



51 The S side of Changabang. This and next three photos: D. Scott

# Changabang

Douglas Scott

At 5 o'clock in the afternoon of 4 June, 6 of us sat on a cone of snow high up in the Garhwal Himalaya. A cold wind blew wreaths of mist between us as we grunted monosyllables at each other. We had worked hard for a month to reach that spot and yet there we were too numb to communicate—dumb shells of our former exuberant selves. It was interesting to observe there was no back-slapping nor hand-shakes, a reluctance to photograph and only a strong feeling towards descending. Yet, we had climbed for 18 roped pitches up and along a beautiful knife-edged snow arête, overwhelmed with the setting as much as by the fine climbing and the good company we shared. Perhaps our feelings on that summit strengthen the point that every mountaineer has made at some time or other, that all the fun is in the getting to the top and not in arriving. It was also late in a day that had started 15 hours before with the certain prospect of a few hours more before we reached our tents on Changabang E face.

Just as we were about to depart, the mist cleared a little to reveal higher ground to the S. Balwant felt strongly that we should cut along the ridge to the very top although no technical problem now remained and it was no more than 50 ft higher. The rest of us were indifferent but we drew straws and Dougal and myself set off on this token gesture. The others would have come too but for the fact that 6 of us would have been a cumbersome number in descent and we really did want to be off the arête before dark. Whilst the others abseiled back down, we tramped along to a notch in the ridge and crossed over solid blocks of white, rough granite. That was the only time we had touched rock on our actual climb up Changabang. After one more rope length, we were walking together to the top of a snow-cone not much different from the other. We could see Martin hurtling down the ridge followed by Tashi and Balwant whilst Chris was in the rear taking photographs.

The mist blew right away and we could see Rishikot which Dougal and Chris had nearly climbed by the impressive ice-face on the W side. More than 2000 ft below us to the W, we looked down on Bagini Peak which Martin and I had climbed by the relatively easy S ridge. Dropping away from our feet towards Bagini Peak was 6000–7000 ft of very steep rock-face, huge and slightly convex, partly covered in hard green ice right down to the Bagini Glacier. The ridge we had followed to our present position continued down in a series of great steps towards 'Shipton's Col'.

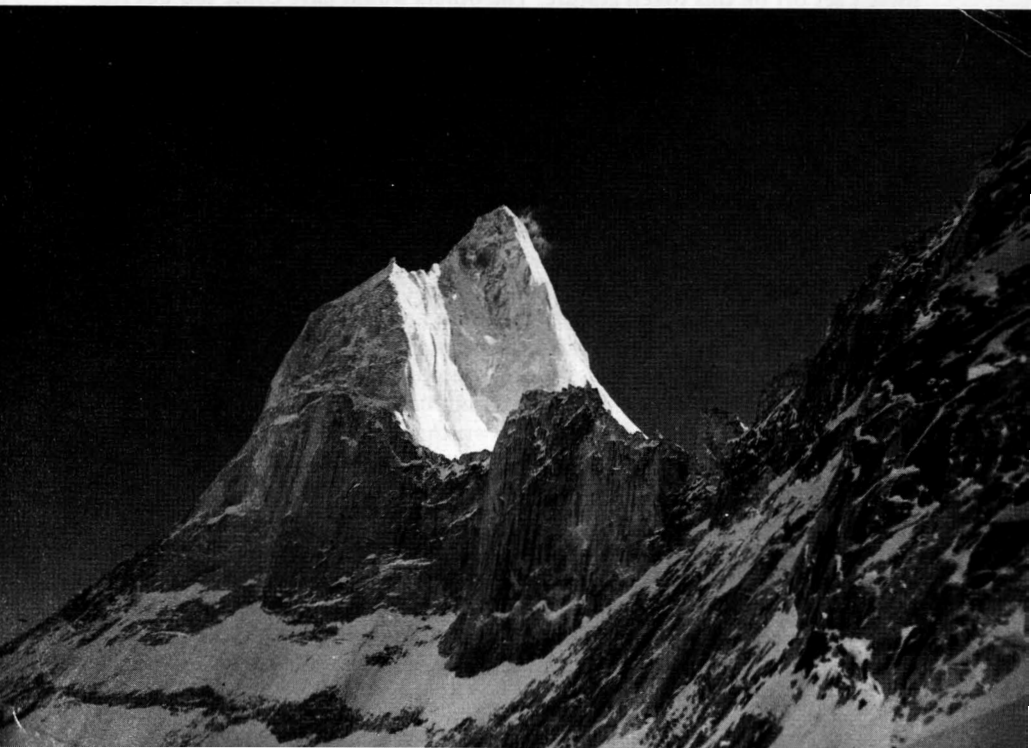
Martin and myself had reached the col after a 2 day effort by climbing up a steep snow-peak further S. We had then traversed a mile-long serrated ridge back N to the col. We left over 1000 ft of ropes fixed down to the Rhamani Glacier for future crossings. We had, in fact, all crossed over this col 4 days before and now turned back along our tracks to start the return journey back to Base Camp

on the Rhamani Glacier via Shipton's Col. We caught up with the others near the bottom of the arête and reached the col between Changabang and Kalanka in pitch darkness. We walked easily over a snow-dome and abseiled down a short step. There was now only one obstacle before camp, a 50° ice-slope undercut at its base which Chris had led in fine style at about 2 o'clock that morning. From the undercut we slithered down dry powder snow to the tents, pulled off our frozen double boots and slipped gratefully into bed. For an hour we had no energy left from our 20 hour day to shovel snow into pans and on to stoves for a brew.

Gradually, however, we warmed to the task and saturated our dehydrated bodies before lying back each with his own memories of the day on the arête. Already bad memories of the unstable snow lying on a cockscomb of friable ice were receding but views into mysterious Tibet stood out sharply in the mind's eye—strangely a patch-work of fields covering the plateaus—Kamet and Kailas dominating the high mountain ranges all lit up by a distant light shining beyond the grey skies that hung over the Garhwal. We drifted off at 6000 m into a fitful sleep.

The next morning it was snowing as we packed up the tents and set off down the slopes and ice-cliffs. Chris shot some ciné film of Balwant as all this section had been climbed at night by moonlight. There was one long abseil down a vertical wall which Dougal had led two days before at 1am. Then we made our own tracks down easier slopes crossing fresh avalanche debris before reaching

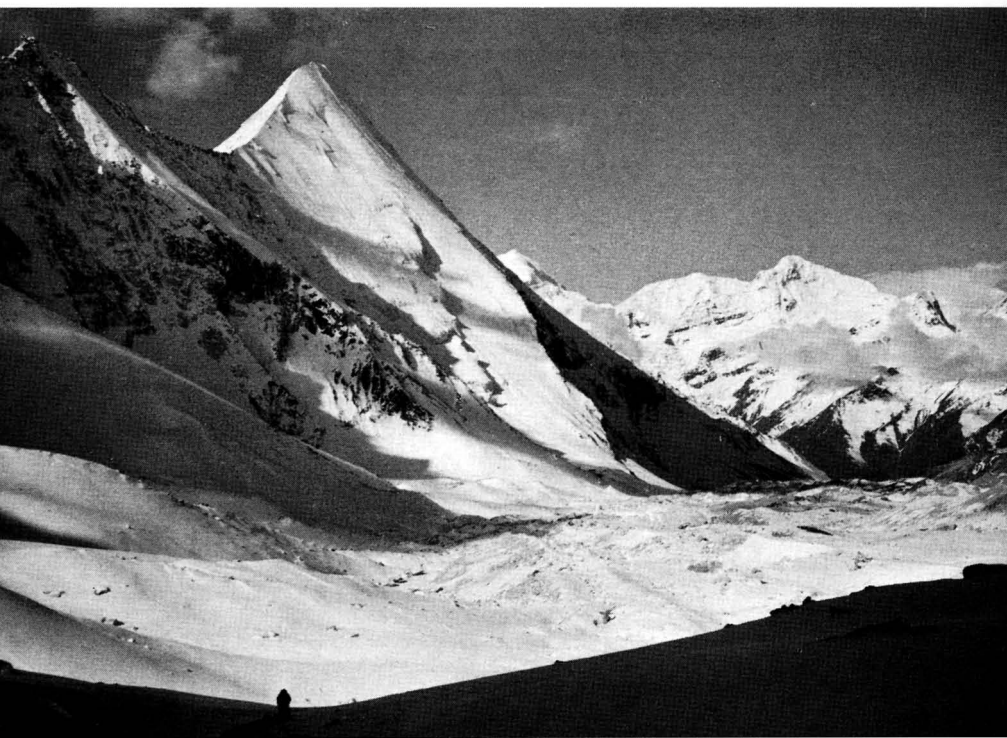
*52 Changabang from the Rhamani glacier*



the Changabang Glacier Camp (4300 m) for afternoon tea. We slept on till dusk and then with the soft wet snow marginally harder, Dougal and myself broke trail up to Shipton's Col with the others following behind. We descended the fixed ropes in the dark after clearing them of ice and one by one plodded across the 2 mile wide Rhamani Glacier to our Advance Base Camp (4300 m) and collapsed into our tents after 5 days' absence.

Next morning we walked down the moraine to Base Camp where we ate fresh fried eggs and drank gallons of fruit juice and tea. Devinder, our amiable Sikh doctor, Kumar who missed the climb because of an accident to his shoulder and Ujager who had been plagued with stomach troubles, all shared our pleasure at having climbed Changabang, as well they might. They had contributed to it in no small way by urging along the unwilling local porters, some of them right up to the snow-line.

At Base Camp, there was time to look around this perfect mountain area. Now that we had a better idea of the scale we were better placed to consider future objectives. Kalanka via the W arête at 6932 m would be a similar climb to the E Arête of Changabang. It tempted us greatly but as so often happens, our ambitions evaporated once the main objective had been reached. We had originally worked out routes on the W face of Changabang and up the interesting ridges and buttresses of the S side, ie from the region of Shipton's Col, but in June all the cracks were full of ice and many of the slabs too were plastered by wind-driven ice and snow. Thus we found ourselves on the wrong side of



## CHANGABANG

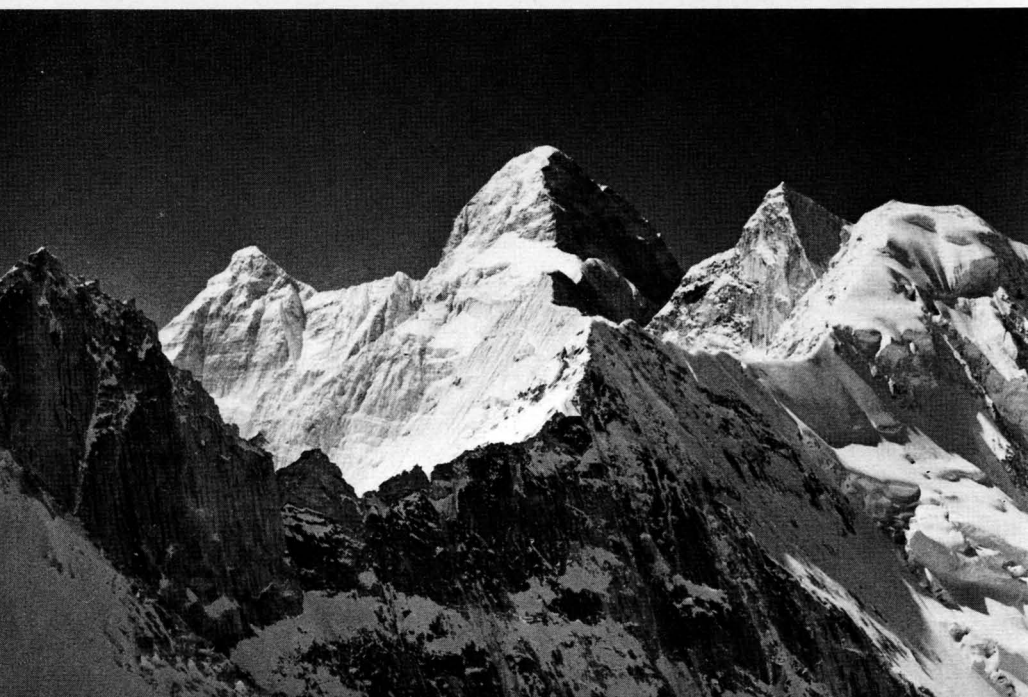
the mountain and hence the crossing of Shipton's Col. Possibly a strong party, well attuned to big wall climbing might succeed here in the autumn after a long dry period. They might consider taking a subsidiary spur that starts gently up from the Rhamani Glacier and rises steeply to join the S ridge about 1000 m from the summit.

There are a few other granite peaks in this core area of the Garwhal. Dunagiri (7067 m) is very much an alpine problem when viewed from the upper Rhamani Glacier. It would be a strong team that pushed a route up the E face. Perhaps for now the S and NE ridges would be better propositions. To the ENE of Dunagiri lies a fine unnamed peak with a long level summit ridge. The ridge descending to the Bagini pass looks interesting and the E face has some fine rock buttresses leading up from the Bagini Glacier which may be larger and not unlike the N side of the Grandes Jorasses.

Looking S from Changabang there is another fine unnamed peak all in granite, that has the appearance of a giant pyramid reaching 6400 m. Further S and opposite Base Camp is the elegant ice peak, Rishikot, which Chris and Dougal nearly climbed. They were only a few hundred ft from the top when the threat of an unplanned bivouac forced them back.

Beyond the immediate area, there are peaks aplenty and in all directions, many virgin and all of them with unclimbed faces and buttresses. Two of the highest Trisul (7120 m) and Nanda Devi (7817 m) are steeped in the history of British Himalayan exploration at its best—small parties of men, modest in means and

### *54 Nanda Devi from Bagini Peak*





manner taking on big commitments and succeeding after many trials. Longstaff, Shipton and Tilman were pre-eminent; Longstaff climbed Trisul in 1907 with the Brocherel brothers of Courmayeur and a Gurkhar, Kharbir. They climbed nearly 6000 ft in one day to reach the top and then descended the same evening some 7000 ft before camping for the night. They had climbed higher than anyone else had ever been at that time. Tilman with Odell reached the top of Nanda Devi in 1936. They were part of a small Anglo-American Expedition and achieved another altitude record for that time. Shipton had done much to map the area and had in the course of his work explored many of the glaciers and incidentally reached a point only 1000 ft below the top of Dunagiri. He preferred to travel with 2 Sherpas and they managed to stay in the field for months at a time humping all their own loads.

How did we compare? Well, with hindsight knowing the route and its problems, we might conceivably have managed with the 4 of us from Britain and 2 local men to help carry freeze-dried foodstuffs and a small amount of local produce up the Changabang Glacier all the way from Lata. As it was, we came to Changabang armed with all the modern big wall paraphernalia and masses of food to sustain several rebuffs. This part of the expedition was organised by the Indian army climbers and their logistical organisation could not be faulted. In the event from where they finished supplying Base Camp, the 6 of us were forced to travel light, for the locals were not able to cross Shipton's Col by technical rope manoeuvres and the 3 to 4 days' food we took was just sufficient. Here, where it mattered, our predecessors would have been proud of us.

Naturally we all thought about returning for another joint Anglo-Indian expedition. The seeds of friendship which Chris had sown in Darjeeling and in Kashmir during previous years had borne fruit, for we had found the Indians not only delightful companions but also skilled climbers. Balwant Sandhu turned out to be a natural alpinist and Tashi from Darjeeling also climbed well. Despite many divergent individuals in the team and precipitation on every day of the expedition, except the summit day, we all worked well together to climb this fine peak.