

A RECONNAISSANCE OF SASER KANGRI, EASTERN KARAKORAMS, 1946

By J. O. M. ROBERTS

SASER KANGRI seemed an attractive object: 25,170 ft. high with three 24,000 ft. satellites, it reigns between the river valleys of Nubra and Shyok. Its nearest rival is Saltoro Kangri, 60 miles away to the N.W. It was almost unexplored from a mountaineering aspect and lay in Ladakh at the end of a long and interesting approach along the Central Asian trade route, far from India. I planned an expedition for the summer of 1946.

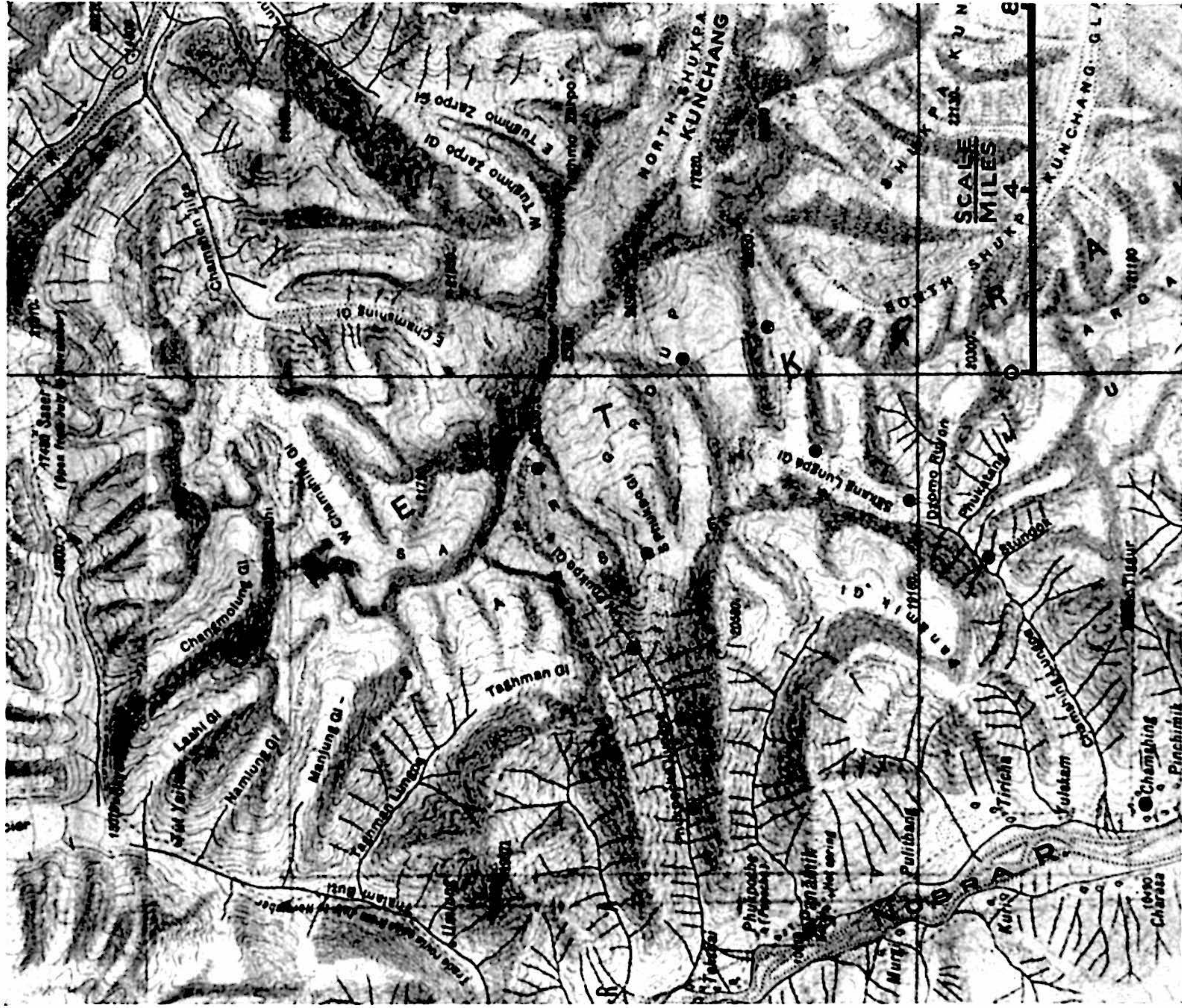
Information about the mountain was confined to a paper by our President, which appeared in the *Geographical Journal* for June 1910, and described his 1909 expedition to the Eastern Karakorams. Bad weather prevented him from making a careful examination of the mountain, but from a base at Panamik in the Nubra, he went up the Phukpoche Lungpa, or nala, and reached 18,000 ft. on its glaciers 'The highest peaks, best approached from the south-west, presented some steep faces of exposed rock.' They did.

The Vissers surveyed the area in 1929 as part of a larger exploration and produced a map. But they appeared to have published nothing in English about the mountain itself and time did not permit further research in this direction.

In 1899 Messrs. Neve, Millais and Tyndale-Biscoe climbed a peak of 20,580 ft. to the E. of Panamik, and Neve's *Picturesque Kashmir* has a photograph of the Saser group taken from the summit. He apparently confused our 23,000 ft. 'Plateau' with the highest peak, which is partly hidden. He advises a base at Skyang Poche, below the Saser pass and thence an approach along one of the 'great ridges running S.E. to the highest peak.' A glance at the modern map will show that this is impracticable. I did not see Neve's photo until we got back, but it would have been of little use in our planning.

I budgeted for a party of four experienced Europeans with four Sherpas, and $3\frac{1}{2}$ months away from civilisation, giving us two clear months on or around the mountain. Charles Wylie, back from four years in a Japanese prison camp, was my companion in the plot and he laboured at home ordering equipment and trying to recruit other members for our still unborn expedition.

In India, I coopted George Lorimer of my battalion. At that time he was not a mountaineer, but had walked and skied in the hills. I also began a somewhat incoherent correspondence, mainly telegraphic, with various Sherpas in Darjeeling. Owing to the uncertainty of our leave, and consequently of all our planning, we were late in the field and most of the best men had already been engaged. However, Passang, my companion of three former trips to the hills, was ill with



THE SASER KANGRI GROUP.

malaria. A tin of Mepaquine was despatched in haste to Darjeeling and Passang was cured and engaged.

We planned to leave in mid-May, and April was a bad month. Charles wrote to say he could not join us and it was now evident that George and I would be the only starters. The arrival of equipment from home was uncertain and so, still, was our leave.

Early May however, brought a grant of 88 days' leave and tents and other important items from home. I wired to Passang to bring the best man he could find. The cutting of our Sherpa strength to only two was forced on us mainly by reasons of economy. Sherpas have become an extremely expensive item in the bill of a Himalayan expedition, and it hardly seemed worth while transporting second rate or inexperienced men across the whole breadth of India and paying them for three months while somewhat similar raw material was available at the base of our mountain.

Sonam, Passang's choice, turned out to be a solid individual of gorilla-like appearance. His technical experience was confined to a visit to Gasherbrum with the French ten years earlier, but as a load carrier and willing hand in camp he was invaluable. I do not think we saw Sonam smile the whole time he was with us, though one sometimes discerned a twinkle in his bloodshot eye. We added a Gurkha Rifleman, Purkabahadur. Like most Gurkhas he was extremely agile and at home on rocks and steep hillsides, but had no experience of snow and ice. However, his services were free and his smile made up for Sonam's lack of one.

My original conception had been of a reconnaissance lasting about three weeks, during which time four small parties of one climber and one porter each, would encircle the mountain. Then, ten days to establish a base and one month for the attempt. The reduced time at our disposal and the party as finally constituted, made such tactics impossible. So we decided to follow in Longstaff's footsteps and approach the mountain direct from Panamik, hoping, if that failed, at any rate to have time to look at the Shyok side. Much would also depend on what distant views we might have of the area before reaching Panamik. We now had small hope of making a serious attempt on the summit, but just in case, we took sufficient high altitude rations, fuel, tents and other equipment for a siege lasting a month; also clothing and equipment for three Ladakhi high camp coolies.

We left Srinagar on May 18 and crossed the Zoji La with seven baggage ponies two days later. Then along the Treaty road to Leh, which we reached on May 30. We slept in the comfortable government bungalows and lived largely off the country.

We halted one day in Leh to reorganise our baggage into 22 light coolie loads for the 18,000 ft. Khardung La. The pass was not yet officially open and ours was the first large party to attempt the crossing.

It was snowing when we camped at Leh Poilu at the foot, but next morning the weather was perfect. We left at about 3 A.M. and were on the top in $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Snow lay down to 15,000 ft. The view was

cloudless and magnificent, but not as extensive to the N. as we had hoped. However, Saser was there on the horizon 45 miles away, looking rather steep and icy.

Panamik we reached on June 5 at the end of a 250-mile walk. We camped in a green meadow traversed by a clear stream and shaded by poplar trees. The village was a mass of wild roses, and irises grew along the edges of the fields.

We had about five weeks to spare and had already decided to concentrate on the Nubra side. But from the Nubra there are two approaches to the western glaciers of the Saser Kangri group: the Phukpoche Lungpa above Panamik and the Chamshing Lungpa, 12 miles to the S. We had not seen Saser since we left the Khardung, and the Vissers' map was still our only guide. Some sort of a reconnaissance was obviously desirable before committing the whole party to either approach, but, on the other hand, time was short and Longstaff had written in not unpromising terms of the Phukpoche. As it was already evident that the success or failure of the expedition was entirely a matter of luck, we decided to go bag and baggage up the Phukpoche and hope for the best.

We stayed two pleasant days in Panamik and entered the ravine with 20 coolies and a sheep on June 8. The route was steep and precipitous, entailing mild rock climbing on two or three occasions. We slept in the nala bed and next day established camp at about 15,000 ft. and sent the coolies back. The site was somewhat low for a base, but sheltered and well supplied with scrub fuel. We could see Saser Kangri IV, 24,330 ft., an attractive snow and ice cone which we came to know as Cloud Peak, but Saser I was hidden by a 20,000 ft. mountain which divides the N. and S. Phukpo Glaciers.

Longstaff had recommended the S. Glacier approach, and it was evident from the map that the N. Glacier drained off a flank of Cloud Peak and did not touch Saser I. We decided to look at this less promising northern approach first and also examine Cloud Peak more closely.

On June 10 George and I reached a height of about 18,000 ft. on the N. Glacier moraine after six hours of abominable boulder hopping. The long N.W. ridge of Saser IV looked not unpromising, but there was obviously no approach to the highest peak from the glacier. A similar excursion the next day up the S. Glacier was less successful owing to bad weather and insufficient energy.

It was now evident that our present base was too low for an effective reconnaissance of the S. Glacier, so we decided to move up to a camp between the snouts of the two glaciers, to be known as Junction Camp.

George and I had an off day while the Sherpas made a dump of tents and food on the new site. The plan was to occupy Junction Camp the next day and then establish a camp on the S. Glacier, the Sherpas returning. However, Purkabahadur, who had not been fit since we left Panamik, now began to run an alarmingly high temperature and complained of pains in his joints. It was distressing to hear

him groaning as he lay in the next tent. We could not leave him by himself in this condition, and a second day passed slowly, depressedly reading the medical section of *Hints to Travellers*.

On the morning of June 14 he was a little better, and we established a camp on the N. moraine of the S. Glacier at about 17,000 ft. It was not as high as we had hoped, but the Sherpas had to get back to our invalid in the lower camp for the night.

Until now the weather had been patchy, but the next morning was excellent and it remained fine for the next four days. We had an interesting day up the glacier and the reconnaissance was successful in a somewhat negative sense. I shall not attempt to describe the topography of this flank of Saser as it is clearly shown in the photograph of the mountain taken from the S. Glacier. Suffice to say that a direct attack on the W. face seemed both dangerous and impossible, and that access to the cols on either side of the highest peak was defended by unstable looking ice cliffs and hanging glacier. There was a further great lump of bulging ice just below the summit, which might conceivably threaten the whole of the base of this side of the mountain.

The ascent of either col was obviously not a technical impossibility, but I do not think it would be justifiable to employ Sherpas under such circumstances. To be fair I must say that we neither saw or heard any large scale ice avalanches coming off this side of Saser, nor were there any obvious signs of avalanche debris or ice blocks at the foot of the mountain. So it may be that the ice, despite appearances, is of a stable character. However, if I personally come to attempt the ascent of Saser Kangri again it will not be direct from the S. Phukpo Glacier.

To the right the 'Plateau' was similarly defended. To the left, Cloud Peak showed a straightforward upper 2000 ft. of snow and ice. A possible route up the lower 2500 ft. of the mountain is indicated in the description accompanying the photograph. I was sorry later that we did not examine this route more carefully, but in any case I think it would have been beyond the capabilities of our little party.

The day following we went up the tributary glacier to the S. of the S. Phukpo in an attempt either to find a way up the Plateau, from where access to the S. col might be possible, or to outflank its great masses completely. We reached a height of about 19,000 ft. and when we halted were about a mile from the head of the glacier and a gap leading over to the Sakang Lungpa Glacier above the Chamshing ravine. Over the gap we had our first view of Saser Kangri III, 24,590 ft., a big square-faced mountain with two summits of almost equal height at either upper corner of the square. The odd 3000 ft. that we could see looked climbable enough. This was a long day and we staggered into camp as it was getting dark. The return journey was highly unpleasant over the softened glacier surface, thigh deep and falling into holes every few yards and cursing all glaciers, moraines and mountains impotently.

We packed up and went down to Junction Camp where the men had now concentrated all the loads with the help of four Ladakhis who had



Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]

CLOUD PEAK, SASER KANGRI AND THE PLATEAU, FROM THE S. PHUKPO GLACIER.

come up to join us as high camp coolies. Purkabahadur was better, but never recovered properly until we got down to Panamik. We took an off day and held a conference of war.

Obviously we had shot our bolt in so far as an attempt on Saser I from the Phukpo Glacier was concerned. And from what we had seen of the mountain the approach from the Chamshing to the S. was equally unpromising, as indeed it later proved to be. The alternative was to turn our attention to the Shyok side, but having a vast quantity of food and equipment collected in Junction Camp we decided first to spend about a week examining Cloud Peak more carefully.

We selected the N.W. ridge route. The ridge could be reached from the S. Glacier by an ice slope, steepening to a bulging wall in its upper section, whence one would land in the gap between the 'Footstool' and the 'Shoulder.' We chose rather to gain the ridge from the N. Glacier, although this curtailed the traverse or the circumventing of the 22,000 ft. Footstool.

We started up the N. Glacier with the Sherpas and two of the Ladakhis on June 19. Three days later we established a camp at about 19,000 ft. at the bottom of the Footstool col. Some snow fell but on the whole, the weather continued fine. Sonam returned to Junction Camp with the Ladakhis to bring up more food.

On the morning of June 22, Passang, George and I left camp without loads to climb to the col and possibly some distance up the Footstool itself. We intended to put a camp on the col next day. The slopes looked deceptively short and easy. It was a gusty, cloudy day.

At first the going was good. The angle was steepish but the snow firm, and we went steadily up kicking steps. At about 19,500 ft., during a traverse across the slope, I struck hard ice covered with an overlayer of soft snow. This was unpleasant, but the section was short and we landed on an inviting looking rock rib, only to leave it almost immediately in favour of the snow. The rocks were steep and rotten and embedded in ice.

The top now looked quite close, and we began to make a staircase track straight up. But progress was becoming more exhausting. We were climbing on ice with an overlayer of some 3 ft. of soft snow. Once made and consolidated, the snow steps held fairly well, but in order to make them it was usually necessary to thrust in the ice-axe at chest level and pull up on it with both arms. A boot merely thrust into the snow with the weight of the body on it scatted uselessly down till it reached the step consolidated below. Cutting steps was even worse. The ice was tough and the snow flowed down from above and engulfed the steps. I was beginning to get very tired and, largely as a result of physical weakness, mentally worried about the security of our position. For this latter reason I refused to let Passang take over the lead, and gave the word for retreat. The others were nothing loth. They were both very cold and bored with my inefficient flounderings.

We were probably 500 ft. from the top when we turned back and had taken five hours from our 19,000 ft. camp without a proper rest.

I would put the height of the col at 21,000 ft. and the Footstool another thousand feet higher, though from the glacier below they appear lower than this. We retied the rope at 100-ft. intervals and descended one at a time. In the prevailing cloudy conditions the slopes were, I think, safe.

That evening in camp the Footstool became the 'Toadstool.' Our vanity had been deeply wounded. However, three quarters of the route was made and we hoped to finish it off next day. The loads and the camp on the col would have to wait. But it snowed all the next morning and we stayed in bed. In the afternoon we went for a scramble on the rock ridge above camp and saw Sonam and the Ladakhis coming up from Junction Camp, small dots on the glacier below.

We were now well stocked for an attempt on Cloud Peak but I was becoming increasingly doubtful about our chances. Progress to date had been painfully slow and the object of the expedition, a route up Saser I, was in danger of being lost sight of. We talked the matter over and settled on a compromise, whereby George and Passang would climb the col and assess the difficulties of traversing or circumventing the Footstool. Meanwhile, Sonam and I would try and reach a point to the N.W. from where we could view the ridge end on. In profile it looked steep but climbable so long as the crest was of a reasonable width. And there might be an easy snow slope on the far side. If the result of these reconnaissances was favourable, we would have a fortnight in which to knock our heads against the mountain. If not, we would leave Cloud Peak, descend to Panamik, and concentrate on trying to find a route up Saser I from another angle.

Sonam and I reached a height of about 20,500 ft. on a peak to the N.W. and examined the ridge which loomed from time to time through a window of cloud. Naturally it looked much steeper than when seen in profile. There was no easy snow field on the far side. In fact it looked narrow and rather menacing. Meanwhile the others had reached the col after five hours' hard work. Passang had led magnificently but was doubtful about getting loads up. They reported the Footstool itself steep and heavily iced. Clean ice would be preferable to the vile conditions prevailing below, but unfortunately only Passang and I had crampons. After considering the whole problem carefully we decided, I think wisely, to break off the attempt and descended, at last in perfect weather, to Junction Camp.

We reached Junction Camp on June 23, and stayed there two days waiting for coolies to come up from the valley. Down in Panamik again, life was very good. Lying on the warm grass under the poplars and reunited with our remaining bottle, moraines, Lungpas, soft snow, failure and small tents became things of the past.

After two days we threw off our lethargy and prepared for a return to the heights. George and Sonam crossed the Saser pass with two ponies, descended to the Shyok, left their ponies and went up the Chamshen Jilga. Passang and I went down the Nubra to Chamshing

and then struck up the Lungpa of that name. After two days we established a camp near the snout of the Sakang Lungpa Glacier and sent our two coolies back with orders to return in a week's time.

On July 4 we set off up the E. moraine with heavy loads. The going was vile. A grassy trough or plain between moraine and mountain, that pleasant feature of the lower reaches of many large Himalayan glaciers, has no place on the western glaciers of Saser Kangri. Once past the snout, the battle of the boulders begins.

We camped at about 17,000 ft. and the next day climbed a peak of 20,500 ft. odd at the end of the long W. ridge of Saser Kangri II, 24,650 ft. This was an amusing climb, and included over two hours' work on a steep ice slope. It would just take crampons, though in places we cut steps for peace of mind. We belayed with ice pitons, the last man removing his piton as soon as the leader was fixed.

I called the peak the 'Lookout' and the summit gave a fine view of the terrific rock and ice cirque at the head of the glacier. There are only two breaches in the defences. On the left of the Plateau a gap leads to the S. tributary of the S. Phukpo Glacier. We had seen it from the other side. And between Saser III and II lay another col or gap to the N. Shukpa Kunchang Glacier. Both Saser II and III are inaccessible by present day standards from this side, the former a massive castle of red rock.

The top of the highest peak remained obstinately hidden in cloud, but Saser I lies back from the glacier, beyond the Plateau—Saser III ridge, and there is no direct approach to it from the Sakang Lungpa. I decided that our next move must be to cross the gap to the N. Shukpa Glacier. We descended by an easier route.

On July 6 we moved up the glacier. The going on the moraine was easier today, but a thigh deep struggle across the glacier, purgatory. We camped on the moraine about two miles from the foot of our gap. It looked accessible enough, but what lay on the far side remained to be seen, easy slopes or a precipice. During the past month the mountain had given away so little that I feared the latter. Saser is a singularly uncooperative mountain.

We reached the gap at 8 A.M. next morning, unroped and on crampons. It was about 19,500 ft. high. I was ahead and Passang shouted up to ask what the other side was like. I arrived on the crest in a shambling, breathless run and sat down. A couple of thousand feet of steep snow and rotten rock overlayed with snow, fell away to the N. Shukpa Kunchang Glacier. And there was a fair amount of avalanche debris at the bottom. The slope was perhaps not quite a precipice, but it looked sufficiently unpleasant. Doubtless it can be descended. We had some pitons and about 300 ft. of Nylon line. But the consequences of failure to reascend the slope in the more dangerous afternoon conditions—a four day walk without food and sleeping equipment—were horrible to contemplate.

We sat in the sun. A whole new face of Saser lay just round the corner. By this time George would be examining one of the Shyok



Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]

PANORAMA FROM THE LOOK OUT. LEFT TO RIGHT, SASER KANGRI I (SUMMIT IN CLOUD), SASER III, AND SASER II.

[To face p. 156.]

approaches. If only we could descend that slope we would have succeeded in covering the whole mountain.

After about an hour of indecision I decided that we were being very feeble-hearted and tied on at the end of 100 ft. of rope belayed by Passang. On closer acquaintance the ground became a deal steeper and the snow was in a rotten condition after days of hot fine weather. I liked it not a bit and retreated, nearly falling off from fright when a nearby portion of the slope avalanched with a loud roar. Saser, uncompromising to the last, was bidding us be gone.

We spent a day exploring the side glacier that comes down S.W. from Saser II and then descended to a camp in the nala near the Stundok side stream. Our coolies had not yet arrived and, on July 10, we climbed Stundok peak, about 20,000 ft., to the E. of Tiggur, 19,385 ft. The weather had now begun to deteriorate, and Saser and his satellites loomed hostile through mist and cloud as we took our final leave of them on the summit.

Next evening the whole party was reunited in the Nubra. George had been up the Chamshing Jilga with Sonam and taken a lot of photographs of the N. face of the mountain. From a subsequent examination of these photographs I would say that, here too, no obvious route exists. The whole face appears extremely steep and well defended. He noted the N. ridge as a possible line. It begins easily, but higher up abuts onto an impossible looking buttress of rock. Possibly one could leave the ridge and traverse on to the E. (N. Shukpa Kunchang Glacier) face. It was singularly unfortunate that Passang and I failed to reach this glacier and so complete our object of reconnaissance.

Of the approaches to Saser Kangri left unexamined by us, this remains the most promising. The way to the glacier would lie up the Shyok. Route books and maps indicate the route. The summer road has fallen into disuse, so the going would be rough. Also all supplies and transport would have to be brought from a considerable distance, a great difference to the luxurious Nubra approach. However, it is worth trying. Mid-June to mid-July is the best time for high mountaineering. The weather we experienced during this period was extraordinarily fine for the Karakorams.

We reached Leh on July 15, and made a leisurely return to Kashmir. In the Indus valley the apricots were ripe. Not least among the attractions of the Eastern Karakorams are the country of Ladakh and its inhabitants. I personally would be willing to return there with no thought of climbing high mountains. But, once in Leh, I feel that the urge for a quick trip up the Shyok to the N. Shukpa would be difficult to resist. Even in the Karakorams few mountains are completely inaccessible on all sides. Both George and I hope to return to finish the job one day.