A Winter Journey Through Eastern Nepal

Ian Haig
Plates 37–40

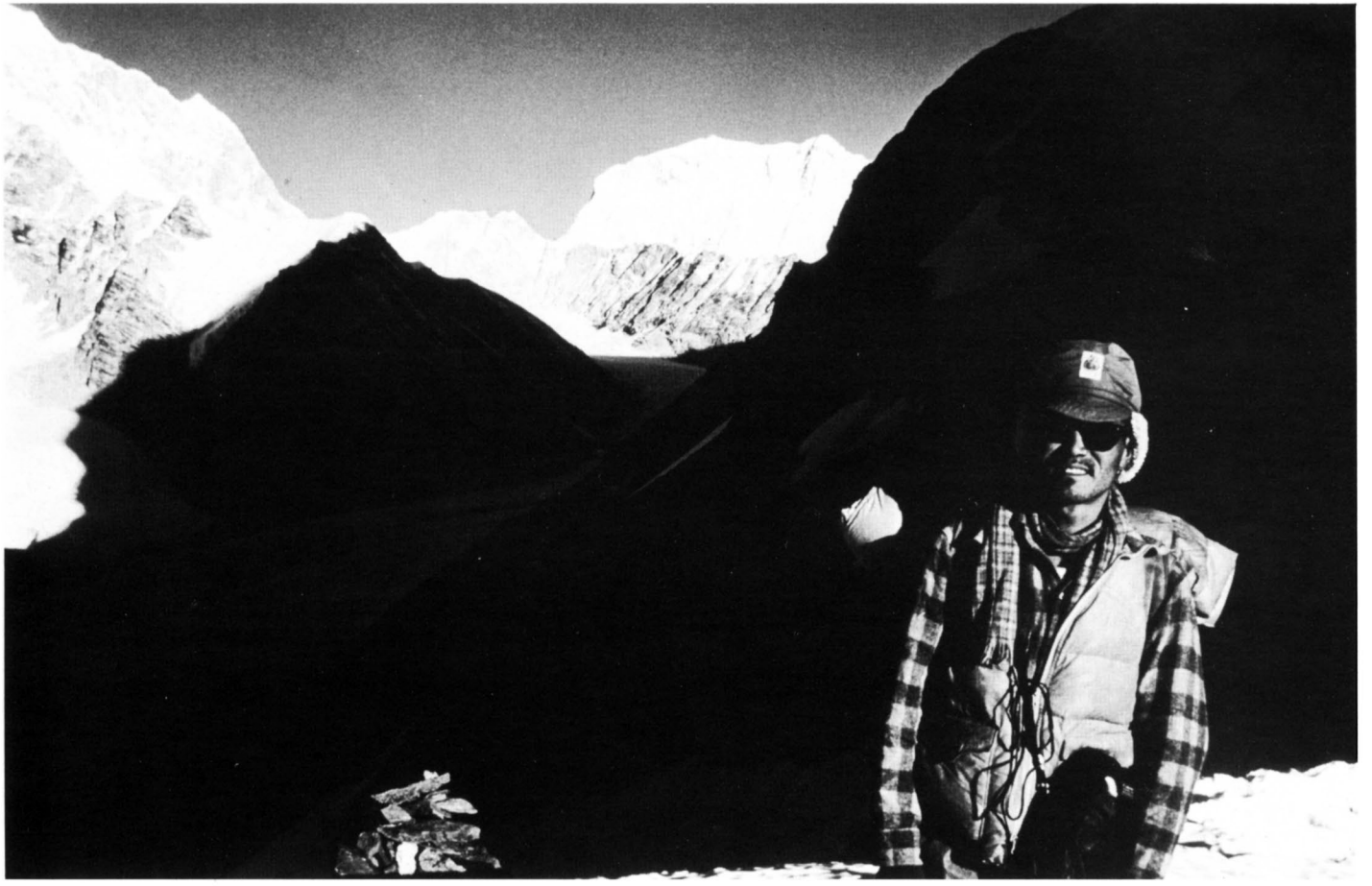
The twin Otter 'plane slipped over the last intervening ridge and began its descent to Lukla in the Dudh Kosi valley. The ground now seemed to be rushing up towards the plane as it rapidly lost height. Moments later, with the engines roaring, the plane hit the hard dirt runway with a terrific bump and came to a stop in 50m. Anu, the sirdar, and his team of Sherpas, who were to support me for the next five weeks of trekking and climbing through Eastern Nepal were there to meet me. I quickly located him and was soon introduced to Ang Nyima the second Sherpa, and Ang Pema, the cook.

I had travelled on my own with local men before, in Ladakh, and had found the experience much to my liking, so I had resolved to make a similar journey through Eastern Nepal. I had been told that the winter months in Nepal were the best, so here I was in Khumbu towards the end of November. The plan was quite vague to begin with; first, spend a little time in the Khumbu villages acclimatising, then go up the Bhot Kosi valley to the Tashi Lapcha to try the peak called Pharchamo, return to Khumbu; then cross into Hongu over the Mingbo La, march around to the Mera La, try Mera, back to Lukla and finally take the Tilman route from Lukla to Tumlingtar across Nepal. It all sounded very simple and it had the merit that, for the most part, it took me off the heavily frequented Everest Base Camp trek route.

On arrival at Anu's house in Khumjung, Pasang Phutar, Anu's wife, who was a leading Khumjung citizen and a member of the local *Panchayat* (Council), made me most welcome. Their two little boys Mingma Nurbu and Pemba Gyaltzen and their little girl, Mingma, just could not get over my being about the house. I was soon sitting by the fire in the upstairs room, cradling some hot chang to warm myself against the chill of the late November evening.

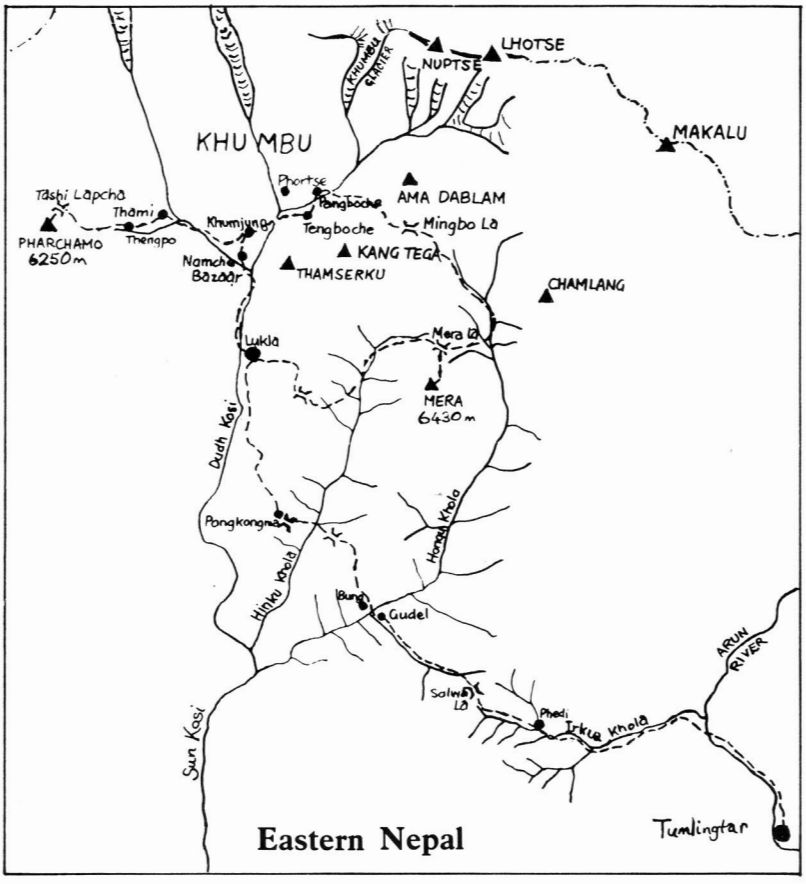
After a brief stay, we set off in brilliant cold sunlight from Khumjung for Tengboche. The smoke from the cooking fires of the Sherpa township formed a blue cloud in the still air. Cows and yaks with their tingling bells were being driven by small boys up the slopes of Khumbui Yal Lha above the village to graze on what they could find on the sparse hillside. Crows floated around uttering their harsh cries keeping watch for any scraps that might be thrown out. We stopped briefly at the Shrine in the centre of Khumjung for Anu to pray and for him to show me the Yeti scalp that is kept in a box there. This was the scalp taken around the world by a special Sherpa representative described by Desmond Doig in *High in the Thin Cold Air*.[1]

We had come to Tengboche Monastery or Gompa for Mane Rimdu, which is the major Sherpa festival in Khumbu; so had hundreds of others! In fact, the green meadows were a veritable forest of tents, trekkers, Sherpas and traders.



37 The Drolambao glacier seen from Tashi Lapcha.

Photo: Ian Haig



The Gompa Hotel/Lodge did a roaring trade, selling, according to Anu, the most expensive chang he had ever come across. Still three glasses of chang at 3 rupees each compared rather well with a bottle of beer at 50 rupees. The Lamas certainly had an eye to turning the festival to good account. Mane Rimdu is a splendid mixture of religious fervour, dancing, drinking and merry-making and large numbers of Sherpas come from throughout Khumbu to join in the fun. The processions, prayers and wonderfully graceful dancing of the Lamas, magnificent in their brilliant silk costumes, are quite unforgettable. None of us had much sleep due to the incessant noise from crowds of friends merry-making all night and the intermittent groaning and parping of the huge alpenhorn-like trumpets of the Monastery.

After the partying, we headed for the more serious stuff up the Bhot Kosi to Thame on our way to the Tashi Lapcha and Pharchamo. But once again we had some calls to make. As Anu quaintly put it, we were to visit his wife's two fathers! One lived at Thame, the other at Thengpo. Naturally, I was intrigued by this interesting state of affairs. All was soon explained, the mother of Pasang

Photo: Ian Haig

38 *Mera (L) and Hinku (L centre) seen from the Zatra la path.*

Phutar, Anu's wife, had married two brothers. It was in fact a polyandrous marriage which, I learnt, was not very common in Khumbu these days. Both fathers were very prosperous, dignified elderly men who owned large numbers of yaks. Pasang Phutar's mother was a very hospitable and kindly woman who provided us with some really excellent chang when we called at her house.

That evening, three Tibetans from Tingri came in to talk and trade with Gyaltzen, Anu's brother-in-law. They had come over the Nangpa La, the traditional route between Tibet and Khumbu. The men were noticeably different in height and dress from the Sherpas. They were taller, somewhat dishevelled and dressed in strongly smelling sheepskins. Each man wore a necklace of semi-precious stones which the Sherpas tried to buy from them. They had brought rock salt which they showed me, to trade for food and other supplies. The next morning they were gone.

We made a leisurely start, our idea being to take it easy to Thengpo, only two hours away, and have lunch with the second father. He, too, was most hospitable. Our afternoon walk along heathery hillsides up the deep trench of the Tashi Lapcha valley, gave delightful views back to the Khumbu peaks and the Mingbo La over which I hoped to cross into Hongu a week later.

An undemanding stage brought us to a snow bowl where we camped just about 300m from the top of the pass and clear of stonefall from Tengi Ragi Tau. I spent a wretched night, not getting more than a couple of hours sleep before I was called at 4.30am. We were away by first light and as I had had little to eat I made sure that my pockets were crammed with Kendal mint cake.

We were soon on the easy ledges that led up on to the névé and there, seemingly very close, was the blue Vee in the sky of the Tashi Lapcha. The sun was now up and its warmth began to revive me so that I pressed forward more strongly towards the pass. There, we were met by an icy blast from the west wind. We put on everything we had, I crammed mint cake into my mouth and we turned towards the icy ridge of Pharchamo.

The ridge steepened so we roped up and started kicking steps. The conditions were superb, the front points of the crampons bit beautifully into the 50° ice slope. On the right far below, the Drolambao glacier stretched up into the heart of the Rolwaling Himal, with cold icy peaks standing sentinel on either side. On the left was our camp on the glacier and there, far beyond, all the mighty peaks of Eastern Khumbu. I went at the slope now with a will, exhilarated by my fine position, panting furiously after every 20 steps. The angle eased and we now found ourselves at a bergschrund, above which the ridge steepened again. It was a long awkward step up, which required a strong pull up on the ice axe, not the easiest thing to do at nearly 6000m. Another ice slope followed, also in superb condition. All this time, I was steadily munching my way through my Kendal mint cake to power me up the mountain. But my drive was now fading and I suggested that we stop for lunch. Unfortunately when the food was unpacked I discovered that Ang Pema had put in no potatoes, cheese or dried fruit for me but only food for the Sherpas. So swallowing my annoyance I nibbled some of the Sherpas' food and concentrated on filming the stupendous views of the Rolwaling and Khumbu Himalaya. I was beginning to feel fairly exhausted, after such a bad night and lack of

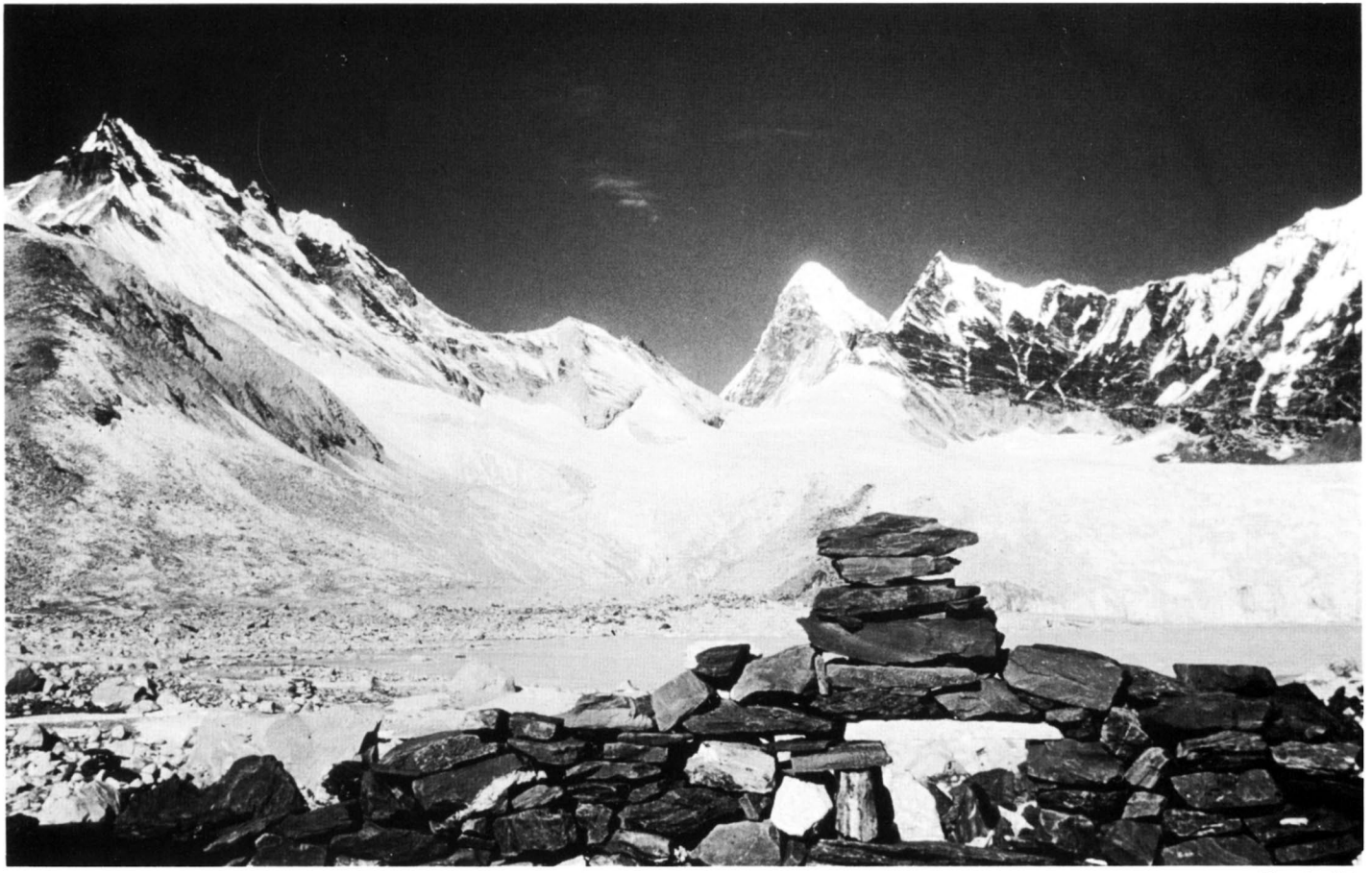


Photo: Ian Haig

39 Ama Dablam seen through the Mingbo la from the ruined hut in the upper Hongu.

acclimatisation. I estimated we were some 100m from the top, but that the ridge went on for some way yet. So, reluctantly, I decided to return.

The descent of the ice slopes went well and I did the long jump across the bergschrund without tumbling over down the ridge. When we reached the col, it was a pleasure to get out of the roaring wind into the relative calm of the lee of the mountain. On reaching camp Ang Pema produced a tin of mixed fruit half of which I gobbled down much too quickly and was promptly sick. Later by degrees I began to recover my strength through drinking a large quantity of sweet milky tea. The Sherpas were now anxious to be off. We decided to aim for Thengpo which we reached just before nightfall. We had been going with only two half-hour breaks for 14 hours.

Having said our good-byes in Thengpo the next day to Anu's second father-in-law and his little girl we set off down to Thame at a cracking pace. At the monastery just above Thame, we met Dr Gil Roberts, who had been on the successful 1963 American Everest West Ridge Expedition. After hearing where we had been, he told me of epic crossings he had made of the Tashi Lapcha.

Our journey back to Khumjung was enlivened by meeting quite a number of Sherpas staggering back to Thame in a cheerful mood having imbibed chang and rakshi rather generously at the Saturday market in Namche Bazaar.

After a rest in Khumjung, we set out for the Hongu valley. We crossed the Imja Khola and began the long trudge up the hillside to Llabarma. Pumori could now be seen, perfectly framed at the head of the valley running up to Everest. Anu told me it was one of the most beautiful peaks in the Himalaya, with which I concurred, and how much he wanted to climb it. He suggested that I should organise an expedition to it with himself as Sirdar, so he could climb it. I, of course, agreed! I later checked up on its availability and found that many others agreed with him on its attractiveness. It was booked for years ahead. I also learnt from Anu how much he wanted to climb Everest. He had been six times without oxygen to camps above the South Col and had lost count of how many times he had been to the Col itself. He could describe in minute detail the ordinary route up the mountain, excepting the icefall which changed all the time. I hoped, for his sake, that he would find an expedition that would give him the chance to fulfil his heart's desire.

We made camp at the end of the level grassy area above Mingbo, used by Hillary as an airstrip to supply his expedition in 1960-61. It was a delightful place with a fine prospect in the evening light of Taboche and Gyachung Kang. I fell asleep that night to the haunting songs of the Sherpas and Sherpanis sitting round the fire.

Despite the bitter cold we were off early. As always the view on the left was of Ama Dablam, brooding heavily over us. Anu pointed out two of the tents of a Korean expedition who were climbing the mountain by the ordinary route. Not surprisingly, he had a great deal of respect for Ama Dablam. As we rounded a corner, we caught sight of the Mingbo La, which we intended to cross on the morrow. It still looked a long way. We eventually reached the site of Hillary's green hut in the late afternoon after a lengthy tramp up the moraine. The cold mists came up again in the evening and blotted out the scene so I was glad to turn in soon after supper.

Photo: Ian Haig

40 *The Rolwaling Himal seen from the Zatra la.*

We made another very early start as we intended to cross the Mingbo La and the glacier in Hongu. The unnamed peaks at the head of this valley are an awesome sight of steep glittering fluted ice, and are mostly unclimbed. Very soon after starting, we entered a small icefall so our route looped backwards and forwards to avoid the crevasses. The snow conditions were excellent so the Sherpanis and Sherpas in their basketball boots negotiated the glacier with ease. Anu and Ang Nyima rushed ahead to set up the fixed ropes while Ang Pema and I brought up the rear. By the time I reached the bottom of the ice flutings, half the party were already up and the Sherpanis, climbing unroped, were doing splendidly in the steps cut for them by Anu. Much to my delight, I was able to record their feat on my cine, to the accompaniment of whistles and shouts from those at the top. At 5800m the Mingbo La gave superb views across the Hongu basin to Chamlang and Baruntse in the east and to the Rolwaling Himal in the west. There was a great deal of discussion amongst the Sherpas over the views as most of them had never been into Hongu. After half an hour on the pass, I took my last lingering look at Khumbu and trudged off down the glacier. It was now late afternoon and, in the lengthening shadows, the cold was bitter. I reached camp at about 4.30pm very cold and exhausted but very satisfied by our successful crossing of the pass.

The upper Hongu is a wild, desolate place with Lhotse and Everest looming at its head and Chamlang and unnamed peaks on opposite sides forming the Hongu into a deep trench. It can only be entered over very high passes and is not a place to fall ill, as evacuation would be difficult. As winter was now beginning all the lakes we passed on our long walk down the valley were frozen, so we amused ourselves as we passed, by sending stones skating across the ice.

We could now see Mera, our next objective. It looked very straightforward but was obviously a long way from the Mera La. Anu pointed out the rognon where we would make our high camp; I reflected that it looked like a windy place. Naulekh, Mera's sister peak, also looked a very inviting but straightforward prospect. I was interested to know if there was any pass by which one could cross the wall of the upper Hongu valley before Chamlang, so as to cross into the Arun river system. But an examination through my cine viewfinder did not show up any immediate obvious weakness.

As we ascended from the Mera La, the views to the north and west of Gyachung Kang, Everest, Makalu and Chamlang, expanded all the time. Our camp at the rognon on a large ledge above the Naulekh glacier had a superb view of Kangchenjunga 130km away through a gap in the eastern Hongu valley wall. We anchored our tents securely, but even so the strength of the wind caused us to sling another rope around each one. I still had one or two alarming moments during the night when I felt the tent billowing up under me and I thought I would find myself flying down to the glacier far below. Dawn was exquisite as the rising sun behind Kangchenjunga, turned the snow pink.

That next morning I had enormous trouble getting my boots and gaiters on, but after some fierce pushing and pulling I was ready to go. The snow was perfect and we crunched steadily uphill. We trended to the left as the way steepened but our crampons were biting crisply, so there was no difficulty.

Every now and then we stopped for me to film and take photographs. I was

gradually slowing up due to the altitude. Higher up a bitter wind blew spindrift into our faces. We reached the E summit of Mera at 6400m, three and three-quarter hours after starting. It is a wonderful viewpoint standing back from the main line of the Himalaya and sufficiently high to overtop its nearest neighbours. From its summit you can see most of the Eastern Himalaya and no less than five, 8000m peaks: Cho Oyu, Everest, Lhotse, Makalu and Kangchenjunga. To the south we could see wave upon wave of blue hills descending, to the Indian plains and there, glittering in the sunshine some 60km away was the great Arun river. A little down the leeside we found a place we could crouch out of the wind to eat our lunch. We considered but rejected going on to the summit about 1km away and about 20m higher, but into the teeth of the wind. We made it back to the tents by the early afternoon and descended down to the Hinku valley to camp just before nightfall.

We now took it more easily down the Hinku and then climbed up over the Zatra La to return to the Dudh Kosi valley. Crossing the pass and seeing the familiar peaks of the Rolwaling Himal was like meeting old friends again. The descent down the other side was long, steep, and not a little awkward.

Ten days after leaving Pangboche, we reached Lukla. Perhaps a discreet veil should be drawn over our activities in Lukla, but suffice it to say that our very jolly celebration that evening at a Sherpa hotel drew down the wrath of the local police for keeping the township awake. We made a rather hurried and surreptitious exit early next morning for Chutok.

The last part of the trek, which would take me across Eastern Nepal to Tumlingtar on the Arun river, was to be a contrast to the rugged stuff we had been doing up till then. From Chutok the route took us pleasantly to Pangkongma, a village of friendly people and fine houses. That evening the atmosphere was idyllically still. Some smoke from forest fires formed a layer right across the valley so that the Rolwaling peaks seemed to float magically above the earth in the sunset.

Later as we climbed up through Gudel, crossing the grain of the middle hills, I understood the frustration Tilman[2] felt, which he put into his little verse:

'For dreadfulness, naught can excel,
The prospect of Bung from Gudel;
And words die away on the tongue,
When we look back on Gudel from Bung.'

The route then passed through some wild forest country and over the Salwa La, which formed the watershed between the Dudh Kosi and Arun river systems. The journey was enlivened by troops of wild grey and brown monkeys leaping about in the trees along the way. They were completely unimpressed by our whistles. Finally, on the tenth day after leaving Lukla, we turned a large spur, dividing the Irkua Khola from the Arun and there below us saw the mighty jade-green river that rises in Tibet and cuts its way right through the Himalaya range. All that now remained was the ferry crossing and a long trudge down the quiet reaches teeming with bird life to Tumlingtar, our journey's end.

1. Sir E. Hillary and D. Doig — *High in the Thin Cold Air.*
2. H. W. Tilman — *Nepal Himalaya.*