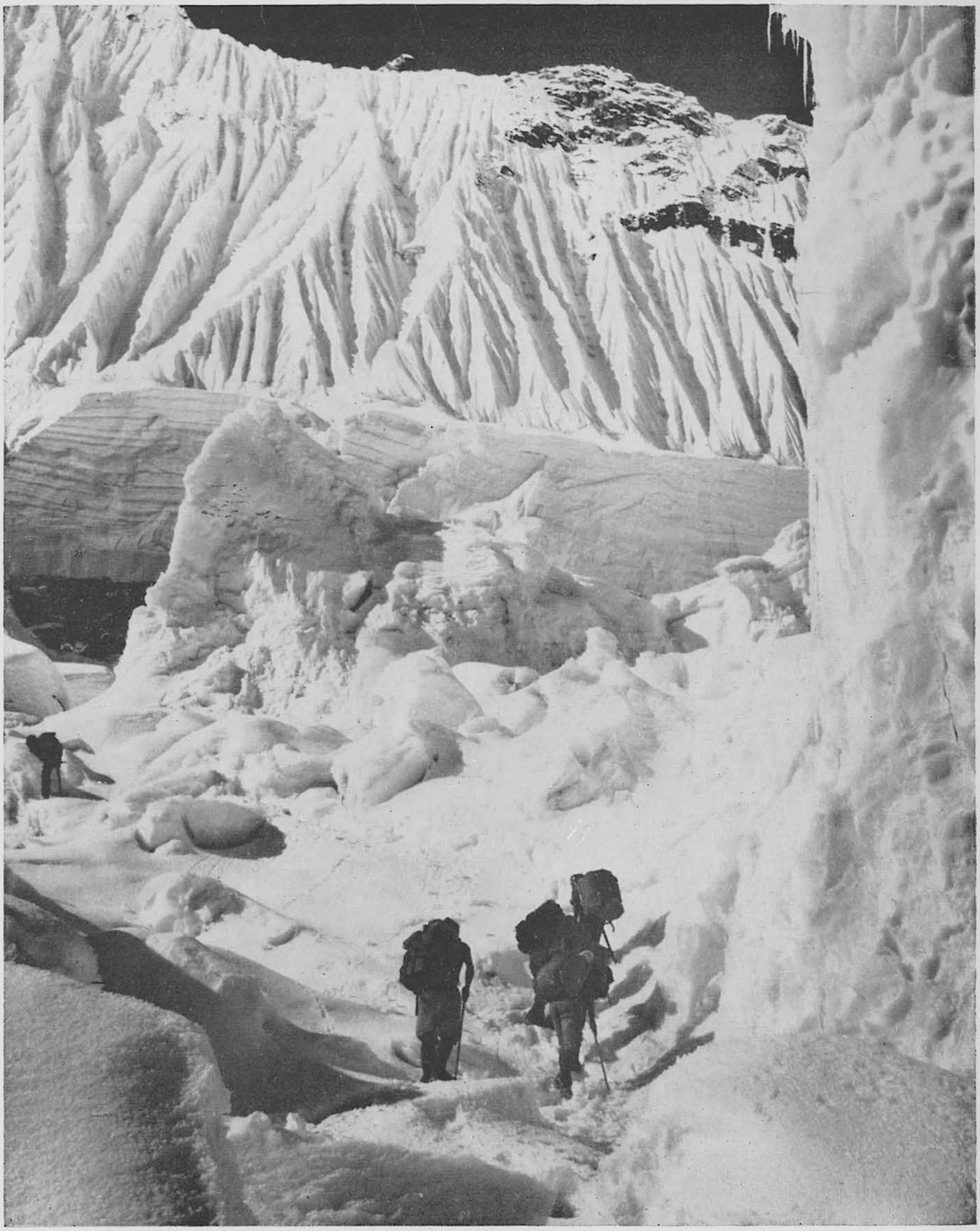

Photo: M. B. Gill]

IN THE ICE-FALL ON KANGTEGA.

(No. 11)

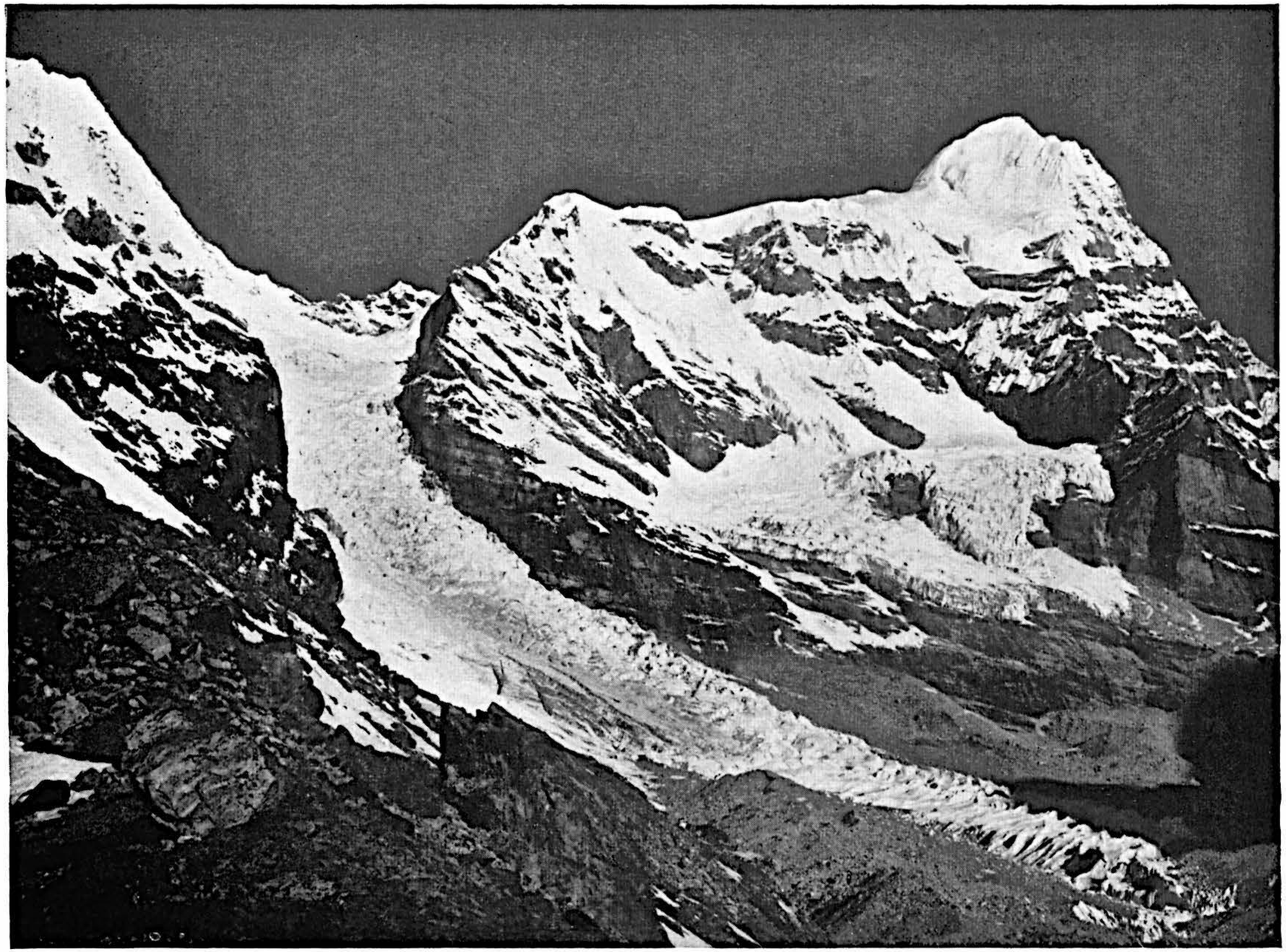

Photo: M. B. Gill]

KANGTEGA, FROM BASE CAMP ON LATERAL MORAINE (17,000 FT.). ROUTE LIES UP ICE-FALL ON THE LEFT, UP CWM OUT OF SIGHT, TO SUMMIT SNOW-SLOPES.

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in two days' frustrating work Dave and I gained only a further 300–400 ft. of steep, loose snow above the rock rib. There were still another 800 ft. or more of steep and nasty snow ascents and traverses under the sheer buttress-top of our rib before even the ridge crest was reached. Dave and I were pretty green regarding Sherpa packing routes, but we were fixing rope like fury and hoping that the skill of Ang Temba and Pemba Tarke was indicative of Sherpa climbing skill in general. Given these two factors, we thought we had a packing route—but we badly needed either a break in the weather or more desperate tactics to complete it.

Fortunately Murray Ellis and Mike Gill arrived up early next day, and with their help we shifted camp up to a small, pantingly-dug platform on the 18,000-ft. snow-field. The boost of starting 1,000 ft. higher proved considerable, and though next day a falling rock went through the most exposed tent, while Ang Temba and Pemba Tarke were inside, we felt it to be a reasonably safe camp all in all. While the Sherpas stoically sat out the rock-falls, the four of us at last pushed through to the ridge, ignoring the snowstorm which deliberately arrived at its earliest yet, 9 a.m. From the high point Dave and I had reached, all was exposed snow, save for one delicate rock traverse; but endless flailing both made a route and disclosed underlying rock on which we could use pitons for fixed ropes (other fixture points included slings round frozen boulders), in the (proven justified) belief that there would never be enough sun on this damned mountain to thaw them out. At three in the afternoon, having used our last climbing rope as a fixed rope, we crawled onto the crest of the ridge, and stared impatiently at the foot of a steep buttress which disappeared into the impenetrable murk. The fixed ropes made a mockery of the difficulties on descent, and we returned to camp in an hour.

The persistent bad weather, and the needs of the school-building programme, the expedition's major project, decided Ed to recall us to Pangboche following our ascent to the ridge. A terse silence reverberated over the radio when we received the message, but as things transpired there is no question but that the mountain, as well as the school-building project, benefited from our week of appalling weather down at Pangboche. Dave, Mike and I returned ready for battle on April 30, and on May 1 dug out Camp One from its heavy accumulation of snow.

Next day, surprisingly running only into mist with no snow, Dave and Mike defeated the first of the two rock slabs which lay between us and the plateau, Mike turning on a fine traversing lead. The following day the weather was even better, and Mike and I left early, determined to reach a site for Camp Two. At the high point of the day before, we found ourselves looking up a steep slab some 100 ft. in height, whose small holds and sheer angle made direct assault impossible (for us

anyway) at that altitude. Securely belayed by Mike, I began a cautious flanking movement over the very exposed face on the left. Soft powder snow over holdless rock demanded the protection of several pitons, and the direct aid (shame!) of two, before I could gain a slightly easier snow and rock gully which led to the top of the main slab. The lead had taken an hour and a half (a frozen Mike informed me), and snow was again falling, but we managed to ascend the steep snow above the slab and ascertain that only 20 ft. of corniced snow ridge separated us from a camp site.

A further day of bad weather kept us fuming in Camp One, but the following day dawned promisingly enough to entice us away, and proved a fine day. We set off together with four Sherpas carrying 40 lb. apiece, to establish Camp Two, despite the fact that the route was not finally completed. It was a totally exhausting day. The Sherpas went up the steep fixed ropes magnificently, but, with their loads, had to be helped on some pitches, a tiring performance when one is straining to ascend oneself. Mike and I had fixed wire ladders on the two steep slabs on the ridge, but ascending them seemed terribly energetic at 20,000 ft., and hauling the loads by rope nearly finished us. Mike then beat off several feet of the corniced ridge to make a safe trail, across which we wearily relayed the loads. The four Sherpas, who had done a magnificent job, clipped back into the fixed ropes and descended, while Dave, Mike, Ang Temba and I stamped out a platform in the soft snow to take the two small Blanchard tents. The spectacular route up had gained us a spectacular camp—a narrow ledge of snow sitting beneath a sweep of snow from the plateau, while below an ice-cliff dropped away over a vast face of rock and snow. The mist cleared away, revealing the peaks nearby—Everest (climbed by the Americans a few days before), Lhotse, Nuptse, Ama Dablam, Kangtega—leaving us with an awed sense of height and loneliness.

We already knew this was no easy Himalayan climb—the difficulties below were such as are normally tackled on one-day alpine climbs at lower altitudes. But we did hope that now, at last, the mountain would relent and allow us to its summit without too much fuss. A recce by Dave and Mike next day, while I grovelled with altitude sickness, completely dispelled this hope. Extremely steep fluted snow led to a badly corniced summit ridge. The following day we were away early, first Dave and Mike, then Ang Temba and I. With enormous labour Dave and Mike cleared away six inches to a foot of powder snow, then cut steps in the variable surface underneath. The exposure increased as we inched up the 60° slope, and looming over us was a huge, overhanging ice-bulge through which we somehow had to find a way. It took from 7.30 a.m. till 1 p.m. to ascend the 600–800-ft. slope, and another half-hour to cut through a merciful break in the ice-bulge. Dave was first up, and

to our anxious inquiries 'what's it like?' came a dubious-sounding reply—'easy for a short distance'. This proved indeed the understatement of the year. It was in fact easy for a short distance—the top of the ice bulge was nearly flat snow and stretched a good twenty yards. But from there on all hell had been let loose. The most appalling corniced ridge we had ever seen tenuously twined up for 200 ft. to the summit ice-bulge—rearing soft snow cornices which, so far as we could tell, were undercut on both sides. I think there was little doubt in anyone's mind from the first glance, but we had to have a closer look if but for form. Fearfully we crept a few yards out along the ridge, with an overhang on one side and soft snow dropping away to nothing on the other. Cautiously we surveyed the mess ahead, then, quietly planting at our highest point the prayer flags given us for the summit by the head Lama of Thyangboche monastery, we wormed our way back to the relative safety of the ice-bulge. To our mind, the final 200 ft. of ridge was unjustifiably dangerous. No skill in the world could guarantee that the ridge would stay put as one crept along it, while a good twenty to thirty feet would have to be cut off, an impossible task, to get down to safe snow.

Soberly we descended to camp, convinced then that Taweche had finally triumphed. But hope springs eternal in the human breast, and it was not long before we were considering the terrible face below the summit bulge—considering it, perhaps, with eyes of desperation rather than reason, but considering it nonetheless. More bad weather brought us all down to Base Camp for an enforced, but much-needed, rest (during which I wrote the preceding), but on May 10, almost a month after Dave and I had first approached the peak, Murray Ellis, Phil Houghton, Sherpa Pemba Tarke and I ascended to re-establish Camp Two. Soft snow avalanches were rumbling off the mountain as we grumbled up to the old Camp One site, and as we reached the tent platform a larger one than usual pinned us to the spot, causing great anxiety for the three Sherpas above. It was a pretty sorry sahib party that crept out from the overhanging rock and began remaking trail over the avalanche debris. Murray had a deep, hacking chest cough, the first time on the entire trip that the 'iron man' had been slowed down, dysentery, altitude and long hours of work having previously completely failed. I had galloping dysentery and felt rather worse than death warmed up, while Phil was so ill he eventually returned to Base Camp. What streak of idiocy kept Murray and me going will never be known, for we already knew the alternative route we were ascending to inspect to be as bad as, or worse, than the one that turned the four of us back three days before. But, moaning at every step, we made it to the foot of the ladders.

Here we found Tom Frost (America). Tom had been acclimatising

badly, and frustratingly had been confined to Base Camp—a great loss to the party as he is one of America's top rock climbers. The previous day, in a desperate attempt to see if he was yet fit, he had set off up towards Camp Two. There was considerable consternation at Base Camp when he failed to return that night; but a short night excursion up to Camp One and repeated yells had elicited the information that he was 'O.K.'. It now transpired he had reached the top of the first ladder, totally exhausted, and setting up one of the Camp Two tents, cached here while we were off the mountain, on a very exposed piece of ridge, he had spent quite a comfortable though very lonely night. His assistance now in hauling the loads back up to the Camp Two site was much appreciated, and, with the non-appearance of Phil, he came on up with us to make a foursome.

If anything we were more exhausted than the first time we had set up Camp Two, by the time we had re-cleared the platform and set up the tents. A recalcitrant primus completely finished my exhausted patience, and language flowed with freedom; but eventually we had a meal of sorts and prepared for the night. The hard-driving snow, which had stung and numbed our faces during the load-hauling up the buttress, paused to give a clear view of our proposed route, but we preferred not to look.

It took us but a few hours next day to finish the story—in Taweche's favour. Struggling up on to the plateau in new snow sometimes knee-deep, we gained a spot with an unimpeded view of the face, and of the left-hand ridge. It was nothing short of appalling. Steeper and half as long again as the face we had ascended previously to the right hand summit-ridge, it was terrifyingly fluted with great knobbly festoons of ice and overhung by the same cornices we had declined to dally with before. At low altitude, without its accumulation of powder snow, and with an easy route off assured, one might possibly have considered attempting it. As it was, it would require (to entice one up) a total disregard for life and limb which neither Murray nor I felt any mountain worth. As fresh mist and snow swept in on a stinging wind, a fitting finale, we turned and crept back to camp. Taweche had triumphed indeed.

A Himalayan peak is not, of course, dismissed by a decision to retreat. Camps and ropes must be laboriously dismantled and removed—and the task seems the more laborious if it is in the face of defeat that the retreat is made. Complete, though, it was, on the next day; and as the days of the move back to Khumjung and re-immersion in the school-building and water-supply programme pass busily by, the sting of failure is passing and another attitude to our Taweche struggle is gaining ground. That philosophical mountaineer Mike Gill expressed this attitude even before defeat was final, when we first retreated from the

corniced summit ridge. 'You know,' he said, 'I think in some ways it is better not to have violated such a fantastic summit.'

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It is hard to see how two successive climbs could have been less similar. Taweche gave us appalling weather, superbly difficult climbing, prolonged struggle, and ultimate defeat. Kangtega, a climb snatched in a week at the very end of the expedition, and with the monsoon hanging over us, gave us fine weather on the days we needed it, breaches in its ice-fall, and bridges over its crevasses, easy climbing save for a pitch in the ice-fall and the steep final cone, and ultimate success.

One climb will linger in the memory as an arduously satisfying struggle not effaced by unexpected defeat—the other as a rushed, unexpected success, the sweeter for taking us by surprise.

From any angle in the Khumbu, Kangtega looks impossible. Taweche looks bad enough, heaven knows! But Kangtega, frankly impossible. A great rearing square of rock, capped by a beautiful sweep of ice, its pinnacled ridges and ice-menaced faces vie with each other in an indecisive contest in infeasibility. But even after Taweche had finished with us, Mike Gill had the energy and enthusiasm to climb a 20,000-ft. peak from the Mingbo to investigate other aspects of Kangtega.

During Ed Hillary's 1960–61 expedition, Dr. Jim Milledge had made a sortie from the Mingbo Silver Hut over to the Inukhu via the Hongu. Penetrating to the head of the valley, he had returned with a report that there was a possible snow route from there on to the high peak of Kangtega. It was to confirm or deny this report that Mike made his climb and, to his delight, from the summit he could see and photograph the Inukhu side of the high peak of Kangtega.

Excitedly he returned to Khumjung to report that indeed a definite possibility lay there. Definite possibility!—indeed the route he described, and that his polaroid photo showed, seemed almost too easy to belong to awe-inspiring Kangtega. A tangled ice-fall led up behind a ridge to reappear as a high névé under-girding a lovely summit cone. Breach the ice-fall, see what lay behind the summit ridge, tackle the summit slopes and we had a route. Not that any portion could not stop us with an impossible crevasse or dangerous snow—but at least, unlike the Khumbu Kangtega, this new, kindlier Kangtega had some chinks in its defences.

To espy a route is one thing; to find time to attempt it from amongst conflicting claims of school-building and the meeting of expedition wives and friends is quite another. It was May 29, the tenth anniversary of Ed's and Tenzing's ascent of Everest, before four of us could be spared for the task. By this time, with Radio India reporting floods in Calcutta and the advent of the monsoon in our part of Nepal, our departure had

about it the air of a gallant gesture rather than a genuine summit attempt. And, as Dave Dornan and Tom Frost (America), Mike Gill and I, and five first-rate Sherpas, struggled across the 15,500 ft. snow pass to the Inukhu in three days' heavy rain, no one amongst us thought we were doing more than making a gesture—or perhaps attempting to see the Inukhu route close up.

But then on the fourth day, unbelievably, the sun appeared for a brief hour in all its glory. And it poked through the thin valley mist on later occasions, illuminating the snow peaks (Nau Lekh and Mera) at the head of the valley; and while nobody dared hope, spirits rose irrepressibly. All that day we travelled up the beautiful Inukhu valley, the forest and the rushing, bouldery river reminiscent of the West Coast. The porters carped at the long day, but we contentedly camped the night at Tanuk, a green delight of a yak pasture cossetted by huge peaks.

Weather and time, time and weather—these were the controlling factors of our existence. We had only two weeks to get in, climb the peak, and rejoin the main party on the high level route back to Katmandu. We had to establish Base Camp quickly—but neither we nor the Sherpas had any idea how far ahead the base of Kangtega lay. Fortunately this question was answered in our favour. Another day took us round a huge semi-circular sweep in the valley, and landed us in a niche in the moraine wall above Kangtega glacier, a bare mile from the foot of the ice-fall. Our five-days-to-Base-Camp schedule was intact. But what about the weather? It had been an unbelievably perfect day—but we needed at least three more like it, and how could that possibly be?

There was no sense in worrying about it—though, of course, impossible not to. Next day, while the others shifted Base Camp on to the moraine below the ice-fall, Mike and I, with two Sherpas, set off to find a way through. Optimism at an early break-through in the lower reaches was slapped down harshly by an impenetrable maze of crevasses above. Descending a little, we traversed left across a jumbled shelf of ice-blocks, with ice-cliffs above and below. High spirits again surged as we made rapid progress towards the névé snows, which swept down much lower on this side of the ice-fall. At the end of our shelf, a huge chasm barred the way; Mike fossicked his way down into it and across the balanced blocks of its floor. Following him across, I was invited to try the near-vertical ice-wall on the far side, and after soft snow had collapsed me into the hole below, managed to carve a route up. A fixed rope on this wall, and we had a very good route on to the upper glacier.

No time to lose. With nearly 5,000 ft. between our Base Camp and the summit, a formidable amount at that altitude, our pressing need was an assault camp as high as possible. Next day, June 4, four sweating sahibs in blistering heat, plugged a weary trail up the confined glacier above the ice-fall—just like the Western Cwm on Everest, our Sherpas

informed us—while five Sherpas strolled up behind, seemingly unaffected by the heat, the altitude, or their 40 lb. loads. Crevasses came and went, with the usual sinking of spirit at first glance, and the usual elation when a bridge was found. 'Wising-up' a bit late, we got the Sherpas to plug the last few hundred yards and, shortly before mid-day, camp was pitched in a flat snow-basin at slightly over 20,000 ft. Above, the glacier curved right and ascended sharply and brokenly to the plateau beneath the summit. This was the until-then unseen portion of our route; it looked crevassed, but promising.

There was but one thought in four minds that night. Three days perfect weather; was it possible we could have a fourth for our summit attempt? Already far higher than we had at one time dreamed possible, our nerves were on edge lest the unexpected cup of success be at this last minute cruelly dashed from our lips. The patter of snow on the tents late in the day had been dismissed as usual afternoon murk, but when we woke at 2 a.m. to what sounded like a raging blizzard, our hearts were fit to break with frustration. By 4.30, however, the clouds had thinned, and we made haste to depart. Mist boiled all round us, denying us the view and not infrequently enveloping us in gentle snow. But the day was climbable.

Only at one point was there much difficulty, in the crevassed corner beyond camp. Above this section, we settled in to the dull monotonous trudge that soft snow at high altitudes demands. Breathing got more and more laboured, and legs heavier to move; but at least the clouds preserved us from the blistering sun.

At 10.30 we reached the foot of the final snow cone. Rising some 800 ft. from the plateau, it presented a beautiful and formidable obstacle. But anything was better than the previous interminable plugging on gentle snow, and we attacked the steep 60° slopes with the nearest approach to relish that could be mustered at nearly 22,000 ft. To our good fortune we found conditions were perfect, but each step chipped in the firm snow had to be compensated for by several ragged breaths. Slowly, so slowly, altitude was gained. After 500 ft. the slope eased, and soft plugging took us under the 200-ft. curved ridge which forms the summit.

Expecting the same firm surface, we launched ourselves wearily at the face of this ridge, only to find ourselves, appalled, nearly thigh-deep in loose snow. Thoughts of avalanche danger were pushed aside with the summit so close. Near the limit of exhaustion now, we pushed and heaved our way up through the clinging snow, till Mike at length crawled on to the ridge. Then—an anguished yell from me to Dave and Tom below. Avalanche!! Splitting off not six inches from where I was belaying, a large wedge of snow thundered down the slope. The edge of the wedge brushed, but failed to dislodge Dave. Tom, Mike

and I were clear. With fearful caution, I moved across to belay in the firm snow now disclosed—only to be submerged by another smaller slide from above. Convinced Mike must be on this one, I crouched over my belay as the snow poured over me, waiting for the sudden shock on the rope as Mike reached its end. When everything cleared, however, there was Mike still on the ridge, anxiously awaiting the shock of my fall.

I joined him on the ridge. The actual summit was a few yards away, six feet higher, but consisted of the as yet undislodged remains of the avalanche snow. Mike and I decided to settle for what we had, but Dave, securely belayed by Tom, bravely edged out the final feet to dispel any doubt.

We had been unreasonably lucky. In our tight schedule we had two days left we could have spent on the mountain—a slender margin indeed, but plenty now we had accomplished our goal. But not only had we been fortunate temporarily. The mist and snow that enshrouded the summit and us, blotting out the eagerly awaited view of the lower peak, marked the end of the perfect days and seemed a fore-runner of the wet weather that could now be only a few days ahead. In the nick of time, in a most fortuitously placed spell of weather, we had rounded off a very successful expedition with an ascent of Kangtega. Bone-weary, we descended well content.