ROUND ABOUT DHAULAGIRI

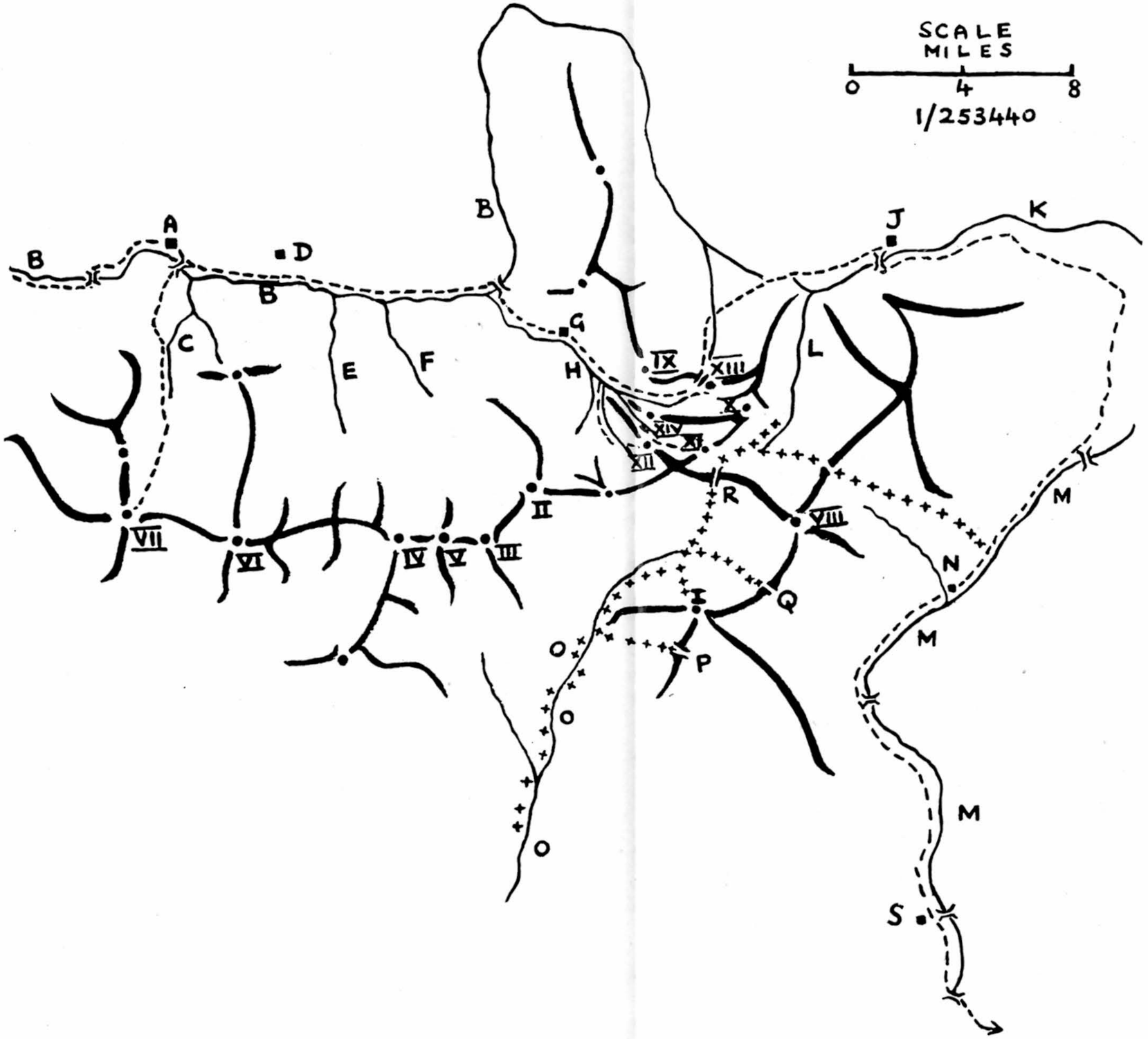
By J. O. M. ROBERTS

(An address delivered at the Alpine Club on March 29, 1955)

PLANNING an expedition to the Himalayas is of course part of the fun, and not least choosing the district. In the autumn of 1954 it was to be Nepal again. In 1953 I had been able to do a little exploring south of Everest and to see something of the eastern ranges, and in 1950, with Tilman, we had been among the central giants, Annapurna, Manaslu and Himalchuli. So now I turned my eye westwards and scanned the two hundred miles of almost untouched country between Api and Dhaulagiri. Apart from Pokhara there are few big lakes in Nepal and I was attracted by the two-mile splash of blue on the map which was the Phoksumdo Tal, 14,000 ft. above sea level and circled by high mountains. Kanjiroba, 22,880 ft., especially, seemed a worthy objective for a small party. This country is some fifty miles north-west of Dhaulagiri. The approach would be from Sallyan to the south-west, up the Thuli Bheri river to the small town of Tibrikot at about 8,000 ft. Sykes and Polunin of the British Museum Expedition had collected in these parts in 1952 and supplied useful information, but for high mountain exploration it was to all intents virgin ground. So I applied for permission early in 1954, but as a precaution specified an area within a fifty mile radius of Tibrikot.

I say as a precaution, as I have to confess to a weakness for making one or more changes in plan before the party actually reaches a road head, fortunately at last bound by the lie of the land to a definite objective. Having finally and enthusiastically decided on a certain area, two or three months of planning and meditation begin to breed a staleness almost, and the roving eye scanning the map alights on a new and more exciting mountain, possibly many miles away. I may note, too, three phases in the preparatory stage of an expedition: one begins with wise and modest aims, determined not to make the mistake of attempting too much, but as time passes confidence and ambition tend to soar and an attempt on a peak of 21,000 or 22,000 ft. is discarded in favour of 'having a look at' something a good deal higher. Phase three comes a little later, before the actual plunge of departure. Now doubts begin to creep in and airy plans surrender for the time being to the immediate and limited object of getting the party intact to a base camp.

In the present case the second, or the sky-is-the-limit, phase coincided with a further examination of the map and it was impossible now not to notice that some twenty miles upstream from Tibrikot the Thuli Bheri became the Barbung Khola, and that this Barbung flowed down from behind the main ridge of the Dhaulagiri Himal north of three peaks of over 25,000 ft., possibly the last of the giants of the Himalaya not yet reconnoitred even in main outline. So Mukutgaon, near the



DHAULAGIRI HIMAL

From Quarter-Inch Sheet No. 62 P
with Reconnaissance Corrections

I	DHAULAGIRI	26,810
II		25,429
III		25,271
IV		25,064
V		24,885
VI	CHUREN HIMAL	24,158
VII	PUTHA HIUNCHULI	23,750
VIII	TUKUCHA PEAK	22,688
IX	MUKUT HIMAL	22,000
X	HANGDE PEAK	22,824
XI	LANGRU PEAK	22,000
XII	CONICAL PEAK	21,000
XIII	(CLIMBED 1954)	20,500
XIV	(CLIMBED 1954)	20,500

A	KAKKOTGAON
B	BARBUNG KHOLA
C	KAYA KHOLA
D	PEMRINGGAON
E	CHUREN KHOLA
F	EAST CHUREN
G	MUKUTGAON
H	MUKUT KHOLA WITH TRIBUTARIES FROM WEST TO EAST: D II GLACIER, CHIMUKARMU, LANGRU AND HANGDE
J	SANGDAH GAON
K	KEHA LUNGPA
L	"HIDDEN VALLEY" (FRENCH 1950)
M	KALI VALLEY
N	TUKUCHA
O	MAYANGDI KHOLA
P	DHAULAGIRI SOUTH COL
Q	NORTH COL
R	COL DES FRANÇAIS
S	DANA AND ROUTE TO POKHARA

– – – – – – – – – ROUTES 1954 (BRITISH)
+ + + + + + + + + ROUTES 1953 (SWISS)

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head of the Barbung and in the northern shadow of Dhaulagiri II, became our intended base. This constituted in fact no very major change in plan, but suggested a realignment of the approach route further to the east of the Bheri valley. Meanwhile, the final decision on this point was kept as a later tit-bit.

A leader liable at short notice to fly off on a personal compass bearing of his own is well advised to keep his party small. It cuts down argument. To go alone with Sherpas permits maximum freedom of movement, but it is also pleasant to travel with a companion of one's own race, and I was lucky to find an ally in George Lorimer. We had been to the Karakorum together in 1946. Our object now was to climb a big mountain and apart from the possibly debatable point of size of party we were determined in all other ways to give ourselves a chance of achieving this object, topographical details permitting. Thus our four Sherpas were to be proved South Col men, and we opened negotiations for their employment in February: several hundreds of pounds were spent on equipment and while subscribing myself more or less to the bag-of-rice school I instructed Lorimer, buying our supplies in Calcutta, that no expense should be spared to maintain morale below the snowline and life above it. As for dates, a post-monsoon party is more or less committed to a monsoon approach march so as to arrive at a base camp on about the day the weather lifts and make full use of the immediate post-monsoon lull. In our case, it was, however, desirable to gain some distant views of the mountains before we made a definite base and we settled for a departure on about September 10, putting us half-way by September 21, when the monsoon might be expected to end.

I was to fly to Calcutta from Singapore to join Lorimer on September 1 and on about August 15 preparations entered phase three. The Nepal permit had not yet been granted, the equipment had been in the Calcutta customs for two months and looked like staying there for another two, and severe flooding and loss of life along the Nepalese-Indian border bade to make a mockery of thoughts of a holiday trip through these stricken regions. To cap other worries a letter now arrived from Mrs. Ang Tharkay, with whom I had not previously corresponded, saying that she had noted my demand for Sherpas and intended sending four honest men. Honesty is a quality which I much admire below the snowline but subordinate to climbing ability above, and I sent off a panicky cable to Lorimer. But as usual these difficulties disappeared one by one. The Nepal permit came through and we travelled together from Calcutta to Lehra near the frontier with the expedition equipment in one enormous wooden box, sealed by the customs and only to be opened in Nepal. The floods had evidently affected the west but little, and on arrival in Lehra I was only mildly put out by the news that our head Sherpa, Pasang Dawa, was in hospital with pneumonia.

By the time we arrived Pasang was much better, but he would not be fit to accompany us. Thus at one stroke we had lost sirdar, most

experienced climber, and cook. I was glad to see Ang Nyima again. Below the snowline he is a somewhat wayward character and one needs to know and understand him. On a mountain, and especially under difficult conditions, he becomes a genuine example of that often misused term, a born leader. We owed a great deal to his climbing ability and drive. The other two Sherpas were Lhakpa Tensing, Darjeeling born, but a likeable and capable young Sherpa, and an older and rather depressed looking man, Pemba Norbu, who is the father of the Pasang Phutar who gave trouble before Everest in 1953. Pemba's latest reference said he was not yet an expert rock climber, which gave me a fellow-feeling for him, a remark which, however, he disproved towards the end of the expedition when given his head for about the only time. Meanwhile, he was cast as cook ; it would be ungrateful to say miscast, as he did try very hard. Just before we left Ang Tharkay had, from the safety of Switzerland, issued an order that porters were in future to demand five rupees a day, as opposed to the old rate of three or four. This we agreed to under pressure, but we did stipulate that, as we had no sirdar, each man would have his own department, as it were, and receive equal pay. At the end of the expedition it was to our surprise our serious, stolid and reliable old Pemba who complained. He claimed extra wages for cooking. As I had for the past month been suffering from what I was privately convinced was a gastric ulcer, and stabbing pains which were not at that moment yielding to a treatment of cold beer, I fear that Pemba received a very curt reply to his request. In place of Pasang we took a Gurkha Rifleman, Hastabahadur Ale. Poor Haste did not care for mountaineering, but he was invaluable in base and kept us supplied in game with the aid of our twelve-bore gun. And to complete the party Douglas Carter of the Lehra Depot joined us for the first two weeks of the approach march.

Now we discarded the low-lying but circuitous Bheri valley approach in favour of a route to the east which would bring us into the Barbung at Tarakot, some way above Tibri. This was obviously a more direct way but we had been doubtful, as the last seven days to the Barbung lay over high and very sparsely populated country, culminating in the 15,522-ft. Jangla Bhanjyang. We feared that a bad track, monsoon wet and cold, and coolie shortages might combine to halt the party. However, local advice in Lehra indicated that all should be well, and this route had the added advantage of giving us views of the Dhaulagiri range from the south, monsoon permitting, which might have a bearing on our future movements. Finally, there was the beneficial effect on Singapore and Calcutta constitutions of some preliminary jogging up and down between the 6,000- and 15,000-ft. contours. About a third route, much further to the east, to Mukut from above Tukucha in the upper Kali valley, we had at this time even less information. The track was clearly marked on the map, but so was a track on the other side of the Kali leading almost to the summit of Annapurna. This route we decided to keep for our return journey when we would be travelling light.



DHAULAGIRI HIMAL FROM THE NORTH. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT.—DHAULAGIRI II (TRIANGULAR FACE), III (ROCK SUMMIT), V (HIGHEST POINT ON THE HORIZONTAL SNOW RIDGE), AND IV (MASSIVE ROCK SUMMIT). DHAULAGIRI ITSELF IS ON THE EXTREME LEFT IN THE DISTANCE.

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On September 7 we rose at three o'clock and loaded the expedition box, the food loads and ourselves into two trucks and set off for the hills. As we motored across the plains one hundred miles of the main Himalayan Range slowly caught fire in the north, a gigantic semi-circle of sentinel mountains which watch over the rolling green hills and forests of the cradle of the Gurkha race, traversed by the gorges of the unseen river valley, Buri Gandaki, Marsyangdi and Kali. The mountains were, Himalchuli, Manaslu, Annapurna, Machha Puchhare, the gash of the Kali, and then the enormous bulk of Dhaulagiri and its 25,000 ft. outliers stretching west to Putha Hiunchuli. Great names all, and great country. Within an hour they were hidden behind thick haze, and as we negotiated long and tedious customs formalities a dust storm swept the countryside followed by torrential rain. In Butwal we unloaded the box for the last time and broke open the seals with savage satisfaction. All that afternoon we packed and sorted loads and by the evening all were ready together with twenty men to carry them. Phase three was over. With mugs of rum we lay at ease on the upper veranda of a friendly inn below a blue silhouette of wooded hills : there was a distant roar of running water, the air was fresh after the rain and life was very good.

The days that followed were of the usual pattern of a march in the late monsoon. It rained every day but not particularly heavily or continuously. The valleys were very hot and the rice fields full of water : the track edged along muddy, slippery banks or waded through fields and irrigation channels and then shot steeply up blue ridges into the mists. There were rivers to cross by dug-out or by swing bridges in various stages of apparently perilous decay, and after that vision on the road to Butwal we hardly saw the snows for a month.

After twelve days we reached the pleasant green valley of the Uttar Ganga at 10,000 ft. in alpine country and halted a day to change coolies. The Butwal men had carried well and were keen at first to continue, but they had brought insufficient clothing for the more rigorous days ahead. Here in Dhor we were surprised to find that our carriers would be Kamis, the menial metal-worker caste of Nepal. We did not care for the Kamis, a rather mean and grubby crowd who talked too much and struck a hard bargain. Having said this I must add that once under way they carried well and with few individual exceptions stuck to their bargain. Their toughness and fortitude in wind and rain in more or less open camp sites at over 12,000 ft. with little fire-wood amazed us, ourselves wrapped in high altitude clothing and with sleeping-bags and tents in which to take refuge. Now for seven days our way lay through a fine country of high ridges, alpine meadows and pine forest. This was the time we should have been gazing at the southern and western aspects of the mountains of our desire, but hardly a glimpse we caught through the monsoon clouds. We crossed the Jangla Bhanjyang and descended to Tarakot. Here we changed transport and it was Kamis again. They even had a large village of their own, apart from the main settlement of Gurkha stock mingling

into Nepalese Bhotia. A meaner lot this, who demanded cash in advance and took three days to cover two days' march to Kakkotgaon. From here the people were Bhotia and the track became passable for yaks. We bade farewell to our Kami army without regret, but our satisfaction was short-lived for the men of Kakkot demanded a quite impossible sum to take us the remaining three days to Mukut. Twenty-four hours bargaining by Lhakpa, by now firmly established as the Dr. Schacht of the expedition, reduced this by half. We now left the pine country and travelled through barren gorges and over windy uplands, relieved in places by beautiful oases of crystal springs and birch and juniper copse.

On October 5 our yak caravan marched into Mukut. Including halts the journey had taken twenty-eight days and we had spent much more than our budget of transport money. But we had arrived, and here in Mukut we found friends and fine mountains, and six weeks stretched ahead. This day, too, the monsoon ended at last and for three weeks there was hardly a cloud in the sky.

Leaving Pemba and Haste to look after base, the four of us took a week's food up to camps at 17,000 and 18,000 ft. above Mukut, which lies itself at 14,000 ft. From here we climbed without great difficulty two peaks of about 20,500 ft. : the snowline north of the main range is high and these climbs cannot be compared with similar altitudes to the south. The summits gave us, however, views of the fine twenty-two thousanders around, none too easy but mostly climbable to the eye of faith. It was tempting to continue here, but we had not walked all this way to bag such lowly peaks. During our advance up the Barbung we had seen little of the northern slopes of the Dhaula range owing to the weather, and now we were round the corner, to the east. But the eastern face of Dhaulagiri number II was visible, the amazing back-drop to our camps and climbs during this time. This surely is one of the great mountain walls of the world. The summit is 25,429 ft. high and the snout of the small glacier at its foot only 14,000 ft. The fall of fluted ice is almost sheer for three-quarters of this height.

We descended to Mukut full of confidence after our early successes, and intent on now finding a way up Dhaula II from the north. Down in base we found that during our absence Haste had shot some forty head of snow pigeon, snow cock and hill partridge. As his cartridge allowance had been three a day, or eighteen in all, this was a good example of Gurkha shooting skill and cunning. Later on he shot two bharal with the twelve-bore. I don't suppose many climbing expeditions have before consumed so much meat in the Himalayas or featured fresh roast partridge on the high altitude menu. But apart from this matter of food, and we seldom had the gun at hand at the right moment anyway, the close presence of game gave an added fascination to our walks and explorations below the snowline. One day while by myself I saw within a single hour two herds of bharal, several coveys of partridge and snow cock, two hares and the usual snow pigeon.

Lorimer had been falling out below the 20,000-foot contour on our

preliminary climbs and it was now decided that he should stay and climb with Ang Nyima in order to gain further acclimatisation, while Lhakpa and I retraced our steps down the Barbung to view the lower peaks of Dhaulagiri from the north. During one long day, October 16, I reached from a camp at Tarenggaon a height of about 17,000 ft. above Pemringgaon, and thanks to excellent view-points and fine weather was able to make a fairly accurate assessment of the problem. In the *Himalayan Journal* for 1934 Professor Kenneth Mason lists :—

Dhaulagiri	.	26,810 ft.
Dhaulagiri II	.	25,429 ft.
Dhaulagiri III	.	25,271 ft.
Dhaulagiri IV	.	25,064 ft.
Dhaulagiri V	.	24,885 ft.

And further to the west :—

Churen Himal	.	24,158 ft.

and,

Putha Hiunchuli	23,750 ft.

All these points of Dhaulagiri were clearly visible, including the main peak itself, which lies, however, some four miles south of the axis of the Dhaulagiri Himal, far removed from the Barbung, and in which our interest was only academic. The clue to all four of the remainder lies in the attainment of the great open slopes of snow and ice which supply the ice-falls emptying down into the cauldron of the upper Churen Khola. From these slopes at 22,000 ft. no critical difficulties apart from distance and altitude appear to bar access to the summits, excepting D IV, a much tougher proposition than its higher neighbours. The ice-falls below are very steep but should be surmountable provided their snouts extend down to the valley floor and do not overhang ice-worn rock precipices. This latter condition seemed quite probable, but it was not possible to look over the rock peaks which buttress the upper Churen, and down into its head. And herein lies the second difficulty, for there is no route up the river gorges and the only course would be to outflank them by a wide detour over very precipitous ground to the east. The locals at this time denied the existence or the possibility of any such route and it did seem that any move in this direction would be ill supported by them.

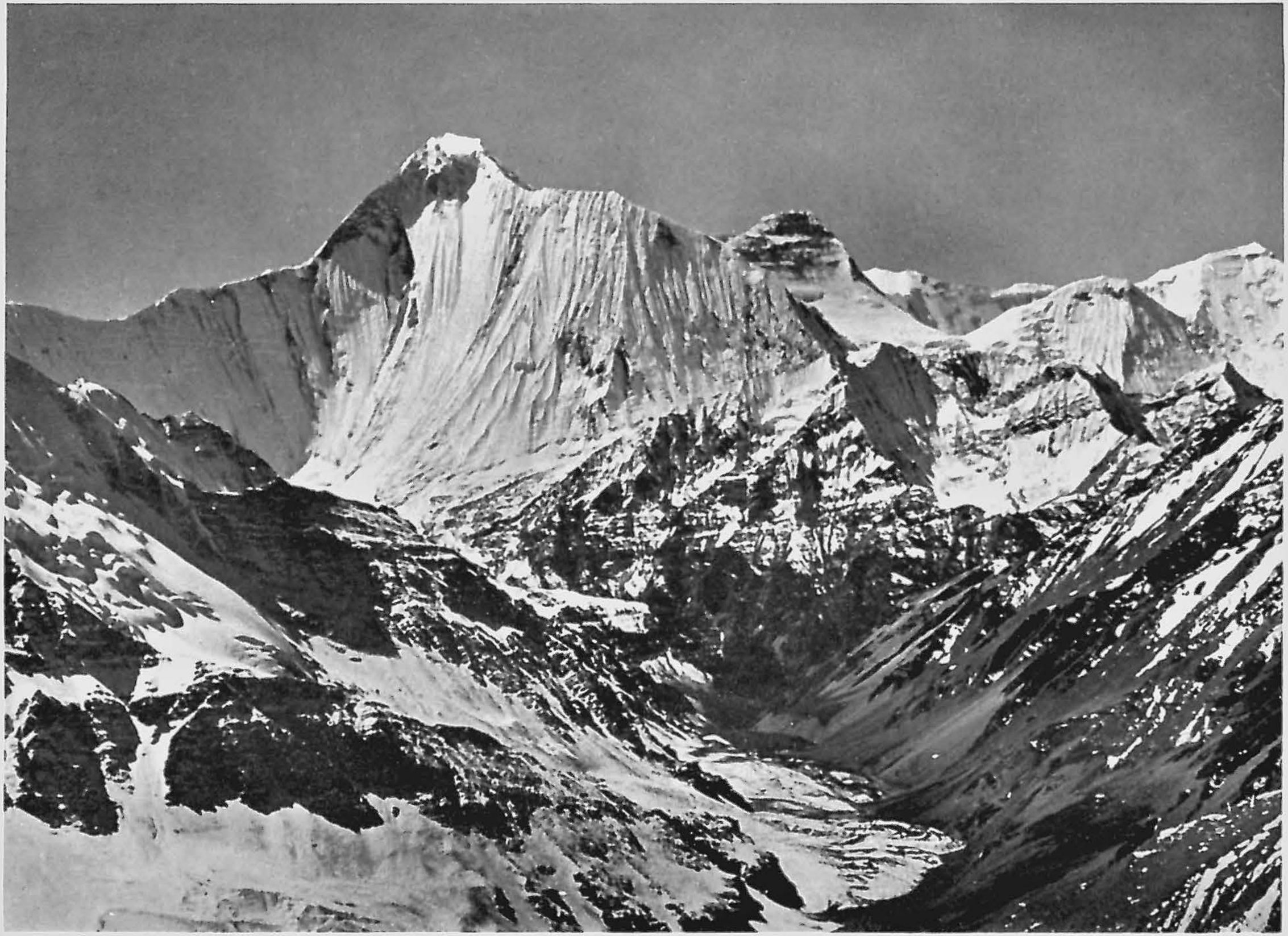
Wandering along by myself over these pleasant rolling uplands with one of the great views of the Himalayas before me, I was in something of a quandary. It seemed that we really should make an attempt to gain the head of the upper Churen and examine the ice-falls, but this double problem of both the gorge and the ice-falls would probably put an ascent of D II completely beyond the reach of a small party and I was doubtful about devoting the rest of our time to a reconnaissance which might give a negative result. I was beginning to wish that the whole face was a downright precipice without the ghost of a route, so that we could return to the smaller Mukut peaks with a clear conscience, when my further wanderings, higher and westwards in a vain

attempt to see over the bulwarks of the Churen, brought me into sight of Putha Hiunchuli and an excellent compromise. From a height of about 21,000 ft. the North-east face, an enormous slab of snow and ice only moderately inclined, led to the 23,750-ft. summit. What lay below I could not see from here, and I avoided the fact that above this height D II also looked climbable but was very doubtful below. In the case of Putha I had, however, a feeling that there was a route and I returned to Mukut the following day to persuade Lorimer as to our future course. We agreed at once on an attempt on Putha Hiunchuli, but to be preceded by a week of climbing and further acclimatisation above Mukut to fit us for the trial, followed by an attempt by Lorimer to force the gorge of the upper Churen while I made certain that a route existed up the Kaya Khola from Kakkot, at any rate to the foot of my day-dream.

This first week was not a great success. After three days' hard work we reached a height of about 20,500 ft. and only 500 ft. below the summit of a mountain we called Conical Peak, only to find ourselves cut off from the base of the steep but climbable final ice-cap by a 200-ft. knife edge of rotten rock, which we were unable to negotiate. A higher camp or a more careful initial reconnaissance would have probably ensured success. From this valley called the Chimukarmu we moved north in a single day to a camp at 18,000 ft. at the head of the Langru glen and at the foot of a fine 22,000-ft. mountain. Now we were careful and determined to make certain of our summit. Lhakpa and I made a track up the first 2,000 ft. and found a site for a proposed camp. From here the ice-slopes to the top looked steep but even now possible of attainment despite a late start. However, we descended according to our careful plans, and to a second disappointment, for at last the perfect weather broke and we were chased down to Mukut by heavy snowfalls.

This snow came after three clear weeks, and fearful of the arrival of what we called the winter snows we decided to turn to Putha Hiunchuli without further delay. This was as well, as the trip lasted three weeks in all and despite continued clear weather during much of this time the cold and wind of November did not encourage high climbing. Above the tree-line, lest pictures of blue skies deceive, we were usually inside tents and sleeping-bags two hours after noon if in camp.

While Lorimer, at one time chest deep in the main stream between retaining walls 2,000 ft. high and 6 ft. apart, failed to find a way up the upper Churen, Ang Nyima and I were little more successful in our search for a route up the Kaya Khola to the base of Putha Hiunchuli. Unlike the Churen there was, however, a route by a detour to the west, although the men of Kakkot did their best to deny it until six braves were offered a very high wage to take us into the valley above the gorge. A long day above Kakkot failed to give me a single view of Putha, which is a very elusive mountain from the north, and my morale sank low as the subsidiary caravans of the expedition approached my camp, convinced by my silence during the past few days that the way was clear.



DHAULAGIRI II AND IV FROM THE EAST.

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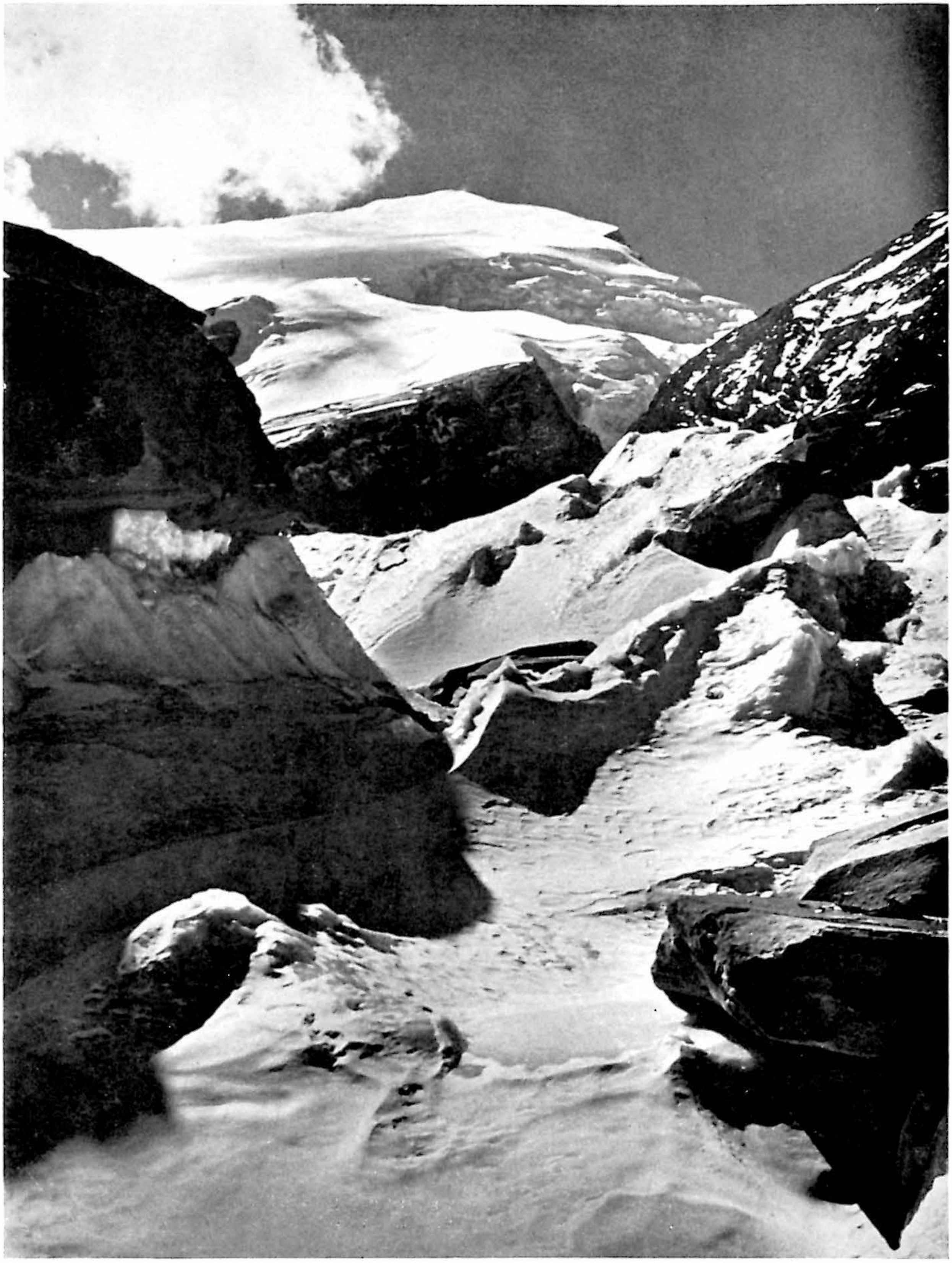

PUTHA HIUNCHULI FROM THE HEAD OF THE KAYA KHOLA.

However, we were committed to an attempt on a mountain of which we had seen only the top 3,000 ft. and we left Kakkot on November 2. To complicate matters it snowed now in the afternoons for the next four days, and in places we had to cut steps in the frozen earth below the snow covering for the porters' soft-soled boots. On the third evening we dropped down into the Kaya Khola and camped beyond the gorge at 15,000 ft., but only some two miles and 3,000 ft. upstream from its junction with the Barbung and the main path to Mukut.

The Kakkot men left us here and the following days were spent relaying loads over difficult and tedious ground to a Camp I at about 17,500 ft. This was finally stocked on November 7 and at last we saw the lower slopes of our mountain for the first time and that the way to the summit appeared to be clear. To save food we now sent Pemba and Hastabahadur back to Kakkot and told the former to return after four days with two local men. Further relays and a steep ice-slope above Camp II at 19,500 ft. brought us to Camp III at about 21,250 ft., established on November 10. The weather was now improving and although the wind was strong and discouraged thoughts of a higher camp on these exposed slopes, it was never a serious menace. The cold was, however, already beginning to affect my feet and at Camp II I changed into our remaining pair of American insulated rubber boots, the Sherpas having adopted with our blessing this elephantine foot-gear lower down. This I did after discussion with Lorimer, who in plain leather boots seemed happier than I was in my specially made double-skinned Himalayan boots.

That night in Camp III was noisy with wind and rather depressing. I had had a trying time with crampons, which slipped off my rubber boots every few feet, and worked until darkness joining the two with the aid of boot-laces. But it was this combination which gave us the summit the following day. Without crampons the long climb up these wind-hardened snow-slopes patched with ice would not have been possible in a single morning, and poor George in his leather boots had to give in to the cold after two hours. Lhakpa went down with him.

Ang Nyima and I continued. The climb is unfortunately a photographic blank as the camera had been left out of my sleeping-bag and both shutter and wind-on were frozen. The summit cone was considerably steeper than the lower slopes but lacked any real technical difficulty. None the less, conscious mainly of warm feet and the fact that I had never before been so high, the climb gave considerable pleasure and 200 ft. below the top I cramponed slowly past a young man who had been to nearly 28,000 ft. on Everest. At 1.15 P.M., four hours after leaving camp, we were looking with gratitude across to the southern sea of green hills and valleys and the country we had traversed six weeks before. The descent was pure joy, striding straight down towards the two tiny tents at Camp III.

Here we spent a second night and then continued down to meet Pemba at base. Descending to Kakkot we used a much shorter ridge route, snowed up at the time of our ascent. And so back to Mukut,

climbing on the way the slopes north of the Barbung to once again examine that side of the Dhaulagiri Himal. Now, after our Kaya Khola experiences, the route into the top of the Churen looked more promising but my mounting enthusiasm was tempered by a further examination of the lower ice-falls. We had talked before of what we would do after Putha, but now we were tired and time and weather were running out. It seemed best to turn at once to the return by the route westwards into the Kali valley, leaving the problem of Dhaulagiri II and even our half-climbed Langru mountain until another year.

We left Mukut on November 20 with yaks, and after a week of high passes, dust and bitter wind reached Tukucha. Now in wooded and softer country, but with Dhaulagiri and the Annapurna still towering in the background, we walked towards Pokhara. There, on December 10, we changed transport for the last time and boarded an aeroplane for India.