THAMSERKU

By DON MACKAY

(Three illustrations: nos. 26–28)

It's all over now. The last of the twisted juniper is flaming away, augmented by butter-box lids, bamboo poles and a discarded basket. The four coolie porters adjust their clumsy loads and soon all will be abandoned to the glossy ravens. After a brief examination of the litter of corned beef and butter tins, foil packets from soups and freeze-dried foods, the ravens too will lose interest in the site, and a year from now only the stone wall that was built as a back to the cook's tarpaulin will bear mute witness to the activity that once was here.

The peak is climbed and you were glad to come down, but now there is a reluctance to complete the retreat to the valley below. The mountain stands so steep above you that the actual steepness is lost and the only feeling you can have of its actuality is in your memory. Later you will look at the mountain from afar, but you will be unable to identify yourself with any particular feature until you think back to how it was when you stood there—and then you'll never know whether or not you're deceiving yourself.

Thamserku, you might say, is the second big peak on the right-hand side of the road to Everest. Or equally you might describe it as the peak in the corner where the Dudh Kosi river turns towards the biggest mountain. It is fairly prominent in a lot of people's lives—those living at Khumjung, Kunde and Namche Bazar—for it is the biggest, closest mountain to their homes. Its western slopes rise from the Dudh Kosi river, very steeply for 3,000 ft., relent slightly for the next 5,000 ft. and then soar for 4,000 ft. as rock and snow ribs which merge into regular ice-flutings. It is nothing if not impressive.

Thamserku, at 21,730 ft., is not high as high mountains go, but there are few who would say that amongst difficult mountains it is not difficult. Logistically, it took six sahibs and seven Sherpas, twenty-three days, four camps and over 4,000 ft. of fixed rope to get four men to the summit

In May of this year, Jim Wilson reconnoitred the peak and suggested, without confidence, that the mountain was climbable. The route he proposed lay up a couloir on the West face to a col on the South ridge and thence up that ridge to the summit. The most apparent problems were above the col and comprised a bump between this col and the next, a rock step, an ice bulge, another rock step and a long, corniced summit ridge. On October 16 most of the expedition climbed for 3,000 ft. above the village of Benkar and from the western side of the Dudh Kosi valley

made a careful study of Thamserku through binoculars. The route that Jim had suggested was verified as the most feasible and although we were aware that the team Ed Hillary had assembled was fairly strong, that it lacked nothing in equipment and that there was plenty of time available, none of us felt particularly confident as we moved in on the mountain. Peter Farrell and Jim moved immediately from Benkar to locate a site for Base Camp, John McKinnon and Dick Stewart went to Namche Bazar to work on the school construction for a few days and Lynn Crawford and I returned to the expedition Base Camp down the valley at Lukla to bring the main lift of food and equipment up to the mountain.

Although Pete and Jim claimed to have spent most of their time lost, they nevertheless had Base Camp well established and had reconnoitred a route across the ice-field that lay under the West face of the peak by the time Lynn and I arrived with the main lift. Base Camp was set at 16,600 ft., on a shelf at the top of a long slope of boulders under the West ridge. To get to the foot of the couloir that led to the col on the South ridge, we had to cross the ice-field below the West face, climbing about 1,000 ft. Two short stretches needed fixed ropes for the load carriers. We decided to make a dump at the foot of the couloir so that the Sherpas could build up a stockpile while we were working on the couloir, but we soon got tired of making the trek all the way down to Base after a day's work in the couloir, and our dump became Camp I. The couloir started off steep and became considerably steeper. It was obvious that we would have to fix ropes over its whole 2,500 ft. and as the floor of the couloir was frequently swept with snow-slides, our route would have to be on the sides. Two of us would go ahead, alternating leads, making a route and fixing the top end of the rope. The other two would follow, improving the steps and fixing the lower part of the rope. This was the pattern of our lives for a week—pleasantly cool work until about 11 a.m. when the couloir became a suntrap and the heat slushed the snow and sapped our energy to leave us in a state of dreadful lethargy. A conveniently overhanging rock about half-way up the couloir made an ideal bivouac and Pete, Lynn and two Sherpas moved in. Jim and I opined that the luxury of a good camp outweighed the disadvantage of an extra hour's climb in the morning. The upper part of the couloir became very steep and we were rather taken aback to find on the seventh day, when we reached the col, that the slopes on the other side fell away just as abruptly. We had hoped to put in a sizeable Camp II on the col, but there did not seem to be room for more than one tent. Eventually, after a lot of excavation, we made room for four tents, and when we overcame our feelings of insecurity, lived happily here and wandered between tents in a casual manner that was potentially quite dangerous.

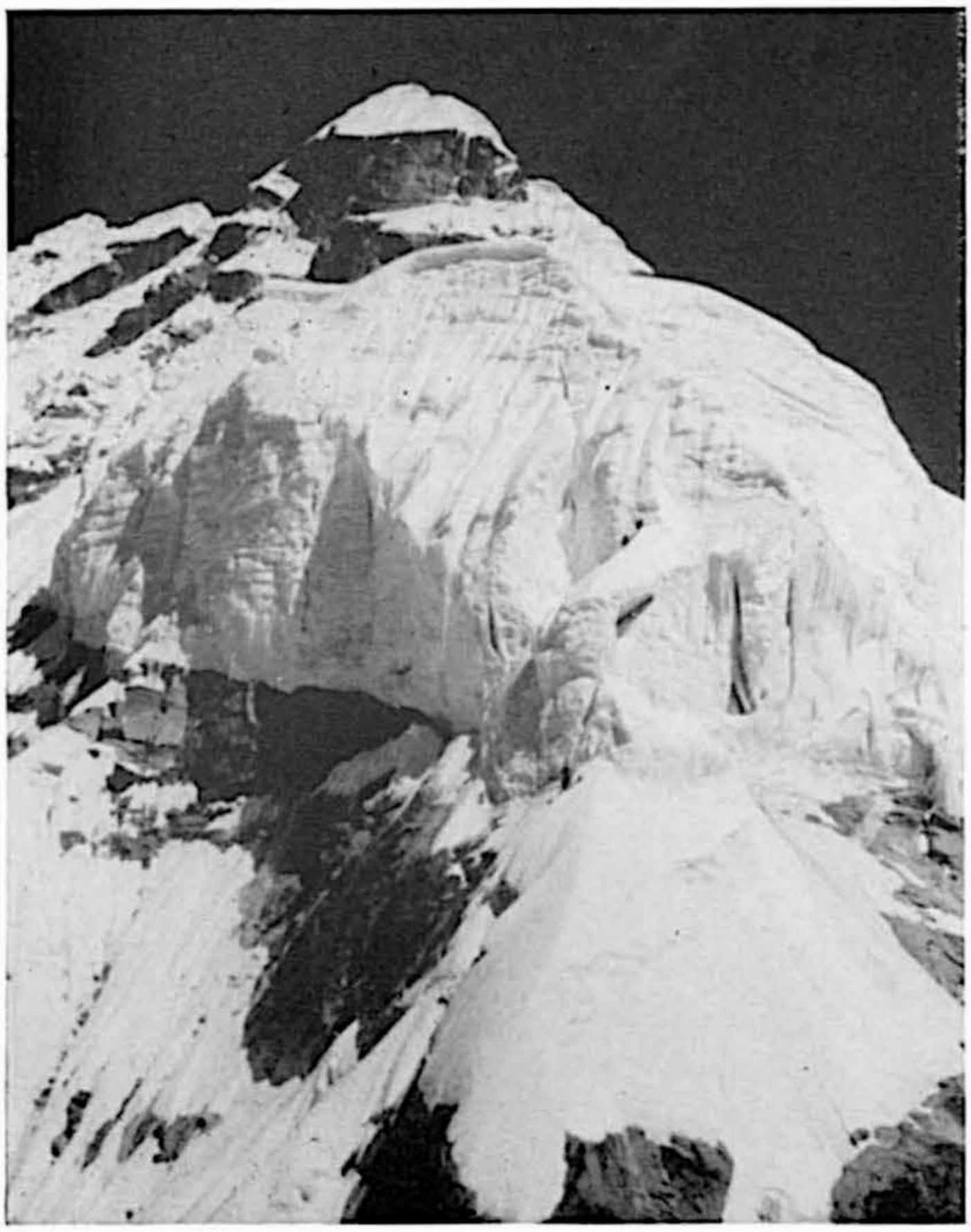
John and Dick now joined us from Namche Bazar and with Pete and Lynn they climbed the few hundred feet to the bump on the ridge above



Expedition Photo]

KANGTEGA, 22,340 FT., AND THAMSERKU, 21,730 FT., FROM THE NORTH-WEST.

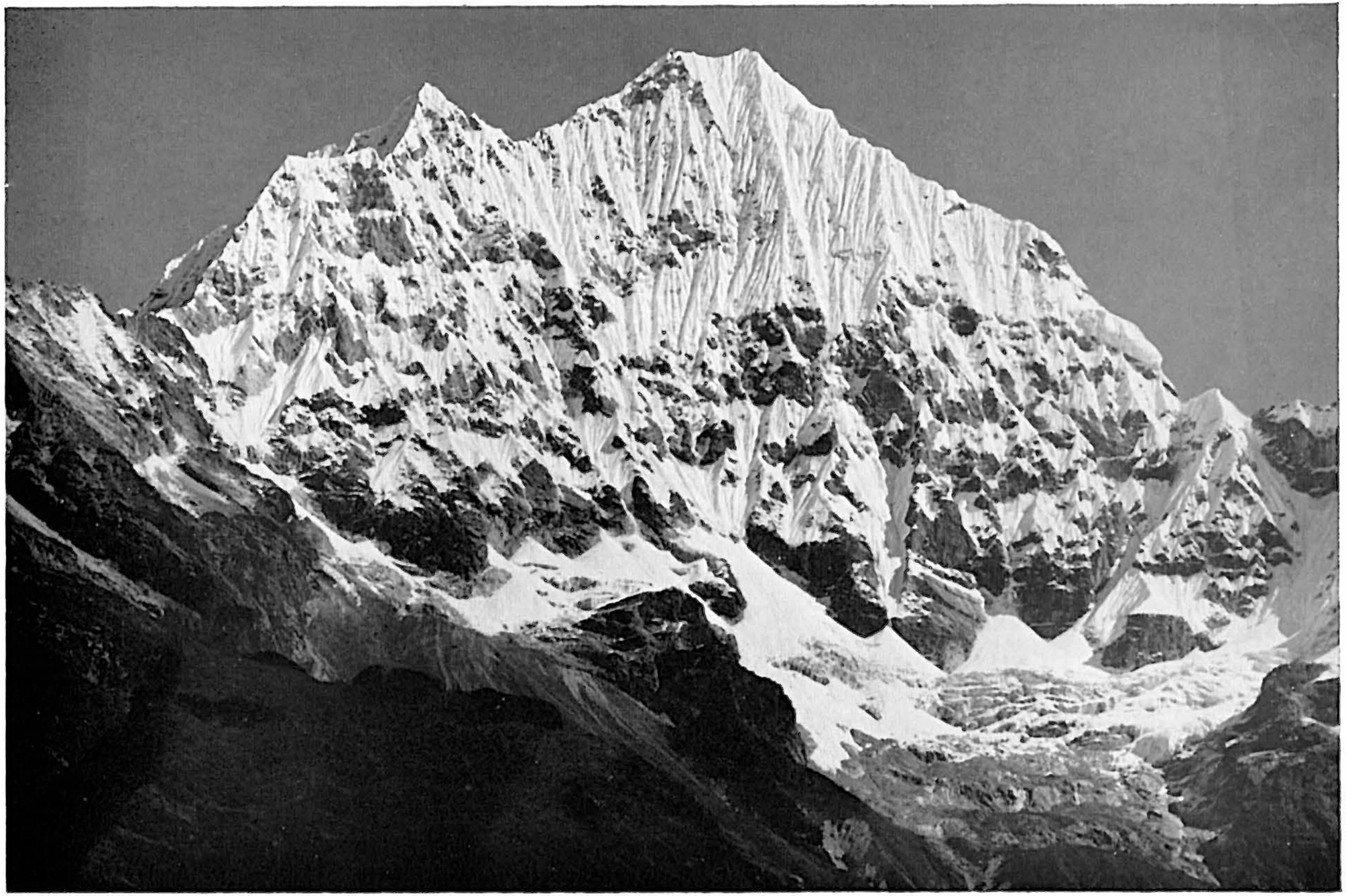
(No. 26)



Expedition Photo

SOUTH RIDGE OF THAMSERKU, SHOWING THE ICE BULGE (TWO CLIMBERS BELOW THE BULGE AND TWO HALF WAY UP IT), THE SECOND ROCK STEP AND THE SUMMIT RIDGE LEADING OFF TO THE LEFT.

(No. 27)



Expedition Photo]

THAMSERKU FROM THE WEST. THE ROUTE OF ASCENT WAS UP THE COULOIR TO THE RIGHT OF THE SUBSIDIARY SNOW PEAK AT THE BOTTOM OF THE RIGHT-HAND RIDGE, THEN OVER THE SNOW PEAK, UP THE ICE BULGE AND ALONG THE RIDGE TO THE SUMMIT.

(No. 28)

Camp II that blocked our view of the way ahead. The tale they told on their return was far from encouraging—artificial pitches of some hundreds of feet on the rock steps and ice bulge that seemed to be going to keep us busy for the next few weeks.

By now we seemed to have settled into combinations. Pete and Lynn, John and Dick, Jim and I were climbing in these pairs. It was not necessary to fix ropes from Camp II over the snow bump to the second col, but from here on the climbing became distinctly interesting. Pete and Lynn did the leading for two days. They managed to by-pass the first rock step on the Dudh Kosi side but there was one awkward 'Hinterstoisser Traverse' across a smooth rock slab that we, even following on Pete's fixed rope, found difficult at first. I would very much have liked to have seen this pitch led. Steep snow ribs led us up to the foot of the ice bulge.

From below, the ice bulge looked about as climbable as the stern of a large ship must appear to a swimmer. At one place though, on the West face, was a weakness. Pete went to work on this in his usual business-like manner, screwing pitons and hanging étriers as though he had been doing it all his life. The bulge was a little over a hundred feet high and relented for about 30 ft. in its mid-portion to allow steps to be cut in the hard ice. Pete and Lynn were rested for a day in Camp II while John and Dick pushed the route on up the ridge, over a couple of awkward steps, to the gently sloping snow-field that was the top of the ice bulge, and that was to be the site of Camp III. Pete and Lynn returned to the attack and John and Dick retired to Camp II. Four Sherpas carried loads magnificently to the bottom of the ice bulge. All the Sherpas we had on Thamserku were very strong and willing and two of them at least, very good climbers. Perhaps it is not fair to single out the best from so fine a team, but Pemba Tharkey and Tensing Niendra were magnificent. We did not feel justified in taking the Sherpas up the ice bulge though we thought they were probably capable of climbing it. Instead we hauled the loads up in a two-stage lift. The lift of Camp III was completed in a day even though we were rather groping to pitch the tents.

Now we were down to stern reality with a vengeance, for there were no Sherpas to blow up our air mattresses and cook our meals; but in spite of these domestic rigours we slept well and warm at 19,800 ft. Next day Pete and Lynn, Jim and I pushed on towards the summit ridge proper. The rock step that had looked so formidable from below was evaded without too much difficulty by sidling to the Kyangshar Khola (east) side. It was now Jim's and my turn to rest in Camp II and John and Dick came up to take our places.

The original plan had been to put two Sherpas and as many sahibs as possible on to the summit, but when we had realised the problems ahead of us from Camp II, we had agreed that if we could get just two sahibs to

the top we would be well content. We doubted that there would be room for a tent on the mountain above Camp III and therefore planned a final carry by the four men at Camp III, to a bivouac about a third of the way along the summit ridge from which the assault pair could make the final dash.

After our rest, Jim and I returned to Camp III and on November 4 climbed to a small saddle at 20,300 ft., just east of the rock step, from which we hoped to view the summit team at work. We had been alone at Camp III, so it was obvious that the others had found sleeping space for four above us and this was borne out at 1 p.m. when we saw two ropes approaching a subsidiary summit. We contacted Lukla Base Camp by radio. Peter Mulgrew came through loud and clear with a message from Jim's wife, Ann, in Kathmandu, that Jim had been successful in his application for a university appointment. Thus we were doubly jubilant as we watched our friends quickly climb the last pinnacle of Thamserku. But it is better that one of the summit party should tell of the last few days' activities.

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Lynn Crawford continues:

Strangely, one seldom feels jubilant when the final battlements have been forced on a consistently difficult peak. As our friends sighted the four of us close to the summit of Thamserku that day, perhaps our feelings were touched with some sadness and humility, for the struggle had been fair and even throughout.

The day Pete and I, Don and Jim reached the ridge above the rock step, our hopes were not the highest, for the end elevation of the ridge was just as we had all feared—crazily corniced and long. Distance was hard to judge too; thus on our return to Camp III we decided to push the route further from this camp before setting out to establish a final bivouac that might not otherwise be close enough for the summit bid.

John and Dick were feeling fit on their arrival, so instead of staying Don and Jim decided to return to Camp II for the night and return next day to fix ropes on the steep approach to the rock.

We made rapid progress back to the ridge next day, fixing a couple of ropes on awkward sectors en route, before trotting off on to the first big 'mushroom'. Gazing back at it from the uphill side, Pete and I were not really surprised to find our tracks, though we had thought them far enough on to the face, were still on overhanging 'build up'. Just prior to following us, Dick offered his already consumed lunch to anyone interested and decided to rest awhile, suggesting John tie on with us. John was obviously tempted but accompanied him back to Camp III. Their loads were left at a special dump.

Forced right on to the face now, Pete and I carved a track, the line of

which resembled the cut of some giant pinking shears, across the flutings toward two rock outcrops below what we hoped was one of the last obstacles. 'The most distant rock should be about the right locality for the bivouac.' And this was as Pete had guessed.

During respite from 'track-cutting' the eyes were drawn down the flutings 4,000 ft. to tiny Camp I; beyond and below that again, the village of Benkar by the Dudh Kosi.

On schedule, the cloud rolled in about mid-day, insulating us from habitation until dusk.

Late in the afternoon we arrived at the base of a small 'mushroom', tentatively selected a bivouac site, unloaded and roped down two messy pitches to resume quite normal passage to the step above Camp III. Thankfully the few fixed ropes led us almost right to the tent.

We had been inspected closely during the day by large ugly ravens, and on our return to camp found the birds had also inspected this rather closely too. The large plastic bag of dehydrated apples that we had been keeping as luxury item no. 1 had been used as something similar to a sand pit by these quaint creatures.

On November 3 the four of us took tent, sleeping bags, light food and a primus to the bivouac site at 20,700 ft., dug a small platform for our tent and by nightfall were packed neatly into the two-man Meade. Apart from John leaping up in the middle of the night to brew some hot lemon and, on occasions, the stray knee digging into the odd groin or stomach, the night passed uneventfully. One did need to take a little care leaving the tent, for the entrance gave immediate access to a large schrund, but notwithstanding we were away safely at an early hour next morning.

For the last week or more, a steady cold wind had persisted during the day, convincing the belayer that his turn at moving could not come around again quickly enough. The one advantage of this wind was its efficiency in freezing steps made in rotten snow and ice, thus benefiting us on our return. However, this day the temperature dropped sufficiently and the wind penetrated enough to force us to struggle into down jackets and wish for our padded trousers in addition.

A vertical snow step of perhaps 30 ft. seemed to be the last major obstacle on this ridge, but we were curious to discover the nature of the route beyond. A mixture of this curiosity plus the bitter cold prompted Pete to force an independent route up, even as John led on the most direct route. From the top of this sector we had only to plug steps up what now seemed like reasonable snow-slopes but was actually the broadening ridge to a saddle between a subsidiary peak and the summit. Those last few hundred feet gave no problems greater than exhaustion and breathing difficulties.

Our mountain was a sporting loser, for we now shared briefly in its magnificence. We saw the big peaks, Everest, Lhotse and others, stand-

ing afar, and aloof, yet being almost the heart of this Solo Khumbu region. To the west was Gauri Sankar with which the strong British team was battling even then. The bivouac was reached about 4.0 p.m.

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Our retreat off the mountain was not particularly orderly. There was bridge construction and more school building ahead of us and Mingma Tsering, our sirdar, hurried us down. He was rather abashed when he had us all assembled at Base Camp, with the coolies waiting, and the 2,500 ft. of fixed rope between Camp I and Camp II still to be unstrung. While the main party left the mountain, Jim and I took two Sherpas and returned to the col to bring down the rope. It was a long day and as we returned to the site of Camp I we were met by a Sherpa with a note from Ed. The 'expedition wives' including Jim's were due to arrive at Lukla by helicopter first thing next morning. We were dog-tired when we stumbled into Base Camp just on dark, and I felt no envy of Jim when, a couple of hours later, he set off on his night march to Lukla.

'Shosoni so.' The Sherpas call farewell and leave me with the mountain. I savour these moments as I sit amongst the grey, lichened scree. Thamserku is not at its best, for a backdrop of high cloud has softened the dramatic, saw-toothed summit ridge, and valley mists give only an intermittent view of the lower slopes. The cold winds that have swept in from Tibet these last four days have lost their edge down here, but I still enjoy the fire for its own sake. When the juniper has burnt I will follow the porters down. Occasionally I will stop and look back at Thamserku, gratefully I think, for all the toil and sweat it cost us, the joy and fear it gave us. We climbed well, and some of us to the top, but I still feel that this was a time of acquiescence by the mountain, and Thamserku is still master.