

CLIMBING THE FISH'S TAIL

BY WILFRID NOYCE

THE Fish's Tail : not a romantic name, but easier to pronounce than Machhapuchhare, wherever we put the accent or however many aitches we cut out. (You can always call it M.P., as we did.) Moreover, as first seen from Annapurna IV in 1950, it does look like a fish's tail : a great wedge stuck skyward and divided to form two summits, one a few feet higher than the other.

It was inevitable that with the turning of eyes towards steep, difficult peaks of medium height which has followed the fall of the giants, Machhapuchhare at 22,958 ft. should attract attention ; especially since it juts out defiantly to the south of the main Annapurna Himal and is by far the most striking object seen from Pokhara, where there is now an airfield.

The mountain was beautifully photographed by B. R. Goodfellow in 1953 ; but it was a bold thought of J. O. M. Roberts to take a closer look at it last spring with a view to an expedition. Till then nobody but the local shepherds had even penetrated 'the Sanctuary'. This is a fairly simple type of basin in principle, bounded by the long and massive ridge from Annapurna I to III on the north, and having M.P. as one guardian of the gates, to the south-east, with the Modi Khola gorge running NE. to SW. alongside ; then a powerful great mountain called Ganesh (23,807 ft.) guarding the south-west and flanked by a 22,000-ft. satellite. Yet all this only six or seven days' walk from Pokhara with its airfield !

Jimmy Roberts traced from across the way what looked to be the only line up the mountain. It is spectacular from every angle, from the Sanctuary as much as from any. Seen this way it has a very long North ridge running from a North Col about one and a half miles away, over a number of huge gendarmes, to finish with a formidable flourish under the final sweep to the higher summit. Jimmy Roberts decided on the ridge and later sent Ang Nyima (of Everest) back to build a bridge over the Modi Khola for use next year.

The preparation of an expedition : the usual alarms, excursions, permits, weights scribbled on the backs of envelopes, visits cap in hand to firms who might supply something free, generous grant from the Everest Foundation. At the beginning of April, Roger Chorley, David Cox and myself were at the Gurkha Depot not far from Gorakhpur, Charles Wylie having preceded us by a few days. Jimmy Roberts, the leader, was at Katmandu making final arrangements.

Our sea kit had not arrived. At Katmandu, where we saw the sights in a mood of exasperation, kind friends assured us that it was quite usual now to wait anything up to a month. Gloom! We camped hotly in a field a few yards from Pokhara airstrip, so that we could charge each plane. It arrived on the 17th. On the 18th the fifty coolies already lined up started on the seven-day journey.

Four days' march through the rice-fields and into gradually wilder country brought us to Chomrong. At Ghandrung, one stage before and a big village, there was said to be a move to stop us. The barley lay ready for threshing. If we went butting into the Sanctuary just now—and it really was a sanctuary, guarded by a miniature shrine—heaven knew what these touchy gods would do! And later . . . Jimmy Roberts and Charles Wylie being officers of Gurkha battalions, and this the Gurung country from which Gurkhas are recruited, the difficulty resolved itself and we promised to keep on the right side of the gods.

From the last village, Chomrong, you take three days to climb the impressive Modi gorge. There is a scarcely visible path; and most of the way dismal bamboo slogging, all the time near the left (true right) bank. At last you come out on more open ground, this year plastered with snow because of the late winter. About half the coolies managed it, hopping along barefoot and with very little on any part of them. These pluckily did the last day's march twice with the loads, while the others very sensibly went down.

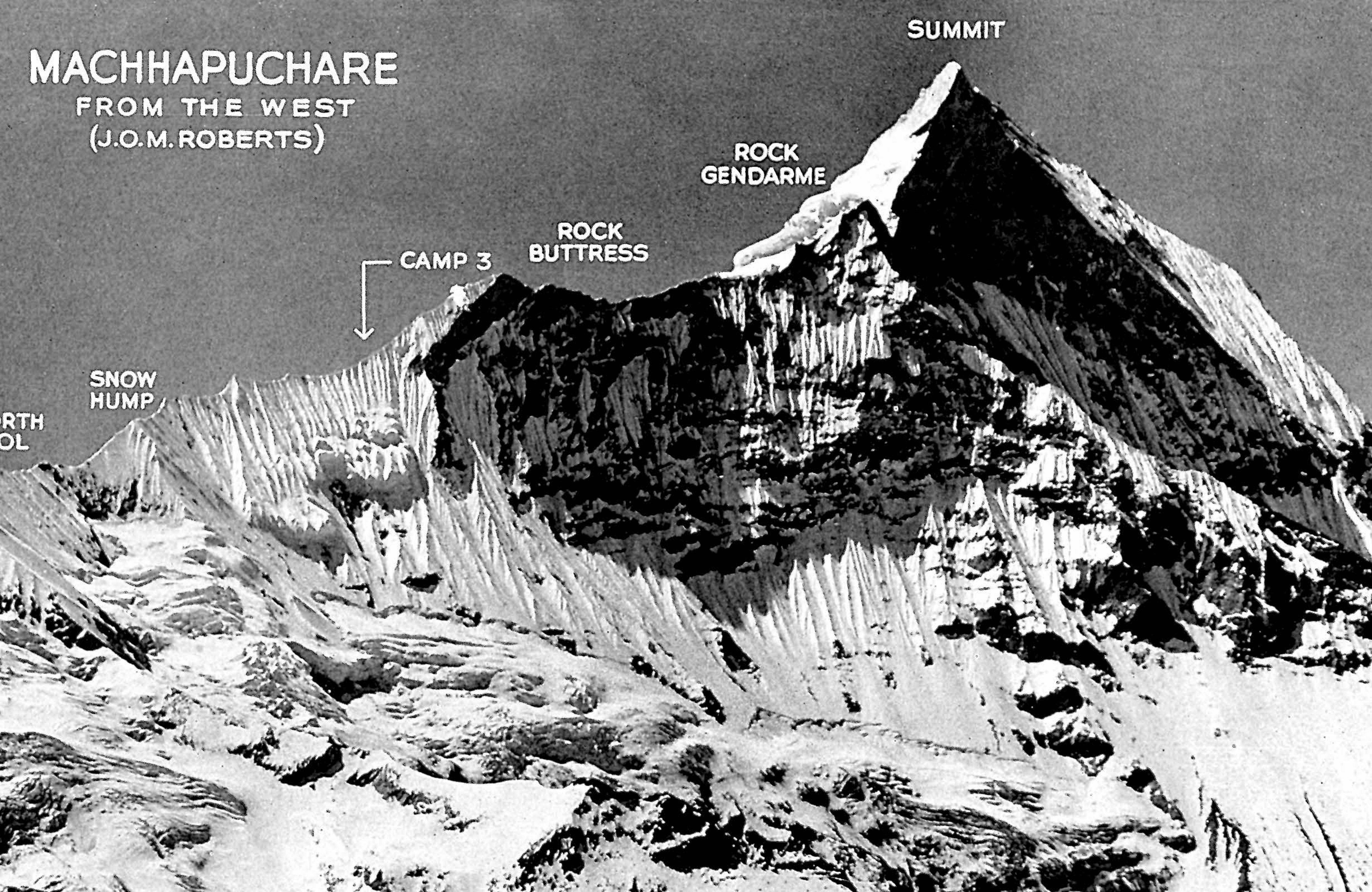
Base Camp, reached in falling snow on April 24, was at about 13,000 ft. in a pretty ablation valley some 700 ft. above the Modi. If you climbed the moraine you had a good view (in the mornings only) of M.P.'s west flank. For its height it is a big mountain; indeed, as we had to descend before starting, the total height to be climbed was the same as that from Base Camp on Everest to the top. Difficulties, too, might start straight away. The whole base of the mountain is a series of gigantic cliffs, cut in only one place by a gully faintly resembling Piers Ghyll but already christened, by Jimmy, Gardyloo. We could not see what obstacles it held, but it might be tricky.

By good fortune Gardyloo was packed tight with snow, easy walking if rather overhung and block-strewn; providentially, a straight snow-slope gave a reasonable and only exit on the right. A thousand feet above this, on April 27, we sited Camp I at 16,000 ft.

At this point we split forces, rather to the bewilderment of our Nepalese liaison officer. Jimmy and Charles went to look for a route on Ganesh, which we overweeningly thought might be added as a savoury; David, Roger and myself set out to reconnoitre the North Col route. However, at Camp I, Roger complained of cold feet and sleepiness; after an effort to get higher, and three nights at Camp I, he went down. As we now know that he was suffering from polio, this was a very

MACHHAPUCHARÉ

FROM THE WEST
(J.O.M. ROBERTS)



SUMMIT

ROCK
GENDARME

ROCK
BUTTRESS

CAMP 3

SNOW
HUMP

ROCK
OUTCROP

determined effort. He told us later that it took him two hours from the river up to Base.

Meanwhile David and I, unsuspecting, were up at Camp II. This part of the mountain between Gardyloo and Camp II was straightforward moraine and then glacier. Camp II itself was under a little rock, and above that business began—3,000 ft. of snow fluting, straight up. At that time, however, we did not know this. We were determined on the North Col (19,500 ft.). A long walk brought us to its base, then 700 ft. of steepish, slightly fluted snow. We climbed it on May 1 and found on the other side—nothing. Later we could see that the col is of literally overhanging rock on its east side. From it our own ridge led up, as sharp, as corniced (both ways) and as long as any that I can imagine. In the far distance, beyond the gendarmes, the great summit wedge looked quite vertical. Nor was it any better from the 'Snow Hump', the first big bump along and about 20,000 ft. We climbed this next day, a tedious day of over ten hours. Two chips and then a step, two chips and then a step, all the way up. It was often like that on M.P.

On our return to Base Camp it was obvious that something was very wrong with Roger. His left leg had gone completely and his right leg was not good. When the others got back next day, having reached 19,500 ft. and charted a route in horribly heavy snow, we decided that it must be polio and that he ought to go down at once. A runner sped down to the wonderful British women's hospital at Pokhara. Miss Steel, at fifty-five, about halved our time for the journey up and met the return party in the gorge, led by Jimmy. It must have been a nightmare descent: thick bamboo and rock are trying at any time, intolerable when you are facing backwards, strapped to somebody's back and not able to duck the branches. When we came that way later, we could not think how Jimmy had managed to get him down nor how Roger had endured the journey; so indefinite was the path.

This left David, Charles and myself, with three Sherpas, since the fourth had gone down. We had now decided that we must hit the ridge nearer the summit, that is to say, just left of what looked like a dumpy rock buttress, but which later, seen end-on, should rather have been called the 'rock wafer'. The problem was: Where to camp? The distance to the ridge was 3,000 ft., too much for one day if it was difficult ground—and it was. Luckily, at about two-thirds height, a series of ice bulges crossed the whole width of the face from the Snow Hump. Now an ice bulge is an unpleasant thing to be under; but it can be very amenable on top. After a lot of step-cutting we sited Camp III on a beautiful bulge, about 20,000 ft. Later we fixed 900 ft. of manilla on this section: steep snow ribs, then a tricky traverse left across ice.

It was after reconnoitring this route that we had The Great Hail-storm. We were used to thunder, with hail or snow, every afternoon. But we had forgotten that camp under a rock-sheltered slope may be a good place if it snows, certainly not if it hails. At about 4 p.m. somebody shouted: 'The slope's coming down!' And indeed, with a gentle hiss, the whole slope of myriads of pea-sized pellets had come slithering down on top of the tents. We spent the rest of the evening bucketing wildly with shovel, plates, anything, except for Charles, who with his military training dug a most scientific diversion channel well above. After that we moved Camp II to a nice safe place between crevasses.

Another day was needed for fixing ropes, then Camp III was successfully established; all except Charles's sleeping-bag, which had been airing on a tent and took a sudden plunge of over 2,000 ft. to somewhere near Camp II below. The next problem was to get on to the ridge, some 700 ft. above. A gully between flutings solved the first part; then a steep fluting, steps needed, and we fixed 200 ft. of rope; then, for three of us on May 16, came the exciting moment of looking over to the east.

It was a splendid view: Annapurnas II and IV nodded above the cloud billows, and many peaks beyond. Unfortunately the relevant part was the foreground, and this was not so promising. The 'Rock Buttress' on our right, blocking out our summit, looked like a mountain itself and projected a ferocious knife-edge down our way. No hope there. However, below it, on the other side if only we could reach it, lay a charming little snowfield, smooth as satin and inviting as a sea-bathe. . . . I started to hack a nick through the cornice.

It took some time to fix a birch stake which would do for both sides, and lower ourselves one by one on 200 ft. of manilla down a very steep little gully which gave out on easier ground. We also discovered, as we feared, that while the west-facing snow had been usually hard and good, this east-facing stuff was always soft and horrible, very horrible. From the bottom of the ropes, we needed to traverse about a quarter of a mile horizontally to reach the snowfield. It took over an hour, and was bad every time we did it. Sometimes you fell right *into* the slope; there was never much danger of falling off it. This time we reached the *névé* with relief and returned in snowfall as we had come. The climb to 'The Nick' was if anything more unpleasant up than down: a sea of vertical mush in which the foot floundered for hold. But there was a way.

There was a way, but could the Sherpas make it? We had three fine ones: Ang Nyima, Tashi, a splendid Kanch Sherpa, and Ang Tsering, who was young but most promising. They looked down with concern from the Nick, but went doggedly at it, each protected by a climbing rope as he descended. The heavy loads were awkward; at one point Ang Tsering fell off with his, and had to wait patiently to



Photo, W. Noyce]

MACHHAPUCHHARE (THE FISH'S TAIL) FROM ABOVE CAMP IV



ON THE FIXED ROPES BELOW CAMP III.



Photos, W. Noyce]

A. D. M. COX ON THE ICE RIDGE ABOVE CAMP IV.

be relieved. It was the same with the traverse, at which they might well have jibbed. Camp IV was placed on the snowfield (20,400 ft.).

From Jimmy's photo of this side of the mountain, taken in 1950 from Annapurna IV, it looked as though our snowfield connected directly with the main upper glacier, which leads fairly smoothly right up to the last summit steepness. Accordingly, on May 18, we three and the Sherpas set out with full loads to put up Camp V. We got no further than 200 yards.

From where IV is placed, under the Rock Buttress, you can see the towering summit obelisk but not the intervening ground; because a short, level knife-edge ridge, the end of a bigger ridge coming down off the Rock Buttress at right angles, cuts off all view of the lower parts. Quite unexpectedly the other side of this little ridge drops a pretty sheer several thousand feet to the valley of the Seti Khola. The upper glacier, so smooth above, breaks off at this level in a series of great undercut bulges, bits of which go tumbling and rumbling down the gorge. Only, a little to the right and 320 ft. below where we stood (I was lowered to inspect more closely), an arm of our glacier reached towards us as a snowy shelf against the mountainside. . . . If only we could get on to it!

For four hours David and I struggled to reach the shelf, while Charles filmed our efforts. First we went along the little ridge and tried another traverse, but the sun-rotten snow stopped us. We tried a higher line, up to the ridge and over. Rotten again. We returned defeated.

'If we had 400 ft. of rope we could be lowered to that shelf', David said. If we got on to that, there was no serious obstacle, apart from two big crevasses before the final steepness. So we went down for more rope and a rope ladder.

By this time Jimmy had got back from his great escort journey, and he started the ball rolling again by leading a load party up to III. When the rest of us went up, on May 29, it was the first and only time that we were able to use tracks from the day before, free of snow.

At the sight of the fixed ropes, Da Temba, the fourth of the Sherpas, decided that he felt giddy and was taken down by Jimmy—who had generously offered to make one less mouth anyway after III and to complete our survey of the basin. The load was taken on by the others, with many jibes at Darjeeling Sherpas, for these three were staunch Sola Khumbu men.

The afternoon snowfall was depressing, because it always meant a cold, early getaway. But we had now 300 ft. of rope fixed above, and the descent from the Nick had lost some of its terrors. Arrived at IV, we started that very evening—snowless for once—to arrange our fixed rope. First we crawled *à cheval* along the knife-edge bounding the snowfield, and lowered our 25-ft. rope ladder over the little bergschrund

so that we could get easily up from that side. The ladder had been skilfully made at Base by Tashi out of manilla with birch rungs. Its top was secured to a spare ice-axe firmly driven in, and from the same axe, on the other side, we lowered the 300 ft. of rope which we hoped would put us near enough to the shelf.

The job was finished next day and we had a trial run. With the others above, I took a twist of fixed rope round the right wrist and descended, held by the climbing rope. I had to work across to a little snow buttress (the route straight down would have dropped me into the Seti), over it and down a steep ice gully. It was a nasty place. My hand held me tight on the rope, my feet slithered trying vainly to bite the icy surface which underlay powder snow. It steepened; I was glad at last to be at the end of the rope, gladder still to see that the last bit looked possible. (It wasn't as easy as it looked, we had to cut off 20 ft. of our climbing rope next day.) Bearing over a bit more, we should just hit the shelf before it plunged into nothing. Then I had to climb back up the rope: a strain on the arms.

Charles decided to stay at IV with Tashi and protect our rear; we were frightened of arriving back at the 'cut-off' and being too tired to climb up. David and I would carry Camp V as far as we could, then make the attempt on June 2. Next day, therefore, we were off at 6.15 a.m. It was important to get to the early, reasonable, snow on this side of the mountain. Even so, the descent of the rope with 40-50-lb. loads took over two hours and a lot of doubtful language. At 8.30 a.m. we were resting, then started along the shelf.

Looking back at it, we found this shelf to be itself a mountain freak. It is supported by nothing and one day will go crashing down into the Seti. But it soon connected with the parent glacier, and up this we hotly ploughed. At two points enormous crevasses spanned the whole width and might well have stopped us. The first was blocked right on the left, the second produced a cunning and quite unsuspected arch of a snowbridge. Just above that we dumped down gratefully and camped (21,000 ft.). 'Glacier lassitude' and thirst had both set in, and we meant to start early next day.

Few people can sleep well before a big climb. I woke at 2 a.m., but we thought that a bit early. At 3 a.m. we were eating Grape-Nuts and brewing tea. By 3.50 we were ready but for crampons, which in the freezing dark took about twenty minutes. We started at 4.15 a.m. We had reckoned on hard snow, but this came up to the ankles and later to the knees. I was disgusted. Nevertheless, it was a joy to be rising into a glorious dawn, to look down at last on the Rock Buttress and later the still higher Rock Gendarme, to look back over the ridge at Base Camp valley and at Camp II. By 7 a.m. we had reached the last shelf, up steeper stuff overlooking a fantastic ice jumble.

It is lucky that slopes seen face-on are never as steep as they look, for this final effort had always looked quite vertical, a fluted, furrowed series of ribs sweeping straight up to a jagged crest. We now saw that they lay back at a high but reasonable angle, perhaps varying from fifty to sixty degrees. But they were composed of pure ice! To the left however, under a weirdly crenellated, ice-corniced skyline ridge, streaks of snow might be joined together. We started up.

Below a little bergschrund the snow was still knee-deep; above it, easy step-cutting led to the first streak. Above that, on the left skyline, hung a gigantic bulbous mass of ice—'the Onion'. It was an age before we passed it. Meanwhile, out of the clear blue a mackerel sky had come scurrying from the south-west. The great peaks, Dhaulagiri, Annapurna and Manaslu, hid their heads in long sausages of cloud. Snow began to fall, at first with sunshine behind, then thickly out of a grey sky. We hurried, so far as we could.

At about 11 a.m., on rickety snow, we rounded a rib which should have led straight to the top: it looked so near, and less than 150 ft. vertically above. But separating us there remained four beautifully polished ribs of ice. A froth of snow clung in places, brushed off with the hand. Each rib ended in a skyline pinnacle, and it was not easy to see which was the highest. Our own skyline ridge, still bristling bulbously, was no help at all.

I rather think that it was a goddess of the mountain, for she had lured us on so cunningly, who now drew that effective line just below the top. I cut two or three steps; each took minutes to make, and handholds too. A long job. We decided that just here two respectably married men should leave her to her stormy privacy and get down. The Chomrongites would be pleased, and ourselves very satisfied. I buried the Nepalese flag and Union Jack, and drove in a piton.

At this point, in falling snow, David decided that the time had come to light a pipe. The more annoyed I became with the nylon cord which refused to unwind, the more he with his pipe, which, perhaps not surprisingly, refused to light. At last we were started, protected down the first steepness by cord; we were re-kicking steps in the snow; we had found our upward line in the ice. We were on the shelf. It must have been snowing hard, for our earlier tracks had vanished altogether, knee-deep though they had been. We had to steer a compass course, completely blind. At 2.30 p.m. we were relieved to sight the little tent, half buried. We had been out ten and a quarter hours, and our beards were hoary with icicles.

On the 3rd we hurried down early, anxious at a great rainbow ring round the sun. Charles and Tashi had been busy. They had succeeded in digging a tunnel right *through* the little ridge, 25 ft. below its crest and 15 ft. long. It was a remarkable feat, and with the ladder

hanging below made our journey shorter and safer. Even so, it took over two hours again. The ropes had frozen in and we had to climb the first three-quarters height unprotected by the fixed one. I have never been thirstier—but we were back !

Ten days later David and I stood on top of an unnamed mountain (christened by Jimmy, Fluted Peak) of about 21,800 ft. in the very centre of the Sanctuary. As an ascent it was memorable for us because we had no time to reconnoitre its complications ; it just happened to go. Also for a spirited moonlight start at 3.15 a.m., a twelve-hour day and a summit cone which gave far the hardest part of the climb, a real ice teaser. As a view point we shall remember it for the vision of Machhapuchhare, standing up, queenly and isolated, a strangely outstanding figure almost dominating that circle of giants. She would hold her own in any company : the steepest, most exciting and alluring mountain that I know.

