WEST NEPAL EXPEDITION, 1964

By JOHN COLE

Three illustrations: nos. 72–74

The Kanjiroba Himal is the highest group between Dhaulagiri, seventy miles to the south-east, and Saipal, eighty miles to the north-west. It is a complex massif of deep gorges, fast flowing rivers and jagged peaks, the highest being Kanjiroba itself, two summits of 22,520 ft. and 22,580 ft. joined by three-quarters of a mile of almost horizontal ridge. This is surrounded by numerous peaks of around 21,000 ft., and the group covers an area of about 200 square miles. Maps of the area, although giving a fair idea of the surrounding country, are completely inaccurate of the mountains themselves. This is hardly surprising, since they are based on work done by the Survey of India in 1926–7 when small teams triangulated and plane-tabled almost the whole of Nepal in a remarkably short time. The Kanjiroba Himal was one of the few areas not penetrated by these survey parties, their reasons being that poor weather and difficult ground prevented access.

The first real penetration of the group was by John Tyson's Kanjiroba Himal Expedition in 1961.[1] This was a pre-monsoon expedition which explored and surveyed the southern part of the group, climbed Matathumba, an elegant peak in the south-west corner, and, as the monsoon was breaking, started the exploration of the Sisne Himal, a small range to the west of the Kanjiroba. They also found what appeared to be a feasible approach from the south to Kanjiroba itself. Using these results, the Ladies' Jagdula Expedition, 1962,[2] visited the area with the intention of attempting Kanjiroba itself. In the event, they climbed an interesting peak of 21,035 ft. at the south-east corner of the group which they first named Kanjiroba, then Tarik, but which should, according to the local people, be called Lha Shamma. They also climbed the highest peak (19,560 ft.) and two of the smaller peaks of the Kagmara Lekh, a small group immediately to the south of the Kanjiroba Himal.

Until now, time in the field has been severely limited by the length of the approach march. Whether this was started from the south at Nepalganj, or from the south-east at Pokhara, the march-in took about four weeks. Either this year or next, there should be a regular air service to Jumla which will cut the total approach time down to a week. Our party met in Kathmandu, where Charles Wylie had worked his usual wonders over permits and Sherpas. John Tyson, again leader, had

[1] *A.J. 67.* 120–129. [2] *A.J. 68.* 65–77.

flown out from England a few days in advance to push the permit through the last stages. James Burnet had come by sea to Bombay and had met Trevor Braham, over from Pakistan, in India to arrange for about half of the kit to be carried from Nepalganj to Jumla accompanied by our Sherpa sirdar, Ang Temba, and a policeman. Bob Kendell had flown from England and I from Pakistan. Prem Bahadur Lama, a police officer, was allocated to us as liaison officer. We flew to Pokhara with our five Sherpas, repacked the remainder of the kit, and set off on the approach march on August 26 with twenty-eight expensive coolies and lovely views of the Annapurna group and Machapuchare breaking through the monsoon clouds.

The monsoon had not ended. For the first eight days to Tukuche we marched through almost continuous rain: up steeply, down into the bottoms of deep valleys; across rivers swollen by the monsoon; through rain forests infested with leeches clinging and biting, only removed with a cigarette; bathing in a hot spring while the rain streamed down; a sucking pig bought for supper and slaughtered by Bob, our resident psychiatrist; a night spent with a British Gurkha soldier on leave in his home village who insisted that we join in the celebrations for the Lord Krishna's birthday—so dancing girls and rakshi well into the night; new boots giving blisters and untrained muscles stiffening. The coolies plodded on through the rain and we marched round Annapurna but saw nothing through the monsoon clouds.

Then everything changed. The downpour stopped as we passed into the rain shadow formed by the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna massifs. The valley of the Kali Gandaki which we had been following for two days, changed from being a deep gorge to a broad flat-bottomed valley opening out only a few miles to the north on to the plains of Tibet. From Tukuche, we saw the Nilgiri peaks, our first sight of high mountains since the Annapurnas over a week before. We also had a glimpse of one of the high ridges leading up to Dhaulagiri. In Tukuche we recruited jhibus (close relatives to yaks). For the first time the sensitivity of the border between Nepal and Tibet was brought home to us: not long before, arms had been smuggled up to the border in United Nations' medical supplies boxes. Consequently, all our crates were opened and searched and our rifle with which we had hoped to supplement our meat ration was confiscated when some of our papers were found to be not quite right. But soon we were off again, now passing through high, open, arid country near the Tibetan border. Occasionally we saw well-armed bandits and had our stories prepared of how our Queen would drop bombs on them if they molested us, but they either kept well clear or came just to be photographed. The following days were a succession of passes, some up to 17,000 ft., down to valleys with primitive stone villages and a few poor crops; camps; a smiling Sherpa with the early

morning mug of tea brought to the tent; occasional diversions such as stalking ptarmigan with the telephoto on the ciné camera and checking the survey equipment to find one of the theodolites smashed in a fall from a yak. Again the country changed. Instead of high, barren uplands with broad valleys, we saw ahead the outlying peaks of our group. Dhanu, our Sherpa cook, sprained his ankle and had to be carried by the other Sherpas for several days. Until on September 24, in lightly falling snow, we reached a col at the south end of the ridge bounding the Kanjiroba Himal on the east. The last days had been troublesome. Coolies had taken over from yaks for the last section as the only yaks we could find were frisky and, when loaded, rushed off in all directions, scattering equipment with gay abandon. Next, the coolies struck for more pay. Finally they were paid off on the col which meant that the following day was wasted carrying all the kit in relays 2,000 ft. down into the Garpung Khola. This had to be done since our paraffin supplies were only sufficient for use above the snowline, as a gallon tends to be expensive when it has been carried on a coolie's back for a month and the woodline was further down even than our camp.

We were now established on the southern edge of the Kanjiroba Himal. The plan was to send a small reconnaissance party to find a route through to the south of the big mountain, still twenty miles to the north. While this was on, another party was to place camps up in the Kagmara Lekh to survey that and the southern part of the Kanjiroba Himal with photo-theodolites. Also we had to locate the remainder of our kit sent up from Nepalganj which by now should have been in Jumla, twenty miles to the west. This kit contained most of our climbing gear and all the high altitude rations, and so far there was no news from Ang Temba. So Phutarey and Ang Dorje were dispatched to Jumla with rupees to find the kit. Dhanu was still immobile. Kanchha was to go with Bob, James and Trevor on the reconnaissance party. So there was a lack of Sherpas. The reconnaissance party left with food for ten days. John and I with Mingma, the only remaining Sherpa, put up a couple of survey camps on the West ridge of Lha Shamma to start the survey. After two days we returned to camp to find Ang Temba had appeared, so that next day John, Ang Temba, Mingma and I set off to survey the Kagmara Lekh. Ang Temba had been with John in 1961 and had been among the strongest of Sherpas. Now he could hardly move above 15,000 ft. and Bob discovered later that he had fairly advanced tuberculosis. So he returned to base after establishing a camp at around 17,000 ft. under the North face of Kagmara I. For the next week we placed camps as necessary in the Kagmara Lekh to give us a complete cover of the area which tied in with John's 1961 work. The early morning was the best surveying time, before clouds started gathering around the surrounding peaks. Soon we were used to crawling out of warm sleeping-bags and struggling

into down suits. Cold fingers adjusted the theodolite until by about 8 a.m. the clouds would gather and Mingma would have steaming mugs ready as we dived back into the tents. From a camp at about 18,000 ft. in a snow basin on the south of the range we climbed one of the peaks of Kagmara I (about 19,500 ft.), the only difficulty being 200 ft. of steep ice up which we cut to the summit cornice, to be rewarded by a glimpse of Dhaulagiri, seventy miles to the south-east through a break in the clouds.



WEST NEPAL, SHOWING 1961 AND 1964 ROUTES.

After a week, we returned to camp in the Garpung Khola. The reconnaissance party was back. They had found that, while it would probably have been possible to force a way through to the southern side of Kanjiroba, the ground, particularly for the last six miles up a steep gorge to the base of the mountain, was hideously difficult. Coolies would have refused. And so lines of communication would have been



Photo: J. Cole]

KANJIROBA FROM 19,000 FT. ON LHA SHAMMA.

(No. 72)

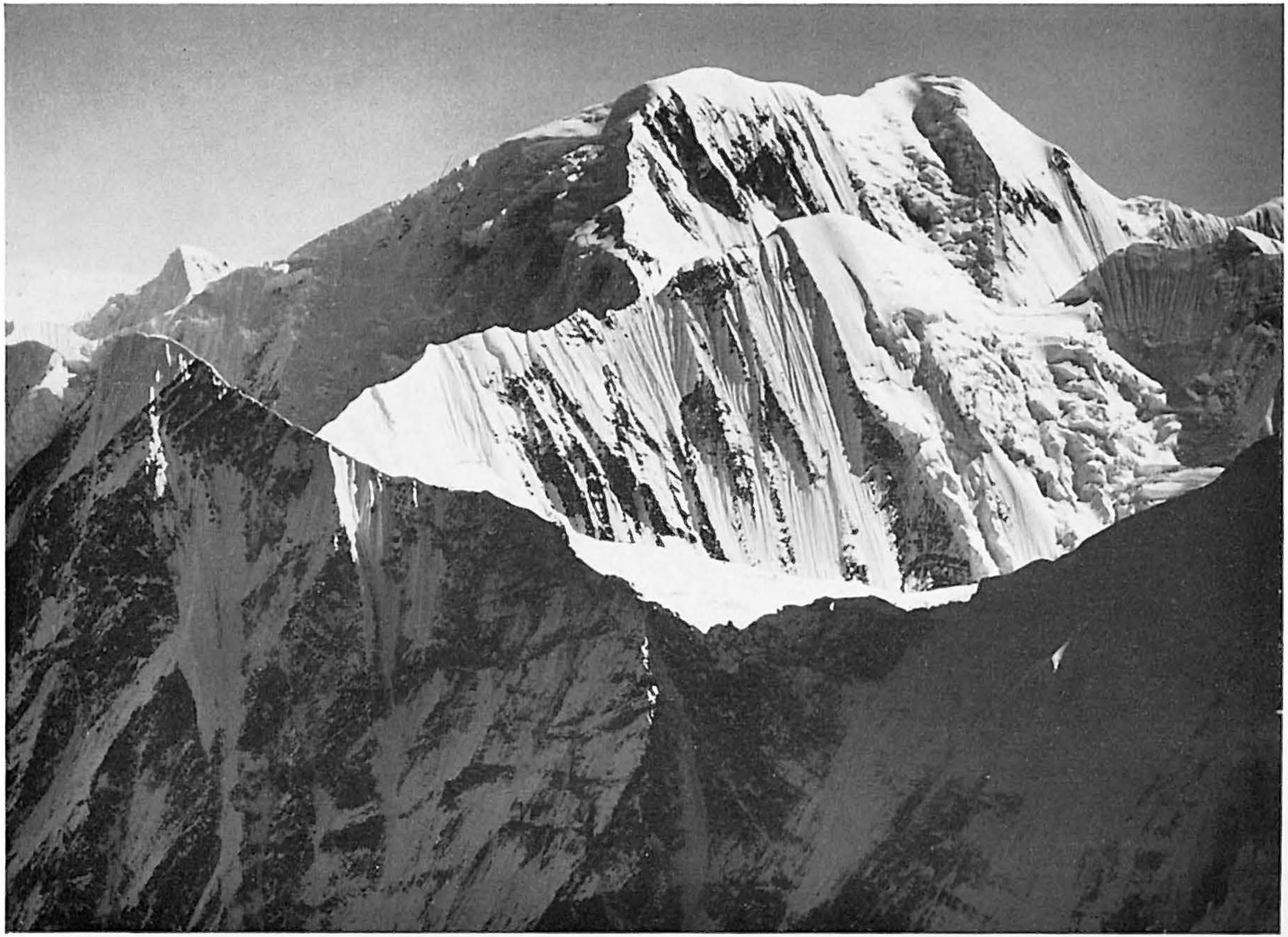


Photo: J. Cole]

TELEPHOTO OF KANJIROBA FROM BHULU LHASA. THE HIGHEST POINT (22,580 FT.) IS ON THE RIGHT.

(No. 73)

too long to mount and support an assault on the big mountain. Bags had to be packed again so that we could march round the west of the group and try to approach the mountain from the north.

While coolies were being hired for the march round, there were a couple of days to spare. Bob and I thought an attempt on Lha Shamma would pass the time nicely. So with Mingma to help carry, we left the Garpung Khola camp at 14,000 ft. and on the first day placed a camp on the West ridge at about 19,000 ft. Again the Sherpa lack told. Loads were too heavy and we were not able to get far enough along the ridge. But next day we were off early. Two large pinnacles made of consolidated mud forced us to traverse down onto the glacier below the South face. By 11 a.m. we had regained the ridge and climbed the 1,000 ft. of steep snow and ice which led to the more level, though much narrower section of the summit ridge. The summit was about an hour and 500 ft. vertically from us, the ridge between being narrow but fairly straightforward. Unfortunately it started to snow heavily and, as I was suffering from bronchitis which made movement difficult, we decided to retreat, one at a time down the steep bit, the snow, falling in small globs rather than flakes, pouring over and round our hands and feet. Next morning, several inches of snow had fallen and, as we had to get down to join the march round to the north, further waiting for the snow to improve was out of the question and we descended, kicking steps carefully in the sharp ridge to avoid being thrown off balance by the packs.

Trevor now had to leave as the cotton season was due to start in Pakistan. So, hiring a man to carry his bag, he strode off southwards towards Nepalganj. Meanwhile we went through the old routine of hiring coolies and eventually were off. Through Kaigaon and Maharigaon we marched round and through the Sisne Himal. On the way I diverged with one Sherpa to Jumla to find out what had gone wrong with our mail system. When our Sherpas had collected the kit from Jumla we had received one or two letters, but since then nothing for two weeks. In Jumla I was caught up in a Hindu festival in which the main activity involved chopping off the heads of thirty or forty cattle and goats with one blow each of a kukri.

On October 22 we reached Dalphu. Time was running short. The Langu gorge we knew to be extremely difficult going. Until we reached Dalphu we thought we should be the first foreigners along it. But we discovered that two Japanese on their way back from climbing Saipal the previous year had passed through Dalphu on their way along the Langu. Since they had not returned to Dalphu, it was presumed that they had got through. We had to get ourselves and sufficient kit for the mountain about eight miles along the gorge, where we expected a subsidiary gorge to go south from the Langu and lead to the base of Kanjiroba itself. The difficulty was to get load carriers. The gorge is

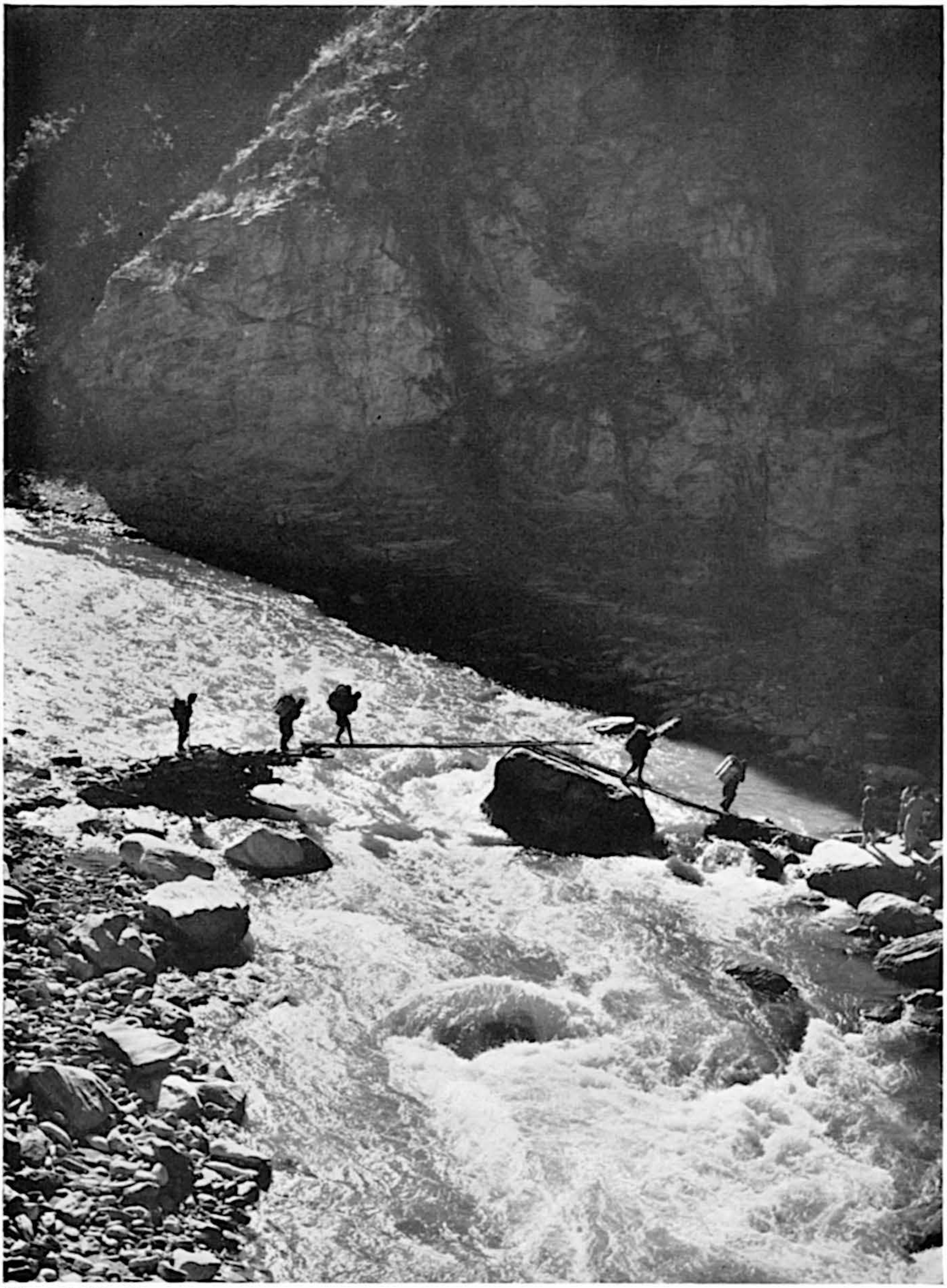


Photo: J. Tyson]

BRIDGE 3, LANGU RIVER (CONSTRUCTED OCTOBER 24–25, 1964).

(No. 74)

several thousand feet deep with steep and in many places sheer sides. The only way to get along it was to get down as near to the river as possible and force a way along whichever bank was feasible. But this would mean crossing the river several times; the river was too deep and fast-flowing to be forded: there were no bridges, so they had to be built.

Dalphu, stone houses perched on a steep hillside, is 2,000 ft. above the bottom of the Langu gorge on the north side. To the south-east, just appearing above the southern rim of the gorge, we could see the tops of three snow peaks. One of them seemed to be the right shape and, from our sketchy information, seemed to be on the right bearing. Since it was more than ten miles away, it could be big enough to be Kanjiroba. The trouble was that once we were forcing our way along the bottom of the gorge, we would not be able to see anything beyond the sides of the gorge itself. We had therefore to choose our side gorge off the Langu by dead reckoning for we had hardly begun sorting out the topography of the north of the massif.

In time, enough of the Dalphu villagers were persuaded to carry. For eight miles we ploughed up the gorge. Three times we were forced to cross the river where the sides of the gorge became sheer. Each time the Sherpas felled trees to make bridges, the last being a sophisticated cantilever affair reaching delicately out to a boulder at midstream with a secondary bridge from there to the far bank. At midday on October 25 we reached a point where a subsidiary gorge branched off to the south towards Kanjiroba. The big mountain was still about eight miles away and we were at 11,000 ft. We were now very short of time. There was no trouble with the weather since for nearly two weeks we had been having a succession of fine days, cold high up because of a constant wind, but obviously set fair for some days to come. But soon after the end of October we had to start the long march out. A quick reconnaissance 2,000 ft. up the side of the Langu showed that to prove this side gorge actually led to the big mountain would take a minimum of three days since it was, if anything, worse going than the Langu itself—thick brush at the bottom, diversions up and down the sides of the gorge to avoid cliffs, waterfalls to surmount. But everything seemed to fit our limited information so we decided that the whole party should make an effort to get up the gorge.

At first, it seemed that we would not be able to do even that. A faint hunters' track led up the hillside apparently to pass over the overhanging cliffs guarding the entrance to the gorge. The track went up for 300 ft. and then traversed to a series of little rotten rock buttresses. At one point a small tree trunk, carved to make a rudimentary ladder, had been laid against one 15 ft. step, its bottom end kicked vaguely into a fifty degree slope to anchor it. Then the track disappeared into a steep mud and rock slab covered with dust. Picking our way gingerly across this we were

then able to slide down through the bushes back to river level. We had proceeded 150 level yards in an hour. Looking back and up, we saw that the Dalphu coolies, sure-footed on all the steep parts of the Langu, were baulking at this. So back we went, tip-toeing down the log of wood. Later in the afternoon, feeling frustration descending, we eventually found a way through the first 150 yards at river level by boulder-hopping and cutting our way with kukris through the dense bush.

Next day, one party led by two Sherpas wielding kukris to cut and blaze the way, went on ahead while the rest followed with loads more slowly. After one intermediate camp, we arrived at a fork. Ahead the gorge opened out, peaks of around 20,000 ft. were appearing above a glacier in the left (south-east) fork, and we guessed we were five or six miles south of the Langu, so only three or four miles from the big mountain though we were still at only about 14,000 ft. Off early next day, we quickly gained another 2,500 ft. up the right-hand branch to see before us the mountain we had glimpsed from Dalphu. Its shape fitted in with what we had seen of Kanjiroba from the south, but there was a nagging feeling that it was not big enough to be the big mountain. We were, however, fully committed so this was the mountain we were to climb. A camp was quickly established just short of the glacier under the North face at around 16,500 ft.

The first camp on the mountain proper was at about 18,000 ft. on a col on the West ridge. The way lay over the glacier, avoiding the debris of séracs which occasionally fell from the North face and up steep snow to the ridge. A platform just below the col was hacked and the Meade tents erected. Between the col and the top camp—on a snow shoulder at a little over 19,000 ft.—the route was over a series of sharp rock gendarmes, the rock good in places but snow-covered. For the last 100-foot step before the snow-shoulder a fixed rope was left in place to ease the descent. Again two tents were dug into the snow and as the primus bubbled away we looked out to the line of 20,000–ers on the Tibetan border twelve miles away, their tops picked out by the setting sun.

Next morning was fine but with a cold wind. We were off before the sun reached the tents, Bob and Mingma in the lead, John and I following. Steep, deep snow; a few hundred feet of loose, airy rock; a sharp snow ridge leading to a level portion; then 500 ft. of cutting in steep ice and we were almost there. Soon after 11 a.m. on October 31 we were on top. It was flat and from it we confirmed our doubts. The big mountain was nearly five miles to the south-east and below our feet was the right gorge going north to the Langu, buried deep in the valley system. All around were peaks of 20,000 to 21,000 ft., unmapped and unphotographed. Our peak, Bhulu Lhasa, something less than 21,000 ft., was a superb vantage point. For an hour we took rounds of photographs and

bearings which with the information collected on the other side of the group would be sufficient to sort out the topography of the area.

It was time to go. My son was due to be born in a little over three weeks. With one Sherpa I force-marched to Jumla in four days leaving the others to follow more slowly with the kit. There I was lucky enough to hitch a ride on an American STOL supply aeroplane. From Jumla, my time to the Indian border was forty minutes: on foot the others took three weeks.