

A JOURNEY IN THE WESTERN KARAKORAM

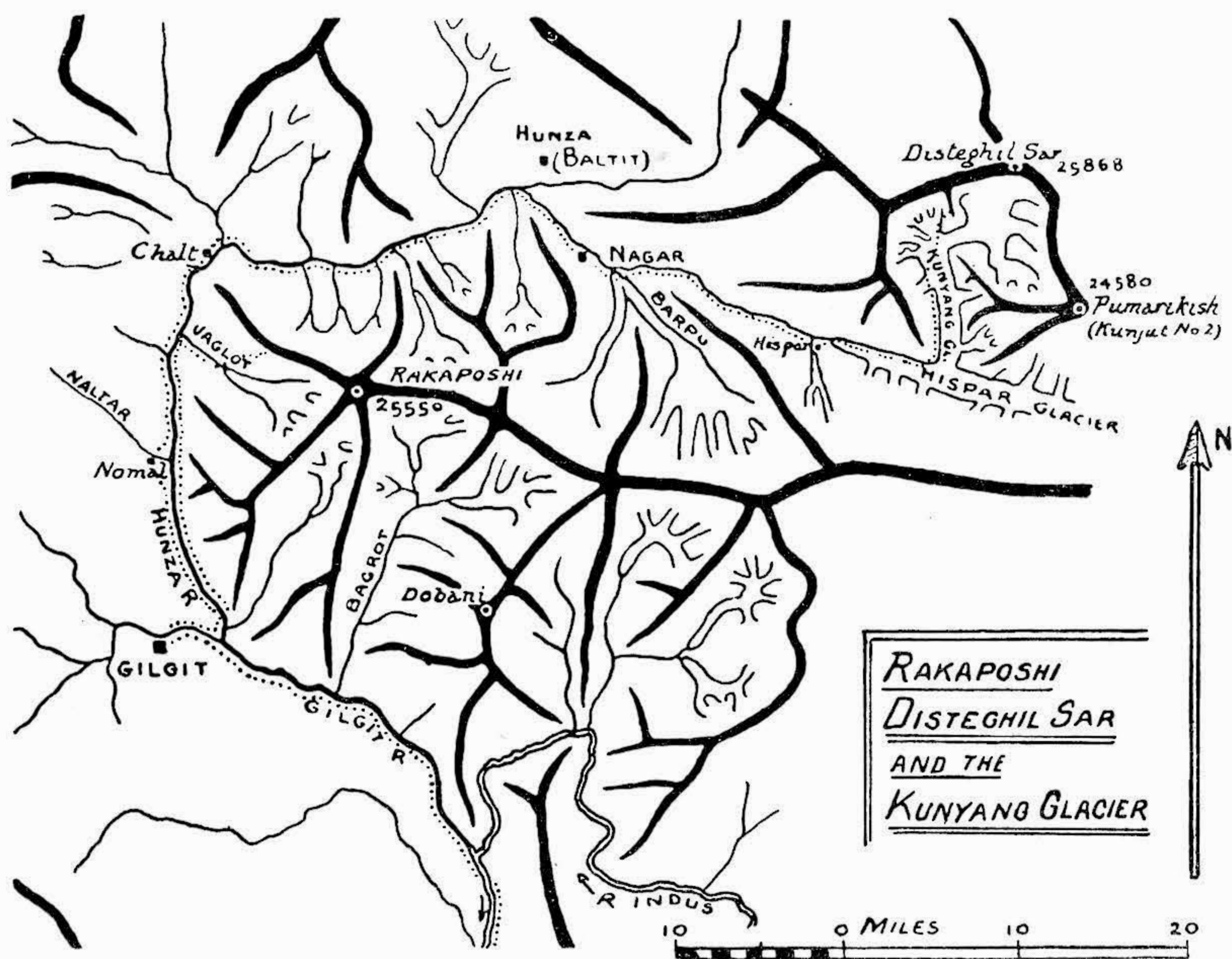
By MICHAL VYVYAN

THE present conventions of Himalayan travel, which is now perhaps in its classic period, somewhat resemble those of Alpine travel in its corresponding stage nearly a century ago. In each case it is usual to explain, if not to justify, being among high mountains by some accomplishment in the way either of practical mountaineering or geographical or scientific investigation, but the subsequent development of Alpine mountaineering inclines one to the belief that these purposes and accomplishments are rather the mould or pattern of mountain experience than the essence of it. This belief is, at any rate, the excuse for the present paper describing a short journey in the western Karakoram last year which has no accomplishments to its credit. Indeed, to return to my comparison, this account will probably read to students of serious Himalayan undertakings much as some 'Narrative of an Excursion to the Aar Glacier' did three quarters of a century ago to those following in contemporary Alpine literature the progress of attempts on the Matterhorn and the triangulations of Adams Reilly.

The plan with which Campbell Secord and I started from England for Gilgit in the first days of June 1938 was to explore the upper basin of the Kunyang Glacier, the first large northern tributary met in ascending the Hispar, and from it to make, if possible, a pass across the western end of the main Karakoram as the range at this point is sometimes regarded. The outskirts of the western Karakoram are perhaps more familiar to travellers than any other part of the Himalaya, for here roads and settled valleys probably reach nearer than elsewhere in the world to very great mountains. The main range is cut by the Hunza valley and the famous Gilgit road between Kashmir and Sinkiang which follows the river, while its southern fork terminates in the knot of Rakaposhi where the Hunza bends to the S. But although the approaches to these mountains have been frequently visited since Conway's great traverse of the Hispar and Baltoro in 1892,¹ not only his work but that of later high-level explorers such as the Workmans and the Vissers seems to have been continually

¹ *A.J.* 16. 413 *sqq.*

hampered by bad weather. For this reason, mainly, the Kunyang Glacier, dominated by Disteghil Sar (25,868 ft.) and Pumarikish (or Kunjut No. 2, 24,580 ft.) had not been penetrated far enough for the latter mountain to be seen, and the attraction of these recesses led Campbell Secord and myself to follow Colonel Mason's recommendation to visit it. If in exploring the upper basin we could find a col leading to the Malangutti or Yazghil Glaciers, this might be the route between the Hispar and Shimshal valleys which has been reputed to exist among local inhabitants on each side of the range. As it turned out, the party which did reach



the northern end of the glacier was not adequate for summit ridge climbing nor equipped for proper surveying. This was the more unfortunate in that the weather was more continually flawless during my brief journeys than I have ever heard of it being among such great mountains; the benevolence of the skies seemed to be a contemptuous gift considering their treatment of our more competent predecessors.

Secord and I came up from Abbottabad in the N.W. Frontier Province via Chilas, a route which is more rapid but gives a longer stretch of the desert Indus valley than the more alpine Kashmir road. Neither of us had been to the Himalaya before and our first sight of great mountains was therefore one of our

summer's more important happenings. It fell to us on entering the Indus valley ; they were far away to the W. in unadministered tribal territory and looked like broken blue stones. Not till a few days later did we see high mountains in full white panoply and then there was suddenly the stupendous mass of Nanga Parbat, complicated and alone to the S., and Haramosh and a slice of Rakaposhi (25,550 ft.) to the N. It was this very first revelation of Himalayan *décolletés* that distracted us from our serious purposes. Looking at them as we lay among long grass in one of the little carpet-like oases that are spread at intervals on the desert shelf above the Indus and its tributaries, we reflected that Kunyang was at least a week of sandy marches further away than the foot of Rakaposhi, and that our feet longed for the more familiar accidents of rock and snow, so we resolved on a temporary defection. Shortly after we reached Gilgit, therefore, we left on a flying visit to the base of Rakaposhi in order to prospect its N.W. ridge which no one seemed to have approached before, but which looked promising from some R.A.F. photographs in our possession. Crossing the brown surf of the Hunza in a native ferry of inflated skins, whose rowers showed great skill and power, was the only sensational part of this preliminary journey, and then we had one of the most unusual pleasures of mountain travel—that of gaining height unexpectedly—at the end of the same day. After we had marched through sand which scorches even local porters' feet in the heat of the day, our path wound some 600 ft. up a precipitous gully in what we thought was merely a *détour* to avoid a cliff jutting out into the river, but reaching the top we found there was no descent. We were in a luscious green alp in the Jaglot valley which we had been making for, and whose main exit seems to be a fairly sheer drop over a cliff which only the Jaglot stream passes on its way to join the Hunza. We camped above Jaglot and the next day we reached the base of our ridge at some 12,500 ft. ; we found it at least worth trying and were well on our way down the Hunza valley by nightfall. In fact we were back in Gilgit in $2\frac{1}{2}$ days after leaving it, having covered about 80 miles and, up and down, some 16,000 ft. in that time, travelling alone with packs and two walking ponies for some of the way.

In Gilgit we luxuriated in the hospitality of the Political Agent and Mrs. Galbraith for nearly a week, waiting for the Government of India's permission to do a climb on our mountain. We overate of the abundant and multifarious fruit and took guileless pound trout from the Kar, a great flashing river, only an hour's canter from Gilgit, which cascades through a tremendous brown gorge.

We left Gilgit again on July 12 and this time crossed the Hunza higher up by an impressive native bridge of twisted osier ropes. We had Balti porters recruited from the Gilgit bazaar where they come in as seasonal labourers, and seeing that they were mostly natives of Skardu and other high places we thought they would carry on snow. In this we were disappointed ; indeed several of them fell out on the way to our base and had to be replaced by local men. But a more serious loss to our *bandobast* was the younger of the two Sherpas whom the Honorary Secretary of the Himalayan Club, Mr. Wale, had most kindly sent to meet us in the plains. He went down with fever just outside Gilgit and had to be sent home, but the other man, Arjeeba, stayed till the end of the summer and being strong and painstaking and a reasonable cook was invaluable.

The pasture at the bend of the Jaglot valley which we had already chosen for our base had every virtue of situation, and if it had not been so closely cropped and trampled by cattle and goats which had come up since our first visit, and consequently infested with flies, it would have been quite Arcadian ; as it was we got to calling it Beelzebub *maidan*. It lay on the lateral moraine of the glacier coming down from the S.W. face of Rakaposhi and was surrounded on three sides by coppices of birch and flowering shrubs like a wild garden. Most common were the outsize blossoms of the local wild rose, blue and yellow violets, purple daisies, pink orchis and a big golden columbine with the scent of honeysuckle. The strawberries were unfortunately over and the abundant wild gooseberries not yet ripe. Above the trees we could see the sun rise almost directly behind the triangular silhouette of the iron-coloured summit peak of Rakaposhi set in its plinth of ice ; the sun used often to throw up a beam of light as it rose reflecting the shape of the summit. And from the belt of trees on the crest of the moraine we looked down on the glacier pouring down from this S.W. face, wrinkled and lead-coloured like newly cooled metal.

Our glen formed a rough rectangle open at the end by which we had approached. Opposite to us on the other side of the glacier was the great southern ridge (shown in the plate opposite p. 236) running down from the summit. Then came the N.W. peak. From this peak there was evidently a considerable descent on to the N.W. ridge and then the further obstacle of another semi-independent protuberance on the ridge before the ice terrace could be reached. We decided to make for the N.W. peak and we therefore followed the cows and goats up the grassy beginnings of the buttress the morning after our arrival in the pasture. The

porters did well carrying to over 4000 ft. above our pasture camp, but I gave myself extra trouble by chasing a markhor with my camera for a couple of hours in the burning shale of the face of the ridge, and I paid for this access of *joie de vivre* with a headache by the time Secord, whose turn it was to look after the porters, came up with me. Here, since the porters refused to carry in the snow and extra pay was no attraction, we camped at 17,300 ft. and I paid them off. The next day my headache persisted and I stayed in camp while Secord and Arjeeba took loads about another 1500 ft. up to a saddle just below the N.W. peak, which we had decided on for the next camp, and returned. When all three of us took more loads the day after, we had the only bad weather during our week on the mountain and then it was merely light snow drizzle and nothing to complain of.

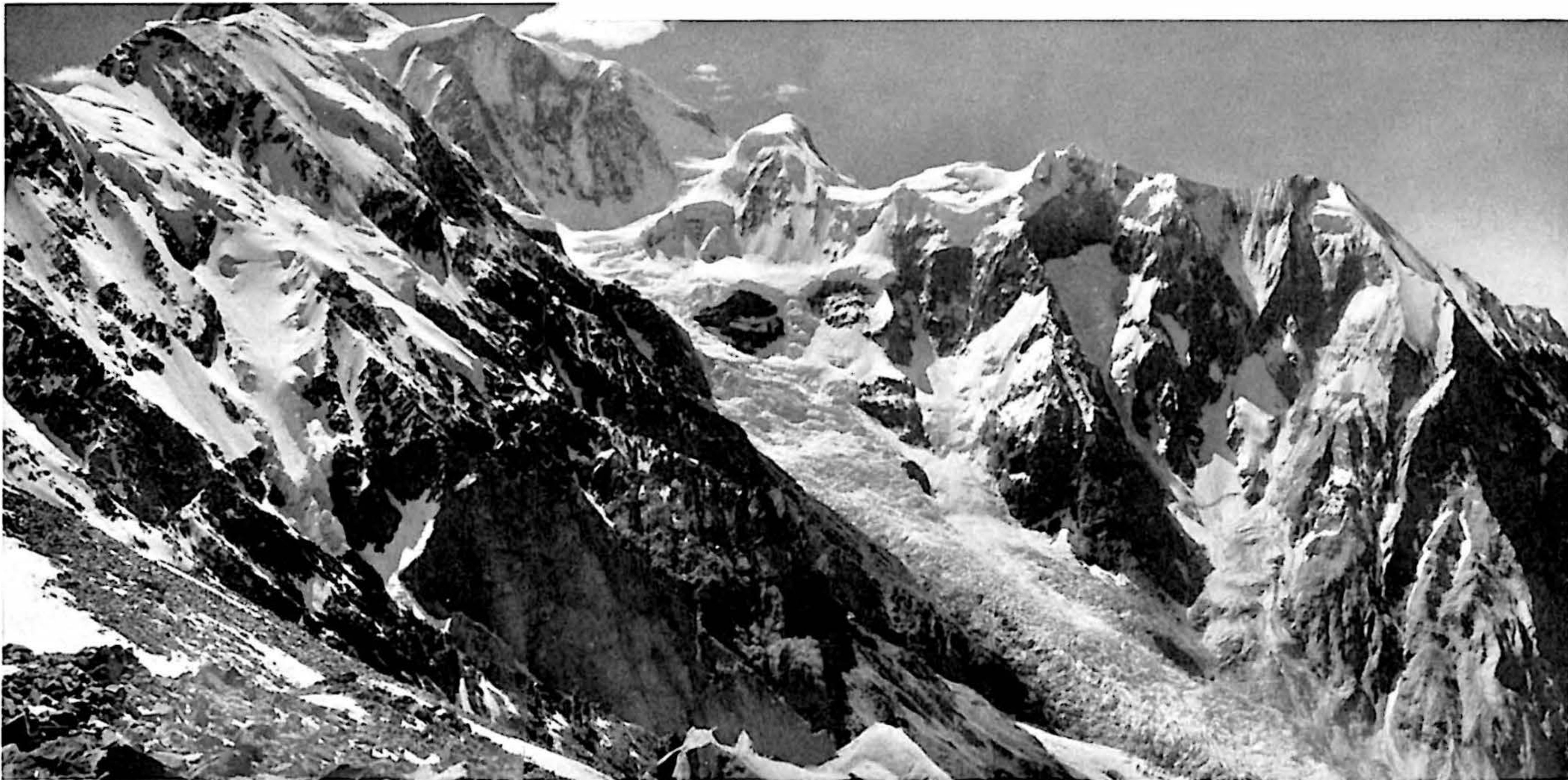
We rested for a day at the saddle camp, possibly in the un-wisdom of novices, and certainly to little advantage, for we met in it the paradox—new to us—of a snowy furnace in which the sun seemed to overwhelm all defences with an almost palpable light. But the situation was very grand. We were already high enough for the scale of the N.W. ridge—which we still hoped, in spite of growing misgivings, to reach via the N.W. peak—to be vast beyond our experience more by reason of its horizontal than its vertical distances. The remoteness of the summit gave the same impression and the dominating quarter of the panorama was the splendid S. ridge opposite to us. In a mixture of mountain architectural styles, this ridge combines the decoration of snow cupolas and hanging glaciers with the most naked black rock; now and then the white puff of an avalanche appeared on its cliffs. Over the lower shoulder of the ridge and a depression in a further semicircular bay of fine rock peaks, the greater part of the mass of Nanga Parbat was visible; Rakhiot Peak, east peak, the summit, Ganalo Peak and other details were clearly distinguishable at the distance of some 65 miles, and to judge from Dr. Bauer's subsequent account, the time we were looking at their mountain covered the longest run of fine weather that his party then working on it had enjoyed.

In the afternoon we had a surprise visit from two men from the Jaglot valley. They had already been with us to the lower camp, and had followed our steps thence in the snow and even those cut in ice. They were fair-skinned young men of fine physique, one of whom, with his brown hair, might easily have passed for a Swiss. They were not talkative and did not bring presents, and they seemed merely to be enjoying this high place which our example showed was quite accessible. The same

couple later performed the feat of carrying in relays some 500 lb. down nearly 4500 ft. in one day, but were rather exhausted by this self-imposed enterprise for they were among the slowest of their fellow villagers on the level next day. Two other visitors were those ubiquitous mountaineers in Europe, Asia and America, Apollo butterflies. They arrived jaded but seemed to revive on moistened maple sugar and made off in their characteristic purposeful flight. After they had left I watched a golden eagle, as I think it was, glide the length of the black precipice opposite until it was chased away by a couple of choughs at about 18,000 ft.

On July 19 Secord and I set out unloaded to climb the N.W. peak, leaving Arjeeba in the camp so that we could go more quickly. The route was obvious, and while it was steep in general inclination and the rock generally followed to avoid ice was rotten, it gave no trouble. We succeeded in avoiding much cutting, although the bergschrund was awkward on our return when the snow was soft, and we felt as if we were moving at Alpine pace. The summit crest seems to consist of an enormous ice cornice; there was a curious long slot between it and the precipitous south edge of the mountain in which we fitted our feet to save step-cutting. We reached the summit in six hours from camp and went to the north edge in turn to see clearly against their brown background the green spots of villages in the Hunza valley seemingly between our legs about 16,000 ft. below. They looked as directly beneath us as does Grindelwald from the Eiger, but the difference in height was twice as great for the point on which we stood is probably as near 23,000 as 22,000 ft. This proximity in the vertical plane between 'sand burnt to powder' and the 'thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice' made our position seem to me somewhat monstrous; it was stirring as a single experience, but one may feel that in general extremes should be less abrupt in the relation of mountains to their environment, lest their dignity be compromised by the element of the curious and remarkable.

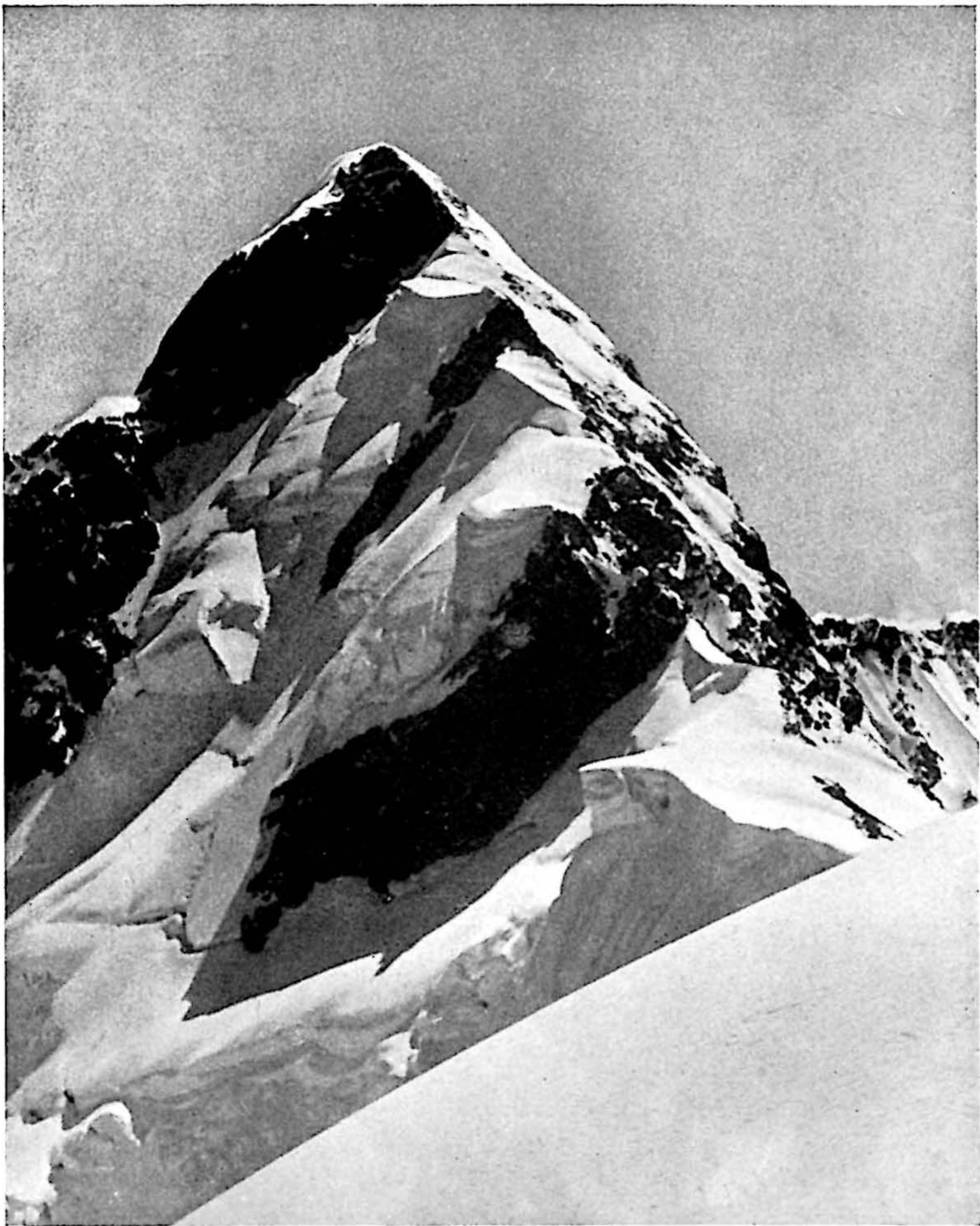
From the N.W. peak which we had now reached, the summit of Rakaposhi was no longer an objective but merely 'part of the view'; it and the connecting ridge had been in sight most of the time on our way up and each of us in his own mind had gradually given up the idea of a route along this ridge being possible with the resources which we possessed. Our peak itself was indeed higher than we had expected and the drop to the ridge more abrupt; moreover, it did not seem possible to short-circuit the peak, at any rate with loads, across the steep linen-fold snow



Photo, M. Vyvyan.]

S.W. RIDGE OF RAKAPOSHI, FROM 17,300 FT. ON N.W. RIDGE.

[To face p. 236.]



Photo, M. Vyvyan.]

N.W. PEAK OF RAKAPOSHI (*ca.* 22,500 FT.) FROM POINT WHERE N.W. RIDGE WAS REACHED (*ca.* 19,000 FT.).

slopes, whose configuration warned us that the layer of snow on top of ice was only a thin one, and which were besides newly scattered with stones. The formidable ridge below the summit we had reached was almost overhung by us ; it was a considerable horizontal distance along it to the next eminence just this side of the flat terrace from which the final rock pyramid springs, and I learned a month later when looking at the whole range from the Hunza valley that the length of the terrace was as much again. Before leaving our peak we looked out at the great mountains north and east of us. The afternoon light obliterated detail by its brilliance where it touched, and left all else utterly obscure ; in the gross the panorama looked strangely transparent, as if made of dark blue glass. The nearer ridges rank closely and confusedly together in this geographically young range, and we made no serious effort to identify any features of the unfamiliar horizon. The summit of Rakaposhi and an intervening buttress cut off the view of K₂ and the Baltoro Karakoram, but where the buttress intersected the skyline there was, just revealed, the very group round the Kunyang Glacier about 70 miles away which was the object of our further travels. I was less certain than Secord at the time of this identification, though we both felt that the link which it would make between two parts of our journey would be a satisfying incident, but a comparison of the photograph taken from the N.W. peak with the silhouette of Pumarikish which later became more familiar to me confirmed his guess.

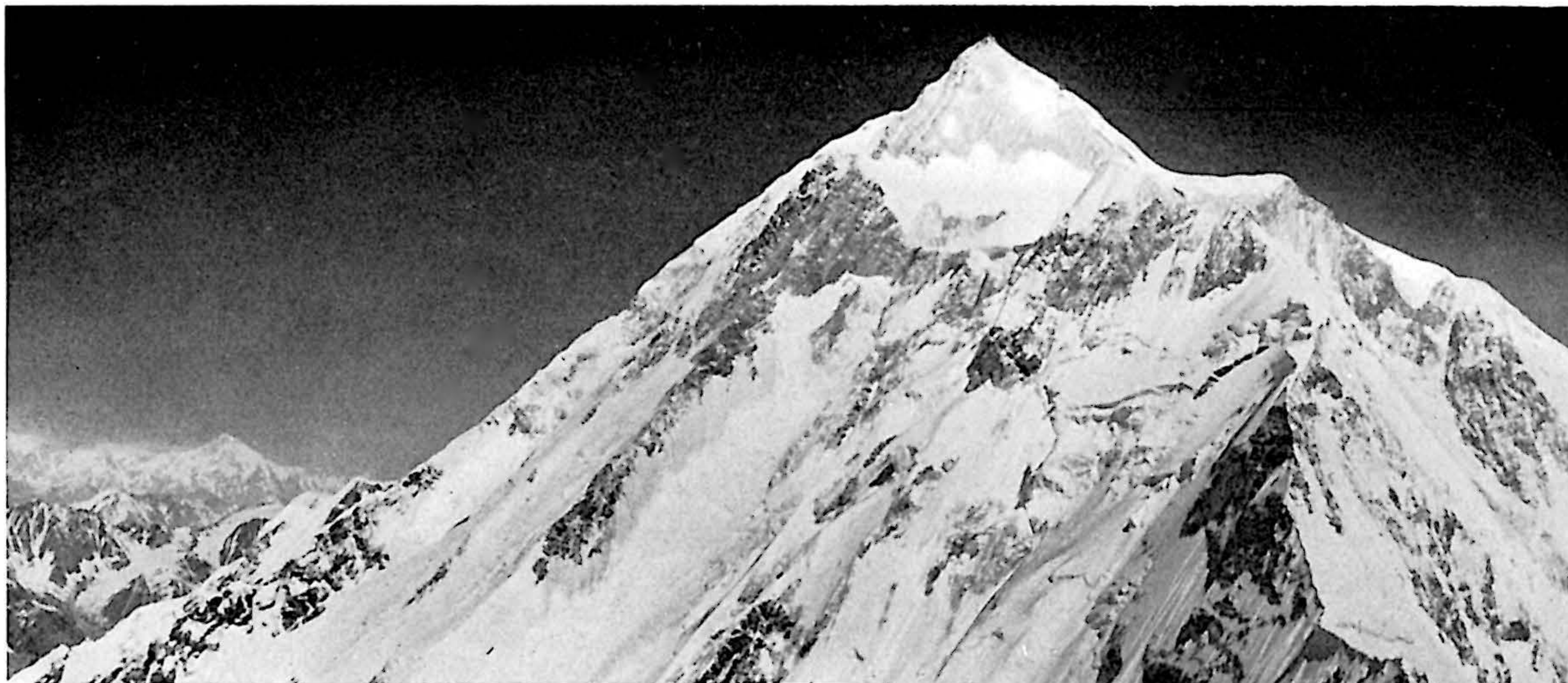
When we returned to Gilgit from Rakaposhi, Campbell Secord learned that he would have to leave for Europe without making the journey to the Hispar and Kunyang Glaciers—news which was a great disappointment to us both. He left with the sick Sherpa in a R.A.F. aeroplane, and we found out afterwards, on comparing times, that his journey took almost exactly the same number of hours to Delhi as mine a month later took weeks on foot. I met the big transport arriving at Gilgit's model pocket field as I rode out on the way to Hispar ; it flew back to India a couple of days later. Without Secord I did not expect any technical results of value from my journey. We had hoped that considerable use could be made of his panoramic camera, but left alone, I produced nothing but a Leica panorama (reproduced opposite p. 240) and the sketch map of the Kunyang Glacier based on field compass bearings which, as it appears on p. 239, has been re-drawn by Colonel Mason. Moreover, with only one Sherpa to climb with there was not much hope of reaching the watershed of the main range and I had to resign myself to the idea of a journey to see what Pumarikish and Disteghil looked like and

not much else. As it turned out this perfunctory visit was, from a personal point of view, well worth while.

The western part of the Hispar Glacier lies in the little state of Nagir, reached by following the Gilgit road to Sinkiang along the Hunza river as far as the point where the road by the river turns N. and the Hispar or Nagir river enters from the E. After turning the corner of Rakaposhi my way ran roughly E. as far as the opening of the Kunyang Glacier between the two prongs of the fork, which is sometimes considered for purposes of nomenclature as the western termination of the main Karakoram chain. Three or four marches were to be counted to Nagir, the capital of the state, another four to the junction of the Kunyang and the Hispar ; this left me a week on the glacier, which seemed enough for my sight-seeing purposes.

Nagir is an inconvenient country to travel in. Rest-houses are suitably maintained by the Mir under the direction of the Public Works Department of the Government of India, but his requirements for private travellers involved in my case changing pack animals at every village. This arrangement presumably serves the purpose of giving each village a share of the traffic receipts, but in one instance it meant unloading ponies at a two-mile interval, and as there are often no substitutes for them but small donkeys and incompetent porters, one's baggage suffers on precipitous mountain tracks. The ponymen themselves on my journey seemed unused to their work and plaintively excused themselves on the ground that they were only 'jungly' people. The Mir, Sir Sikandar Khan, showed me most kind hospitality on my way in and out and supplied me with porters for the route beyond Nagir which is impassable for pack animals. I was also furnished with an obligatory escort of a succession of *shikaris* (who seemed to enjoy themselves greatly in unsuccessful markhor and ibex hunting on their own) and with one of the Mir's bodyguard who knew Urdu and could therefore act as interpreter with the porters. The latter only talked Burushaski, the unique language spoken in the three states of Hunza, Nagir and Yasin, which has no affinities whatever with any other speech in the world. They were a rough lot and lazy, but very sure-footed.

The oases which I went through towards Nagir were lovely in the end of July with standing crops and apricot trees in full fruit. The abundance of these apricot trees is unbelievable ; tree after tree lines the stone-walled paths, loaded so profusely with perfect ripe fruit that they look like gala decorations. Beyond Nagir the way at once descends a cliff and crosses the Barpu Glacier which



Photo, M. Vyryan.

RAKAPOSHI (25,550 FT.), WITH N.W. RIDGE AND N. PRECIPICES,
FROM JUST BELOW SUMMIT OF N.W. PEAK. PUMARIKISH
(KUNJUT No. 2) IN DISTANCE.

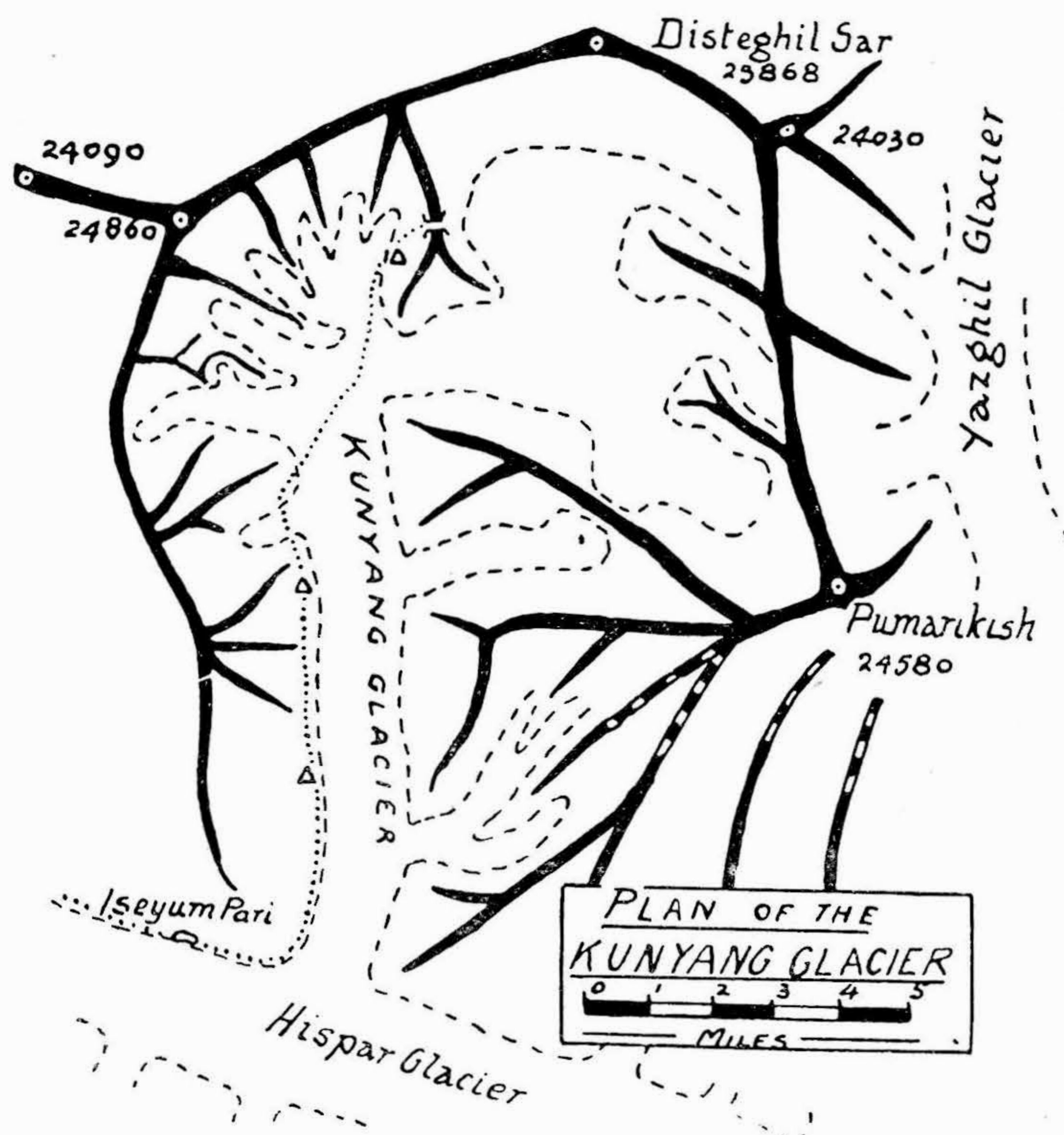
[To face p. 238.]



Photo, M. Vyvyan.]

RAKAPOSHI (TO LEFT) WITH N.W. RIDGE, FROM HUNZA VALLEY.

comes down from the massif of Chogo Lungma, whose southern side in the shape of the peak of Haramosh I had seen many miles away a month before, and then follows up the desert banks of the stampeding Hispar river. The glaciers were in full melt when I passed and the torrent often rumbled with the thunderous collision of great blocks of rock rolling along its bed. The Hispar Glacier itself is reached just beyond the oasis of Hispar,



a lovely place with the thick stone houses of true uplands, almost treeless, but covered, when I was there, with waving crops of barley and sainfoin.

The Kunyang Glacier is the first turning to the left out of the Hispar, and a day and a half later we had pitched camp on the grass-covered moraine of the western or true right bank, the limit to which the porters would carry. Near by was the clean-picked carcass of an ibex which the shikaris said had been killed by a *dinka* (snow leopard in Burushaski). They told me that

this spot, which was often reached by hunters, was actually visited some years ago by the Mir of Nagir. The next camp which Arjeeba and I put a couple of hours further along the lateral moraine, seemed to be at a point as far up the Kunyang as had previously been attained, for it was in sight of Disteghil Sar, vertically somewhat below the point where Dr. and Mrs. Visser's party seemed to have had their view of the mountain in 1925 before bad weather closed it and turned them back. I had a week here, or higher up, and became so familiar with the sight of the splendid white cirque at its head that I began in my impotence to see good in the other side of the nineteenth-century controversy over the rightness of knowing mountains otherwise than by climbing them.

So far as material progress was concerned I wasted two days here in somewhat fruitless expeditions: one to examine the double-branched gorge of a side glacier higher up on the right bank of the Kunyang from which I finally found myself cut off by a sheer cliff, and one in trying to cross the main glacier with the aim of reaching the E. bay via an icefall coming down from Pumarikish. For a third day I was held up by Arjeeba being sick, and I tried to put this time to use by re-secting on my plane table from Disteghil, Pumarikish and a peak S. of the Hispar; but either I was more incompetent than even I had realised, or the latter peak (which is not a triangulated point) is incorrectly located on the existing Survey of India $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. sheet. I was almost relieved by the failure of this concession to the proprieties—like the Alpine traveller in the 1850's whose release by some untoward incident from the burden of observations often seems to be announced with some satisfaction: 'My friend F—— had the misfortune to step upon my minimum and boiling-point thermometers and was inconsolable that *finis* should thus be written to my observations before they were properly commenced.' Pt. 23,750 ft. acted the part of my friend F——; full responsibility is never the writer's.

After Arjeeba's professed recovery we did finally traverse the length of the glacier to a spur which I found divided the E. bay from the N. end. This took twelve hours and was rather trying. The glacier seems to be waxing and undercuts the moraines, so that one has to choose a moment between the almost continuous stonefalls in daylight to get on to the glacier; then one must resign oneself to a day picking the way along a particular coloured rock selected from above (in this case red granite detritus from Pumarikish) as the most favourable dirt band to follow. There were no crevasses, but the surface was like a very high sea, the

DISTEGHIL SAR.



N.

N.E.

PUMARIKISH.



S.E.

PANORAMA FROM KUNYANG SPUR STATION OF WALL ENCLOSING E. BAY OF UPPER KUNYANG GLACIER, FROM N. TO S.E., SHOWING S.W. FACE OF DISTEGHIL SAR (25,868 FT.), N.W. FACE OF PUMARIKISH (24,580 FT.), AND SUGGESTED PASS OVER WATERSHED TO YAZGHIL GLACIER AND SHIMSHAL VALLEY.

ice, thus shaped, being covered with unstable rocks which made a perpetual clatter as they came down all day in the sun. The noise was mingled with that of the distant mud avalanches which are characteristic of these mountains, though not peculiar to them : piles of earth which are usually coming down somewhere or other on the mountain sides containing the glaciers and which, moving slowly, roar like climbing freight trains. Some of the waves of ice were very steep, especially what may be called the ice breakers near the shore of the spur which we had to reach, and there were the other more normal obstacles which delayed us, such as streams which had to be bridged by overbalancing into them whatever big rocks could be found poised on their edges.

The weather had been brilliant and serene though a little too fine for perfect clarity of light ; this continued, and the next day on the crest of the spur we gained a far more splendid panorama than I had allowed myself to imagine. I had already seen that the map rightly conjectures an E. bay to the glacier, and now I saw its containing walls from fairly close. The spur we were on ran up in a theoretically possible climbing route to the N. ridge, which one's eye then followed eastward to Disteghil, an undistinguished comb of rock and snow, in spite of its nearly 26,000 ft., on this S.-facing and less glaciated side. After Disteghil the ridge swings S. till in the E. there appeared what looked like the missing pass. Thence the S.E. quadrant of the bay climbed to the colossal triangular outline of Pumarikish. This N. face of almost 12,000 ft. is plastered with hanging glaciers like the coruscations of a piece of semi-precious ore. By comparison with photographs of other mountains it must be almost as fine as any face in the world, and it was some consolation for being impotent as a climber that no one had presumably ever seen it before.

I should naturally have liked to spend the day or two more available in trying to approach, if not reach, the putative col across the range, which in theory might lead down to the Yazghil Glacier and so to the Shimshal valley. There was an icefall high up, but so far as that the way looked comparatively short and simple. Unfortunately, however, our provisions gave out at this point. The Sherpa had started eating mine ; he had not, he said, brought the tsamba I had told him to bring because he had been feeling so ill when he started that he thought he would never be able to eat anything again—he was now, however, quite recovered. But the Hispar porters were due at the base camp in two days' time and there was no question of fetching more food, so we

made our way back after taking a photographic panorama of the head of the glacier.

On our return clouds came up as we left the Hispar but they kept behind us all the way, giving me the chance of seeing perfectly the mountains enclosing the Hunza valley which had been slightly obscured on the way in. There is one magnificent peak above Nagir—Bubuli (Burushaski for Princess) Muting I learned that it was called. It had occurred to me before that it looked like the Péteret arête of Mont Blanc, and now I saw that instead of ending at Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, as it were, the ridge started again and went on for another 5000 ft. or so. In Hispar I was met by a band of wood-wind and drums and a deputation of notables. Subsequently a fire-light tamasha was arranged, including sword dances and the national *bûm* (markhor) dance, the markhor being a sort of totem animal in all this country. Unfortunately there were no markhor horns available, so dancers had to make do with those of ibex, and were greeted with derisive shouts of ' Kil ! kil ! ' (ibex, ibex) by the audience. My appreciation of these courtesies was somewhat damped when I gathered that they were arranged by the headman of Hispar in order to secure my intercession with the authorities. He had been exiled for causing disturbances in his native village of Chalt, near the Gilgit border, and had become headman by force of (presumably bad) character, but apparently preferred to serve in heaven than reign in hell.

Beyond Nagir the weather remained almost cloudless, and I had what I had missed on the way in, complete views of the whole N.W. ridge of Rakaposhi. The subsidiary N.W. peak, which Secord and I had climbed on its undistinguished and not richly glaciated southern side, revealed itself as a fine white mass worthy of the ridge as a whole, and when I looked up at this magnificent object I reflected that it was unlikely that anyone had often had the good fortune to climb to such a respectable height by such an easy and unexacting route as had opened itself to us.

We acknowledge with gratitude the permission of the Editor, *Himalayan Journal*, for the use of photographic blocks and sketch-maps to illustrate this paper.—EDITOR.