THE NEPAL HIMALAYA

By H. W. TILMAN

Read before the Alpine Club, February 2, 1950

I HAVE remarked before that if you want to climb a lot the last place to go is the Himalaya. Our experience last year confirms this, and to avoid raising false hopes of hearing how we wrestled with some cloud-splitting summit I might have called this paper 'The March of Science'—but the Editor, I believe, likes to keep his pages clean.

When the Himalayan Committee approached the Nepal Government our idea was to kill two birds—to have a look at the S. side of Mount Everest and to give a few likely aspirants some experience of Himalayan conditions. The Nepal Government consented, but it confined the expedition to the Langtang Himal 80 miles W. of Everest, and it also insisted on our undertaking some scientific work besides just frivolling upon the mountains; so we had to recast our ideas and we decided upon a party of four, two scientists accompanied by two climbers to lend tone. Mr. Peter Lloyd and I had intended going to the Himalaya anyway and since we were members of the committee concerned this simplified matters. As the Bible tells us, you must not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn.

But the enlightened views of the Nepalese on the proper aims of an expedition were a facer for me who hitherto had refused to mingle art with science; but just as Paris was once deemed worth a Mass so I thought a glimpse of the Nepal Himalaya worth the swallowing of a stubbornly held principle or prejudice. There are, I believe, other branches of science but we plumped for the only two we could think of offhand, geology and botany. The botanist was easy, for Mr. Scott Russell at once produced O. Polunin, a Charterhouse master, who filled the bill admirably. Finding a geologist gave more trouble. The number of these who do anything so vulgar as battering the living rock in the field is extraordinarily minute. As weathering agents we can dismiss them. I worked steadily through a list of twenty professors none of whom, however, showed any inclination to pluck their rusting hammers from the wall. Nor would they detail a subordinate for the job. Research, setting examination papers and answering them, kept the whole geological strata of England firmly in situ. A willing victim was at last found in J. S. Scott, of St. Andrews University, which University came down very handsomely with a grant of £150. Finance gave little trouble. As I have said before, if you want to climb in some distant range you do it, quite rightly, at your own expense, but should you want to go to the North Pole to collect cosmic dust, to the bottom of the ocean for globigerina ooze, or to Patagonia to measure the skulls of Fuegians, the pundits will hand you the stuff on a plate.

This motley team assembled in Katmandu at the end of May. In Katmandu you must suppress that latent tendency towards slovenliness that is gaining upon us here. Dinner jackets and visiting cards are no more meaningless symbols there than are comrade Dalton's millions here. Incidentally, in the back-blocks of Nepal they hardly know the word Katmandu ; they call it Nepal and that includes and is confined to the whole rich, thickly populated valley in which Katmandu lies, a circle of less than twenty miles. Beyond that, as Sir Fopling Flutter said of the country beyond Hyde Park, all is desert.

With four Sherpas and forty local coolies we started on May 29. The approach march took only eight days and followed the valley of the Trisuli, which is one of those rivers that rise in Tibet far N. of the Himalaya and cut their way through the range in deep gorges. Where the river enters Nepal at a point slightly N. of the Himalayan axis it is only 6000 ft. above the sea. A day's march short of the frontier we turned N.-E. up the Langtang Khola (khola means river) to settle like a cloud of locusts on Langtang village. However, the hungry forty had to be fed for only one night, next day they returned to Katmandu. It was the easiest approach march I have done, the track was good, the coolies docile, no exhortation was needed. There was neither grumbling nor cadging, and ' baksheesh ' was not even mentioned.

Above the forest, at about 10,000 ft. the Langtang is a fine open valley, rich in flowers and a grazier's paradise. The village lies at 11,000 ft., has some thirty houses, and is spacious in the possession of cattle—cows, zos, yaks. Wheat, buckwheat, and potatoes are grown, and much butter is made, a lot of which is bought for consumption in Tibetan monasteries. Butter enters largely into their religious ceremonies, and so does beer ; for in the debased Buddhism of those parts, as in Shropshire, ' malt does more than Milton can to justify God's way to man.' The butter is burnt in innumerable lamps, drunk in innumerable bowls of tea, and images are decorated and human heads blessed with it. The Langtang valley has religious traditions too. Within it no animal may be killed—except for a sheep, thoughtfully slaughtered for us by a bear of non-Buddhist tendencies, we had no meat—and up one of the glaciers are two rock needles which are revered as images of two Buddhist saints. Lamas came from Tibet to worship these from the valley.

Our first three weeks were devoted to exploration and survey. These were the only fine weeks we were to have, for by the end of June the monsoon had set in, but even had we been aware of this I doubt if we should have spent them otherwise. In new country the urge to explore is not to be withstood and here were three major glaciers and several minor ones waiting to be examined. Moreover, in our cautious eyes, none of the Langtang peaks invited assault at that early stage. Nor was Lloyd very fit ; indeed, as the result of several weeks in Australia, he was a little gross, a fault which an insufficiently arduous approach march had not even begun to remedy.

The head of the Langtang valley is formed by the main Himalayan

range which at this point is likewise the frontier. Only ten miles to the N.E. on the Tibet side is Gosainthan (26,291 ft.) between which and the frontier the country is quite unknown. Our object was to make a survey of this, which we hoped to do without entering Tibet by lugging a photo-theodolite on to the main range at several points. If we could get down the other side so much the better, for it would be high, glaciated country and therefore uninhabited. Peter Lloyd, who can multiply and divide, had generously consented to wield the precision instrument which, by the way, used plates and had no shutter.

Four miles up from the village there is a gompa situated close to the snout of a considerable glacier fed from the southern face of Langtang Lirung (23,771 ft.). Lirung is the highest of the Langtang group but there is no way on to it from the S. side which is defended by a rock and ice cirque. A long way E. of the peak a ridge, which we took to be the main ridge, appeared accessible, so from a 17,000 ft. camp we climbed it and Lloyd did his first station at about 19,000 ft. It was not the main ridge so we came down and set out for the head of the valley, much encouraged by the old story of an easy pass over the range. It was difficult to imagine any shorter or better way to Tibet than by the Trisuli valley, but the oldest inhabitant well remembered people coming over the pass and bringing their yaks with them. I admire the yak, but his reputation, like that of many of us Himalayan climbers, is enhanced by time and distance. This pass, they said, had been closed at the time of the Nepal-Tibet war (1854), but whether by man's edict or by some natural cataclysm we could not discover.

It took three days to get within striking distance of the glacier head which to our relief terminated in a long, easy snow slope. A faint track which followed moraine and ablation valley on the right bank might have been accounted for as a grazing track, but in the glacier trough, well beyond the limits of grass, I noticed two or three cairns. I am a believer in tradition and there are other Himalayan mysteries besides ancient passes which are supported both by tradition and tracks.

There were in fact three widely separated cols at the head of the valley, all about 20,000 ft. and all fairly easily reached. From two of them we merely looked down upon the big W. glacier, but the most easterly was bang on the frontier ridge. The view from any col—a mountain window opening on to another valley—is exciting, much more so when the col is on a frontier ridge. This was our big moment, the moment for which I had been, as Pepys says, in child ever since we had left Katmandu. Much depended on what we saw and to our disgust we did not see much. Below us a big glacier drained W., across it lay a tangle of mountains, and at its head a high ridge stretched away to the N.W., screening Gosainthan and all the country between. The descent on the Tibet side was steep, so steep that even had we had with us, instead of Sherpas, that earlier and better strain of yaks there was no taking a camp down ; and since there were no other accessible points on the main range our survey had to be confined to the Langtang itself. By doing this we were not trying to paint the lily. The present

¼″ maps are based on a survey carried out by Indian surveyors of the Survey of India in the 'twenties. The major peaks are trigonometrically fixed and up to the level of habitation the maps are good enough to dispel any illusion one might have of being an explorer ; but above that they are bad enough to permit of glaciers offering charming surprises and cols unexpected and puzzling vistas.

Having visited all these cols and done some lower stations, we began to move down the glacier, by which time the weather had put paid to further surveying. On the way I went up a tributary glacier to the E. from where I caught sight of another col which proved useful later. From Langtang village we moved round Rasua Garhi, the Nepalese frontier post in the Trisuli valley, whence we hoped to reach the northern slopes of Langtang Lirung. For some obscure reason (for the territory is of no value) the Nepalese have here pushed the frontier beyond the main Himalayan axis to the Lende Khola. This river drains the N. side of the Langtang Himal and I am pretty confident that the glacier we had seen from the col drains into the Lende.

At Rasua Garhi, squeezed between the river and the wall of the gorge, is a substantial stone fort built 100 years ago, embrasured for cannon and loopholed, and manned by some fifty militiamen. Close to the junction of Lende and Trisuli the Lende is bridged by a wooden cantilever bridge of which half is maintained by the Tibetans and half by Nepal. On the Tibet side is nothing but a stone bearing a Chinese inscription from which, if you were a sinologue, you would no doubt learn not where you were but of some pithy Confucianism—' When struck by a thunderbolt,' for example, ' it is superfluous to consult the Book of Dates as to the meaning of the omen.' The absence on the Tibet side of any hint of might, majesty, and power, not so much as an empty sentry-box, is in accord with Tibetan genius which manages to maintain its privacy behind quite imaginary barriers. Along her southern border are many passes and river gateways but nowhere any guards. Of course, should you happen to intrude, sooner rather than later you will be seen off by some stout, affable official in Homburg hat and dark spectacles.

The Trisuli valley is an important trade route between Nepal and Kyirong in the Tsang province of Tibet, and to my mind one of the dullest. No mule-trains with jingling bells and scarlet wool-tufted harness enliven the road, nor any tea-houses for their picturesque drivers. The carrying is done by coolies who take rice to Kyirong and bring back salt from the salt lake a day's march beyond. Some 5000 man-loads of salt pass Rasua yearly. Trade is blessedly free. We ourselves imported from Kyirong some very drinkable arak and paid no duty.

According to local opinion, which on this rare occasion was right, there was no getting along the Nepal side of the Lende Khola, while the track on the Tibet side was, of course, out of bounds. But we were told of a track which, starting from below Rasua, led to a grazing alp known as the ' Milk Lake ' on the N. slopes of the Langtang ridge ;

and since the Nepal bank of the Lende is nothing but a cliff covered with a queer mixture of juniper and bamboo we plumped for the track. It would mean a long traverse eastwards from the Milk Lake to get near the Lirung peak but by getting high in this sort of country one not only avoids bush-crawling but should find it less steep.

For three days, through mist, rain, and leeches, we climbed an abrupt track to the Milk Lake, a pale green tarn at about 15,500 ft. The evening we arrived the cloud curtain rolled momentarily away to reveal a great peak which to our astonished eyes threatened to topple into the lake by which we were encamped. It was the 21,000 ft. peak below which, on the other side, lay Langtang village; so at least we knew where we were and it was a long way from Lirung. We disregarded this hostile looking summit, flattering ourselves that we were after bigger game, but we could not disregard a rock ridge which descended from it which lay athwart our proposed route. This ridge, the first probably of several like it, defeated us. In searching for a place the porters could cross we dropped down two or three thousand feet thus throwing away the illusory advantage of height and becoming entangled in a jungle of juniper and bamboo. We cut our losses and went down.

Thus foiled we moved to the Ganesh Himal, a group of magnificent peaks 15 miles W. of the Trisuli—Lloyd and I bent on finding a peak we might climb, for none of the Langtang peaks seemed in that category, and the other two, who all this time had been busy after their kind, greedy for new plants and rocks. So far the rocks by reason of their uniformity had failed to please our geologist. The Ganesh receive more than their share of monsoon; or so it seemed to us who lived in a world of mist and rain, the sun having been extinguished apparently for good. Luckily we found a snug base in some stone huts at a grazing alp used by Tibetans for their yaks. Both parties considered the other trespassers.

A brief clearing led to our first and only successful climb on a modest 19,500 ft. peak called Paldor. When we started from our high camp we had not yet seen the peak, but it proved to be where we expected and a pleasant route obligingly unfolded itself as we climbed. What would have been a more serious affair was a mighty 24,291 ft. snow mountain whose perfect proportions suddenly disclosed themselves early one morning, filling the head of the valley. If (and in the Himalaya this is often the biggest ' if ') one could get on to the S.W. ridge the rest looked straightforward. We wasted no time in putting a camp at about 15,000 ft. by a lovely green lake whence we explored to the head of the glacier. This was surrounded by a great cirque composed largely of four monstrously steep and broken icefalls. That which concerned us originated in a high col between our peak and another named Pabil (23,361 ft.), for the col was the key to the S.W. ridge. The worst of the ice-fall might be avoided by the rocks on the Pabil side, but to reach the rocks meant climbing for about half an hour immediately beneath the rotting face of the icefall from which seracs had recently fallen and might be expected to fall again. Tensing

and I had a good look at the place, climbing a short way up the ice-worn slabs to see if they would go, while fragments of ice whizzed viciously by.

Warmth is the greatest drawback to monsoon conditions. Had the nights been cold one might have got up here safely, but from July to September, even at 19,000 ft., I doubt if it froze on more than two or three nights when the sky happened to be clear. To have to make decisions in such circumstances is the devil. The risks cannot be well assessed and here was a desirable and apparently snatchable prize at the cost of a short exposure to them. The doubtful reward for avoiding such risks is a clear conscience, but there is never anything to prove that you were right, whereas if you accept the risk the proof that you were wrong is apt to be too conclusive. Had we been descending, climbing without loads, or better still without porters, we might not have hesitated, but now prudence or funk easily prevailed. For days I was tormented by mocking visions of this snowy dome, so probably our decision was wrong.

No more could be done here. Of the three great peaks of 22,000 23,000 and 24,000 ft. which crown the head of this glacier only the last offered any chance and that we had refused. We therefore returned (' slunk back ' is perhaps the word for two of us) to the Langtang where Lloyd had still to tie up the loose ends of the survey and where Polunin hoped to find seeds beginning to ripen. A brief break in the all but permanent cloud canopy during which we enjoyed three clear mornings enabled Lloyd to finish. Meantime Scott and I went up the West Langtang glacier to a col about 19,500 ft. This was on the frontier ridge, so that once more we looked down to the big westward flowing glacier, and once more the descent to it was so long and steep that without much consideration I dismissed the hope of taking a camp over. Later, when Lloyd had gone, it occurred to me that I had condemned this too summarily, so with two Sherpas and loads for a week's stay I again visited the col. There was a rib of snow which earlier in the season might well have taken us down, but now except for a narrow ribbon of snow crowning the apex the rib had turned to ice. At the end of a rope I probed the rocks to one side of the rib, but they were so loose that in carrying loads down we should infallibly have brought them about our ears in cascades.

Lloyd, who had to start home about August 20, had only some ten days left, just time perhaps to turn defeat into victory. For though it was comforting to think that our climbing activities would be hidden under the more respectable cloak of science there was no hiding from ourselves that as a climbing holiday the trip had been a failure. Not that we had been as idle or unenterprising as this account may suggest, for in telling the story of $3\frac{1}{2}$ months in as many pages one omits much, in particular the day-to-day load-carrying, scree-scrambling, boulder hopping, and snow plodding which the Himalaya impose on their votaries. But even a prolonged course of these amusements is not so wearing as it may sound. In the Himalaya we may not observe the

five-day week but we often observe the five-hour day. For a number of reasons—porters, weather, camp sites—one usually finds that by early afternoon it is time to camp. More time, therefore, is spent upon the back than on the feet; bed-sores are the Himalayan climber's occupational disease, and a box of books his most cherished load.

Near the junction of the three big Langtang glaciers is a peak 20,986 ft. high, the loveliest of the valley, a gem whose fluted faces of glistening snow sweep up to snow ridges of slender symmetry. We coveted this Fluted Peak, as we named it, and we determined to have a go at the S.-W. ridge which hitherto we had shunned on account of an extremely steep step. We approached it by a side valley containing a glacier which I blithely assumed must originate from the peak. We spent a morning sitting on the moraine peering intently up the glacier into the misty void. Unblessed with infra-red eyesight we saw nothing. On my confident advice we decided to camp near the glacier head and, while I moved up with the porters, Lloyd climbed a hill with the machine (as he called the theodolite) in the forlorn hope of doing a station. Happening to look back during one of our numerous halts I saw over my left shoulder, glimmering high and white, the top of the Fluted Peak. So we went back and camped at the foot of the peak on the other side of the glacier, picking up Lloyd, to whom also the truth had been revealed. A heavy snow storm drove us from our first high camp at about 18,500 ft. before we had attempted anything, but apart from the step, which would certainly have stopped us, the rock below it was dangerously loose. Most high Himalayan ridges seem to be held together by snow. When that goes the rocks begin to go too. Some geologists affirm that the Himalaya are still rising and in view of the daily loss in height they suffer by falling rocks we can only hope it is so. Other pundits tell us of their vast age and we listen in respectful silence, but the climber who treads their ridges, especially if he is clumsy on his feet, and feels the mountain melting away under them, may be inclined to lop a few millions of years from the aeons of their sublime guesses.

The lower part of our ridge was wedge-shaped and this setback led to our trying the other side of the wedge separated from the first by a hanging glacier. Here, too, the rocks on the edge were free from ice and snow and they were more stable. We made good progress until nearing the point of the wedge at about 19,500 ft. where the rocks disappeared under the snow. This route by-passed the step and would, we think, have gone in normal conditions. Now a foot of wet snow lay on ice, steps would have to be cut in the ice itself and it was a fair assumption that such conditions prevailed for at least another thousand feet. We gave in.

After Lloyd and Scott had left on August 20, the latter with several hundredweight of Himalaya, the gathering of which had cost him two broken hammers, I paid the second futile visit to the W. glacier col and then started with two Sherpas for the Jugal Himal. This is the next group of peaks to the E. and we succeeded in reaching them by

means of the col from the E. glacier which I had noticed in June. It afforded an easy pass and we rattled down the glacier on the far side in heavy rain but in high spirits. We camped near the glacier tongue and next morning the mist lifted sufficiently to show our glacier draining by a profound gorge into a main valley of even greater profundity. The three big peaks of the Jugal Himal—Dorje Lakhpa (22,929 ft.), a nearby unnamed summit of 23,240 ft., and Phurbi Chyachu (21,344 ft.) —were hidden, but from a latter glimpse we had of them they seemed as uncompromising as the Langtang peaks and far less approachable. Our present object was to reach the main ridge (also the frontier) from which we might have seen Gosainthan. We had first to get into the main valley and because there was no way from above we thought we would try to ascend it from the highest village. We therefore embarked upon a long ridge walk past the five sacred lakes of ' Panch Pokhra,' a pilgrim resort, until we found a path down to the valley. Tempathang, the highest village, was only about 6000 ft. up. Beyond it, they told us, there was no track, the grazing alps having been abandoned and the path to them, or at least the bridges, destroyed.

Having no time to disprove this statement we struck westwards across the great N.-S. drainage troughs in order to meet Polunin. He had come out by the Gangja La (18,500 ft.) by a track which follows a ridge between two similar troughs. Such ' ridge-ways ' are common in these parts, for they afford easier going than the valleys. Crossing yet one more valley, we joined the ridge-way which leads to the sacred lake of Gosainkund (15,000 ft.), where each July some 5,000 pious Hindus gather to worship Mahadeo, the god being represented by a massive rock sunk in the lake.

Though Peter Lloyd and I had thus come more or less hungry away, the bellies of the scientists had been filled. Scott's stone ballast I have spoken of. Polunin, with the help of Toni, a lean and hungry Goanese whom I christened Wolfe Tone, had collected 2000 plants, 270 bird skins, besides butterflies, bugs, and other creatures defying classification. Nor should it be forgotten that I gave my own long pent-up scientific ardour full rein. On behalf of one of our older members I played havoc amongst the beetles, sweeping all I met, regardless of age, sex, or species, into what I called my Belsen battery.

All these, together with the geological and survey data to be worked out, may (in some eyes) justify the expenditure of something under £1,500 for most of which we are indebted to the following: British Museum, Percy Sladen Trust, Godman Trust, the R.H.S., R.G.S., the Royal Society, St. Andrews University, the Geographical Magazine, and the Himalayan Committee. I should also like to record our gratitude to the Nepalese authorities for their permission and much assistance, and to the British Embassy, Katmandu (particularly Colonel R. R. Proud) for the greatest help and hospitality.