

THE GERMAN SIKKIM EXPEDITION, 1936¹

By PAUL BAUER

Translated

RECENT Asiatic expeditions have led to the question whether the presence of many mountaineers and porters is really essential for the conquest of Himalayan giants, or whether a party of three or four amateurs, with a reduced number of porters, is not really a far cheaper and more repaying proposition.

To act on this latter principle, we started accordingly from Germany on July 10, just a group of four mountaineers. All our objectives were based on the presence of but four or five porters. I was acting as leader and my companions were: Dr. Karl Wien, in charge also of the scientific and photogrammetrical studies; Dr. Günther Hepp, who besides acting as doctor looked after the physiological work; and Adolf Göttner. Our object was to see how far such a small and mobile party could progress. We wished besides to train the leader also as a nucleus for the fourth attempt on Nanga Parbat, and test once again the equipment, provisions and methods required for the said attempt.

Our mountain objectives were the savage and incomparable peaks neighbouring on Kangchenjunga. During our attempt on the latter in 1929 and 1931,² the former, although perpetually staring us in the face, had had to be neglected in view of our still higher aims. We knew, of course, that in the vicinity of Kangchenjunga there existed also unknown and secret glens, covered in their damp and ravine-like recesses with luxuriant vegetation—great, deeply-cut chasms on one side, indescribably fierce rock splinters and towering séracs on the other—the whole of which must form an unequalled picture.

The Sikkim authorities and its inhabitants were full of pleasant memories to us; everywhere we met old acquaintances who again helped us joyfully. The paths had much improved; one can now motor as far as Gangtök, while onwards to Lachen

¹ See in general, Marcel Kurz's 1 : 100,000 'Kangchenjunga' map, *A. J.* 44, and especially Karl Wien's 'Zemu Glacier' 1 : 33,333, *H. J.* vii.

² *A. J.* 42. 73-7, 185-202; 44. 13-24.

mules³ can be taken without much risk of land-slides. Moreover, in this latter village the natives had become experienced as porters, so that without delay we could transport our kit from Darjeeling to our base camp on the Zemu Glacier—at about 4500 m. Here, on the day of arrival, August 16, we discharged the bulk of the porters who had carried food, tents and equipment for ourselves and for our own men, in 49 loads, each weighing approximately 60 lbs. We now began our real activities with two picked Sherpas and two Bhutias.

Towering right above the tents of the base camp, rose Siniolchum, an ice peak of such beauty and steepness that perhaps no other peak in the world can compete with. Often had we gazed at it—in 1929 for months at a time—yet never had the idea entered our heads that perhaps we could climb it, so sharp and repellent did it appear. In 1931 we had once more lived for weeks and months in its vicinity when gradually a doubt had come to some of us as to its inaccessibility; above all we had seen from high up on the N.E. spur of Kangchenjunga that the W. arête was certainly possible along big stretches. Now we had arrived with the firm intention of trying the mountain. We had naturally never mentioned our plan because it would have been considered impossible or too ambitious.

As soon as the base camp had been arranged, we set off straightway on August 18 to assault Siniolchum, while strength and will remained as yet unimpaired. However, we made little progress as much soft and rotten snow lay on the glacier, while snow fell incessantly. We advanced very slowly over the flat glacier terraces and it was not feasible to attack the face. On August 21, after three days' struggle, we had to turn back in a snow-blizzard, from about 5200 m. on the great ice terrace abutting close against the N. face. We did not abandon hope, although bad weather had prevented any view of the upper part of the glacier and the peak itself had concealed, consequently, its many secrets; on the contrary we were firmly resolved to return, and accordingly left behind part of the food, kit and especially our ice pitons on the spot. But we were not destined to retrieve them, for on our return a month later the depth of névé had increased by more than six feet.

The great accumulations of snow, lying at this height on the Siniolchum Glacier, forced us to bear S.E. on August 23, trusting to find less snow on the lower peaks in that direction. As objective, the picture of the stupendous Siniolchum Needle obtained from the S. by Allwein and Pircher in 1931⁴ drew us

³ A. J. 48. 223-4.

⁴ A. J. 44. illustration facing 23.

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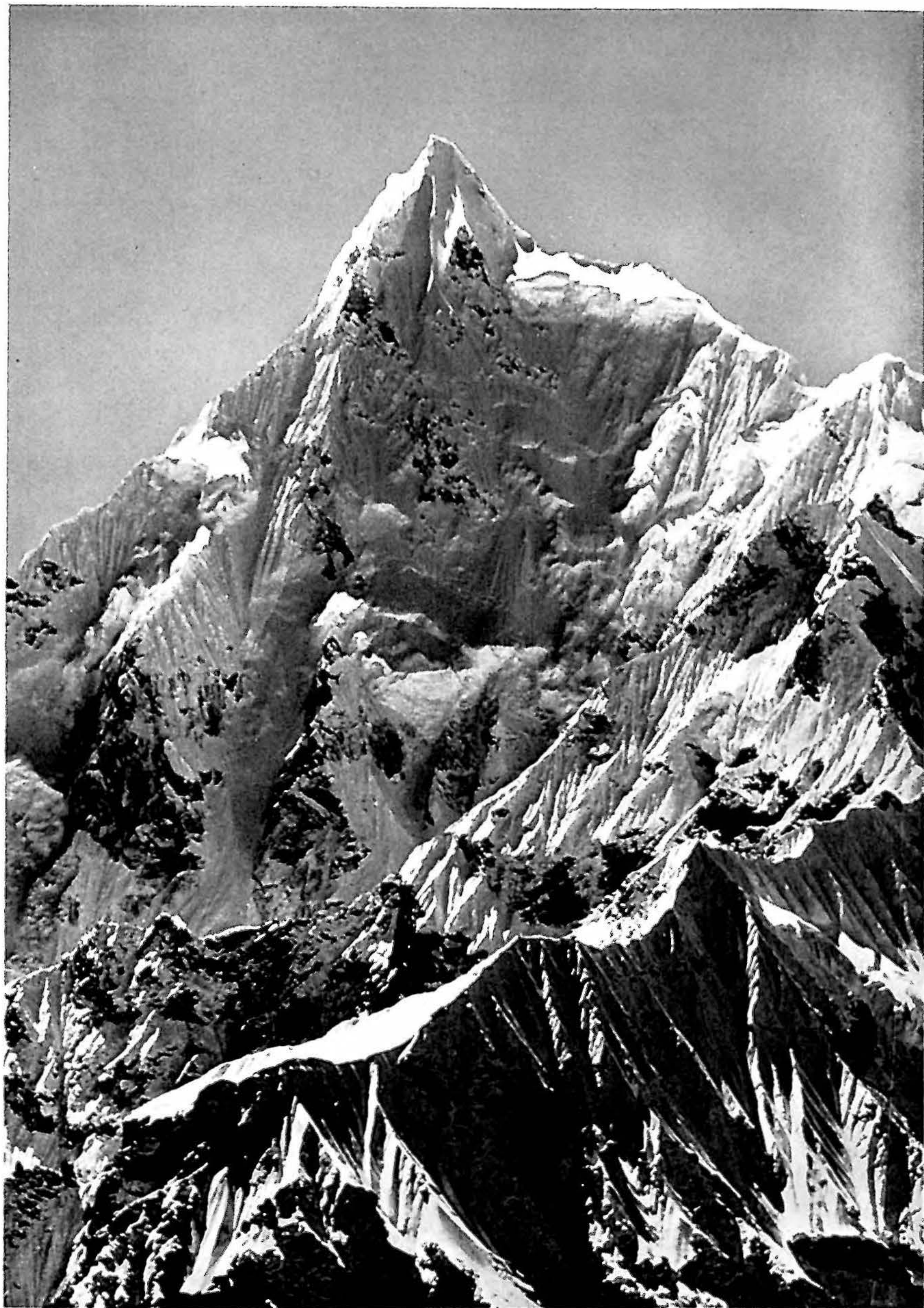


Photo, A. Göttner.]

SINIOLCHUM FROM A POINT NEAR BASE CAMP, 1936.

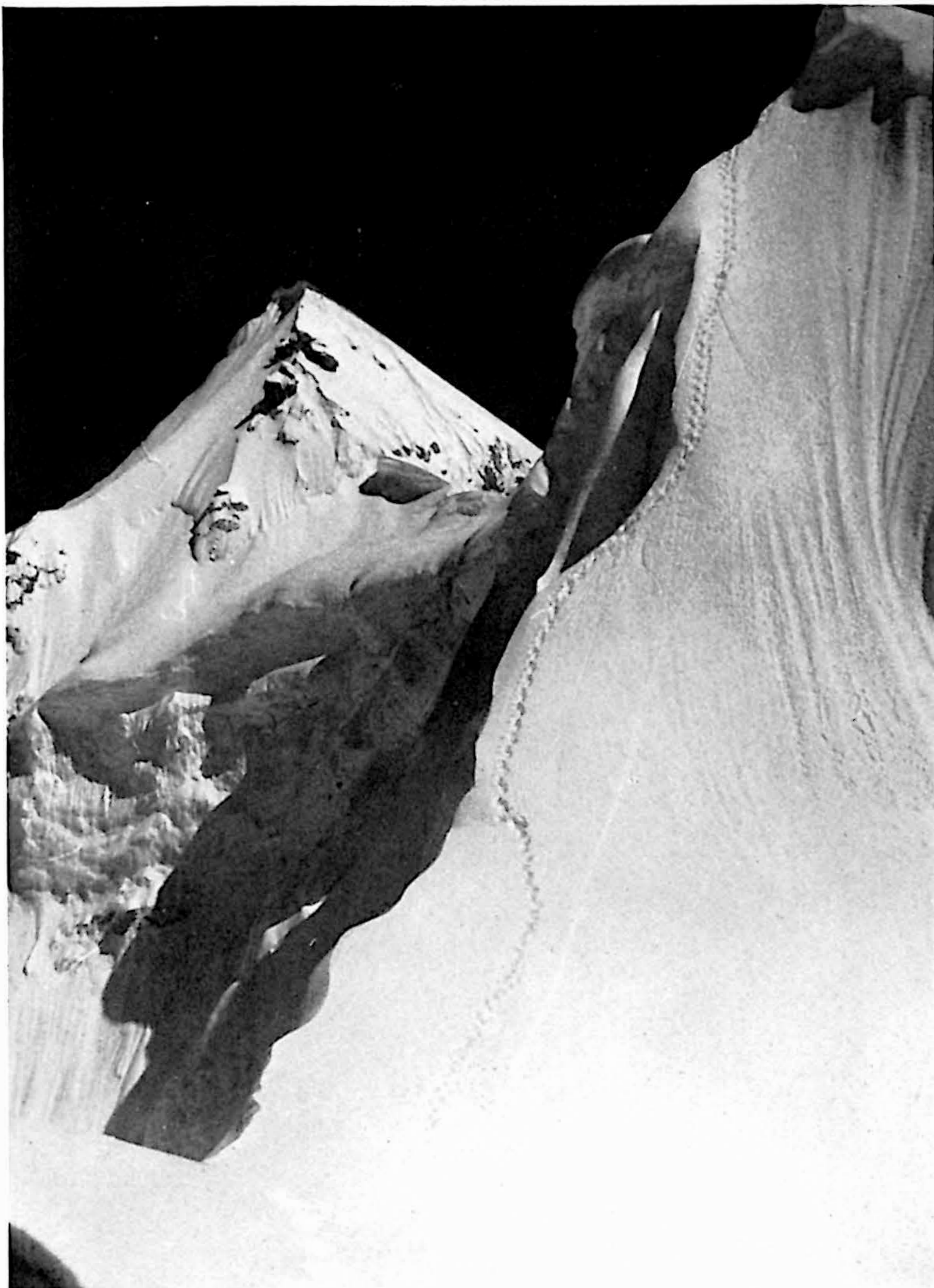
----- route concealed.

x bivouac.



Telephoto, A. Göttner.]

SUMMIT OF SINIOLCHUM FROM THE 'STONE PASS,' 1936.



Photo, G. Hepp.]

SINIOLCHUM, LOOKING TOWARDS SUMMIT FROM NOTCH ABOVE POINT 6470 M.,
SHOWING PARTY JUST BELOW CORNICHE, 1936.

thither. Surrounding this wondrous pinnacle lay glens, the westernmost ⁵ of which alone had once been traversed by Allwein and Pircher. Those to the E. were quite unknown.

We experienced there the supreme delights of the explorer—the sight of glaciers, glens and mountains that no one had ever seen. Close to the enormous 28,000-ft. Kangchenjunga massif lies a fascinatingly wild and varying landscape composed of far greater masses than ever seen in Europe and, enchanting as are our own Alps, yet a country where with one look one can embrace the green and variegated colours of meadow and rhododendron forest together with sharp-serrated rocks and threatening séracs, must far surpass them. Never shall we forget the sight when in the evening of the fifth day, smothered in cloud and camping in dripping rhododendrons, we beheld, without any warning, the mists dispersing through which we had vainly peered for ages, knowing that below us lay the mysterious main valley; suddenly, I say, came that clear view into the recesses of the Zemtú Glacier glen which no man's eye had ever beheld before.

There before us leapt upwards our longed-for Siniolchum Needle, inaccessible from this side: 6000 ft. of hopeless slabs of rock seamed with hanging glaciers. We bore up across the Zemtú valley and came into a little glacier glen leading towards the back of the Needle on its S.E. flank. Despite pouring rain we forced our way ceaselessly upwards and together with our trusty dog, Wastl, who had accompanied us from Gangtok, attained a depression, *ca.* 5200 m. We named this *Kukur* Gap (*Nepali* for dog); it must lead into the Passanram valley ⁶ but nothing could be seen; only the endless crash of falling stones warned us that it must lie very steep and deep below us.

Ceaseless rain drove us yet again from the locality. Again we left provisions and kit behind, but this time dumped pitons and the long ropes on the Gantsa Glacier, intending after the worst of the monsoon to return thither once more. Yet these articles also were destined to remain unfound. On the return journey a fine day suddenly appeared. In the greatest haste, Hepp and Göttner climbed the N. peak of LIKLO, *ca.* 5800 m., a most imposing object in the eastern part of this region. All attempts made by Wien and myself on this day, August 31, to indulge in photography, were stopped by the depth of cloud concealing always the fundamental object.

Following this struggle with the dreadful weather, we turned to the N.W., knowing from previous experience that the summer monsoon winds, bringing rain and snow, lose their power there

⁵ *A. J.* 44. 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*



Telephoto, A. Göttner.]

LIKLO FROM THE NORTHERN CHAIN, 1936.

away behind the Kangchenjunga massif. After a three days' march along the Zemu and Nepal Gap Glaciers, we arrived on September 6 below Nepal Gap and camped at about 6000 metres. The weather was distinctly better there. We experienced several days without snow until the usual afternoon fall and even these falls were of lesser depth, while the mornings were often fine.

Next we tried the 7000–7200-m.-high Twins by the E. arête. Göttner, Hepp and Wien made the attempt, but snow conditions compelled them to give up after they had tried for a whole day—they reached an altitude of about 6400 m. The snow was often more than knee-deep and so slushy that it was impossible to secure foothold or safeguard the party. They bivouacked on the ridge during their return, arriving below on the following morning. I had gone up early to Nepal Gap to try the N. arête of the Twins, but it appeared to be distinctly harder than the other.

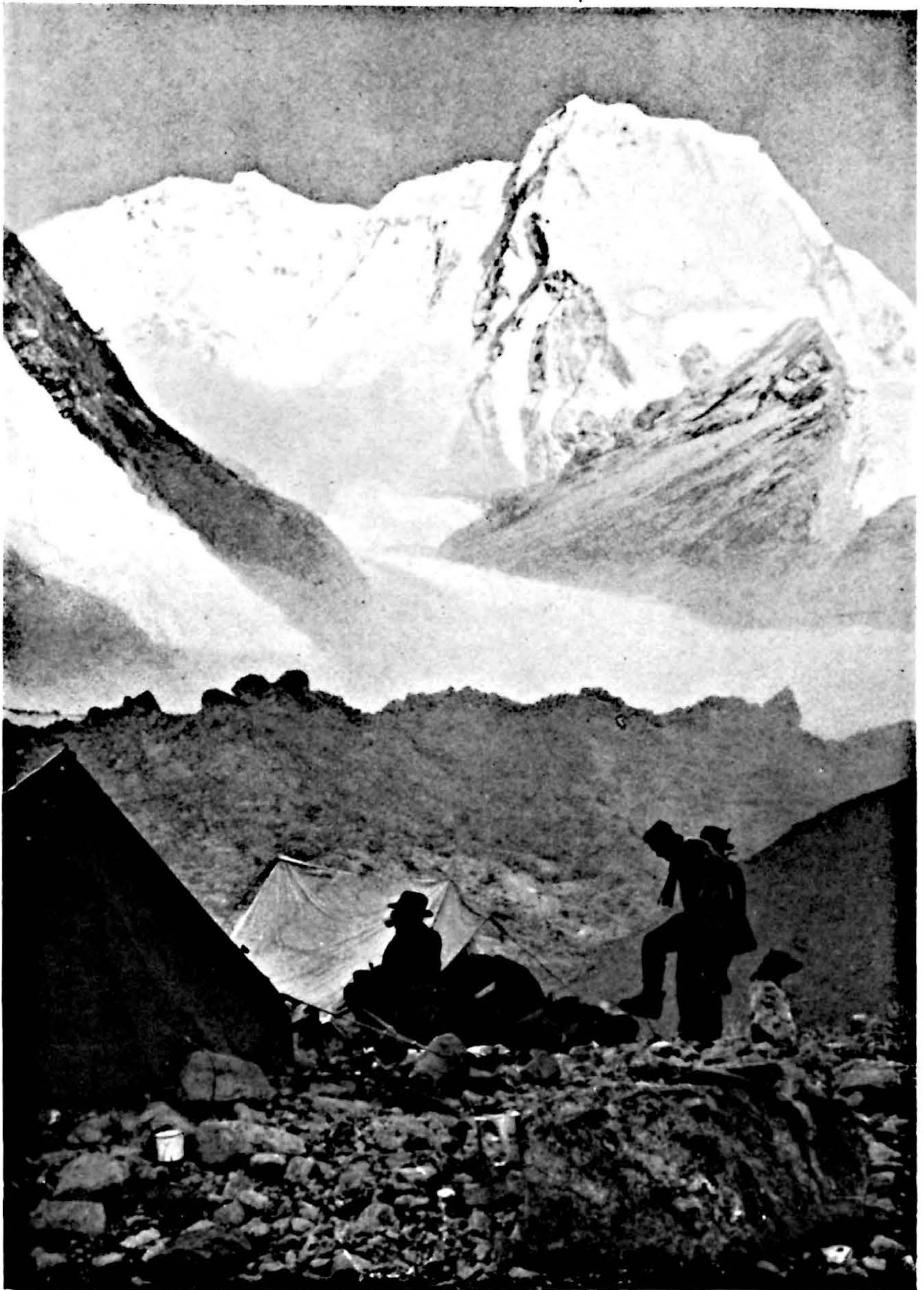
Accordingly we turned towards the *ca.* 7400-m.-high Tent Peak. The approach leads over the S. arête where we hoped the sun on the last day had sufficiently consolidated the snow. At first this proved to be the case ; after a start at 04.00 we made rapid progress, but then the sun began to soften the névé, clouds rolled up again in the afternoon, while the advance grew slower and slower ; finally it became evident that we could hardly ascend Tent Peak. We changed plans, Hepp and I turned back, while the others were anxious to make a further attempt. We two soon got into trouble : a side buttress, which had appeared feasible from above and below, assumed for about 500 ft. the characteristics of the N.E. spur of Kangchenjunga and compelled us to bivouac. Göttner and Wien, for their part, bivouacked in a natural ice-grotto in the ridge at nearly 7000 metres. By the following morning the wind had swept the snow, fallen during the night, on to our side of the peak ; they sank thigh-deep at times and progress was barely possible. After many hours they finally attained the SECOND PEAK, 7163 m., but the ridge leading to the following top of Nepal Peak and falling at a tremendous angle for more than 3500 ft. on the Nepalese slope, proved difficult and dangerous owing to the deep and moist snow masses encumbering it. They might have been able to penetrate nearly as far as the next hump, whence they could have obtained a view of the angle formed by Tent Peak, but it was really *too* dangerous. A great piece of corniche broke away, luckily without evil consequences, while the remainder of the crest became so unstable that it could be attempted no longer.

This happened on September 10. Already at nightfall, as we all assembled together in our camp on the Nepal Gap Glacier,

Nepal Peak, 23,470 ft.



Tent Peak, 24,090 ft.



Photo, G. Hepp.]

TENT AND NEPAL PEAKS AT DAWN, FROM NEPAL GAP GLACIER CAMP, 1936.

ominous tokens of a blizzard appeared over Nepal Gap. We settled accordingly to turn back as quickly as possible to our base camp, so as to escape actual burial by the expected snowstorm. Nevertheless we did not quite accomplish the stage to the base on the next day; some of the packs had to be dumped *en route* as too heavy for a forced march—these loads we did not see again for more than a week—while the rearguard, compelled to bivouac yet again, underwent the greatest labour next day in forcing their way through heavy snow to the base.

It snowed without a break for forty-two hours, followed by four days' almost uninterrupted rainfall. Both our Bhutia porters reported sick and we despatched them to Darjeeling; the *sardar* and the cook were suffering from headaches and each wanted to go home, but our two Sherpas remained absolutely loyal. On September 17 it suddenly cleared up brilliantly in the morning. Avalanches thundered everywhere down the mountains, while the whole landscape steamed in the glittering sunshine. We fetched our kits next day from the Nepal Gap Glacier, but clouds rolled up once more in the afternoon, while again on the following morning the weather worsened somewhat. Nevertheless it was improving as a whole and we trusted that the monsoon was nearly over. We could see Kangchenjunga above, but its wind-plume as yet showed little signs of those western or northern influences betokening the advance of really fine weather. In fact, the cloud-sea crept up again along the Zemu glen, nevertheless we were quite determined, cost what it might, to make another attempt on Siniolchum.

At first, on September 19 and 20, we made terribly slow progress through the masses of snow. The provisions dumped on the first attempt were but partially recovered, while on the upper glacier not a trace of our kits could be found.

The weather, as luck would have it, grew colder; in those places where the sun had acted the snow became harder and bore. These lucky auguries hastened our progress, the upper icefall was quickly passed on the third day, and we advanced along the lengthy glacier basin. The second icefall proved long and difficult, the sun having already softened the surface before we could traverse it; conditions forced the porters to their utmost exertions, while in places we had to haul the loads upwards. Finally we came to a spot whence all progress with laden porters was at an end.

We continued alone on the following day with the tent-sacks and a few emergency rations over very steep slopes, covered on the shady side with deep and cold powdery snow, finally attaining

the W. arête of Siniolchum at a height of 6200 m. We were above the clouds, the tent containing our porters was still covered, while there in the base camp it was probably raining and snowing once more. Above us, however, the sky was blue and absolutely cloudless, the air was calm and all but motionless. The scene surrounding us on all sides was one of utter sublimity. Along the massif of Kangchenjunga, the five satellites⁷ of the eternal snows guarded with overpowering magnificence the exposed but unapproachable vitals of the Simvu recess. To our right we gazed over a bottomless abyss into the Pandim glen, more than 13,000 ft. below, while to our left, away and to the side of the cloud-sea covering the Zemu, lay far to the N. Chomiomo, Chomolhari, and lastly Kangchenjunga himself: in front of us glinted the indescribable beauty of Siniolchum's summit. We bore upwards towards our goal, soon clambering over the ice-crowned snow pinnacles guarding its flanks, sharper than any turret of purest Gothic architecture. Carefully we climbed along the narrow ridge, smashing our way through corniches, being finally stopped by one of the latter as night closed in. There, at about 6400 m., we spent the night sitting in our tent-sacks. It was frosty and sapped our strength; cold and hard was the dawn in this lofty region. As soon as light permitted we forced a way through the corniche.

The summit was near but we advanced very slowly. Sometimes the second rope could make no progress where the first was held up; sometimes the first had to wait when the second rope lagged too far behind. At 08.00 on September 23 we attained the depression behind the first peak, whence a height of some 1600 ft. and a horizontal distance of 550 yards still separated us from the top. I realized that we should not reach the summit that day—and consequently in all probability never at all—if we continued to act as at present; we had to separate, two must stay back while two must continue without loads. Accordingly I stayed behind with Hepp, while Göttner and Wien proceeded as quickly as possible with but the barest necessities. They could depend on us to help them; if they wanted us we could bring the bivouac gear after them should they not be able to return to us in time.

Changing leaders alternately, Göttner and Wien worked up the abrupt step leading out of the depression. Towards midday they reached the base of the final summit-wall. Anxiously we followed them with our eyes as they fought their way up the precipitous slope—slowly, even terribly slowly, but surely. At last two tiny

⁷ See *H. J.* vii, illustrations facing pp. 69, 74.

dark figures, secured with the rope, were standing beneath the summit-corniche. We breathed again when we saw the leader safe through the overhang. The deed was accomplished, and a few moments later, at 2 P.M., they were standing on the summit of SINIOLCHUM. They could not stay there long as the sun was blazing with full power on the final step and softening the snow. They accordingly descended at once.

We saw our companions again through the cornice and anxiously watched their careful descent down the softened summit-wall. Again hours passed, night was approaching; we could hardly reckon on their being able to reach the bivouac place, so prepared to carry the necessary gear towards them. However, with time enough to spare, they appeared on the tower above the notch. We left a bottle of tea for them in the notch and cut deep steps in the névé down to the bivouac. At 6 P.M., just at nightfall, they came down towards us through the cornice and we all spent a second night in the place. It was colder than the first night, but a wonderful elation filled us all at having made the ascent of one of the sharpest and most beautiful peaks in the world.

Two days later we returned to the base camp. As soon as we had equipped our two fresh porters—these had come to our assistance from Lachen—we started up the Zemu Glacier, Göttner, Hepp and I together with two porters, to attempt Simvu. Wien with two other porters went off to proceed from the Simvu glen into the Passanram, with the idea of making a photogrammetric survey of the region S. of Siniolchum.

On October 2 Hepp and Göttner reached the N.E. SUMMIT of SIMVU, 6545 m. This was attained late in the afternoon, forcing their way through deep snow. Later in the night they arrived in our tent on the upper Simvu Saddle, *ca.* 5500 m., whither internal cramps had forced me to turn back previously.

Two days later we proceeded to our old Camp VI on Kangchenjunga, to visit the grave and memorial to Schaller on the rock-islet.⁸ It was our one and only fine day in the Zemu, but even then clouds rolled up in the late afternoon from the S. over the Zemu Gap, 'Cloud Gap' as Kellas long ago so aptly named it. The weather then once more became bad, we had partly to curtail our plans and returned to the base camp.

On October 9 when the weather was again somewhat better, Göttner and I proceeded past Marco Pallis's wonderfully situated camp,⁹ over 'Stone' Gap to the Hidden Glacier. During the following days we climbed some mountains, such as PODON Peak,

⁸ *A. J.* 44. 17-18.

⁹ *A. J.* 48. 360.

Simvu highest summit.



Expedition photo.]

SIMVU HIGHEST SUMMIT WITH LOWER E. ARÊTE OF KANGCHENJUNGA, 1936.



Telephoto, A. Göttner.]

POINT 6545 M. OF SIMVU, SHOWING TRACKS.

Summit, 22,300 ft.



P. 6550 m



P. 6545 m.



Telephoto, A. Göttnner.]

PART OF SIMVU MASSIF FROM 'STEIN PASS.'
ROUTE LAY UP GLACIER TO POINT 6545 M., 1936.

[To face p. 49.]

GREEN LAKE Peak, 'BLACK' and 'WHITE' Peaks, all round about 20,000 ft. It was most interesting to perceive how the clouds lying deep in the Teesta valley in the morning, invariably in the course of the day crept up and smothered the Zemu, while to the north, over the Lhonak and Tibet, everything was beautifully clear. We then steered E.N.E. through a side glen down the Lhonak stream to the deserted shepherd's kraal of Langpo, and, on October 13, over the Thela to Yaktang.

There I discovered that for a fortnight, that is since his crossing of the Simvu Saddle, not a word had been received from Wien. This made me very anxious as he was rationed for six days only. I was forced to the conclusion that he had been obliged through bad weather to descend into the Talung glen and had there been held up in virgin-forest. I hurried down to Lachen in the night, and hastened next morning on horseback to meet him with provisions in the Talung. However, the porter Girti, making for Lachen, met me *en route* and informed me with many eastern gestures how the photogrammetric apparatus had come to grief already on the Simvu Saddle, that rain had fallen ceaselessly, that they had reached the level glacier in the S. arête of Simvu in viewless weather, how for two days they had vainly attempted, in pouring rain, the crossing of the Kukur Gap into the Zemtuglen. Finally, Girti related picturesquely how, foodless at length, they had forced their way for a whole day through the thick undergrowth of deep-cut ravines on the E. and N. banks of the Passanram and Talung torrents, arriving at last on the fourteenth day at the nearest hamlet near Pingting.

We can but congratulate our members and the party on their splendid success—success obtained in the face of weather and most conceivable forms of hardship.—EDITOR A. J.