# GAURI SANKAR, 1964

## By IAN CLOUGH

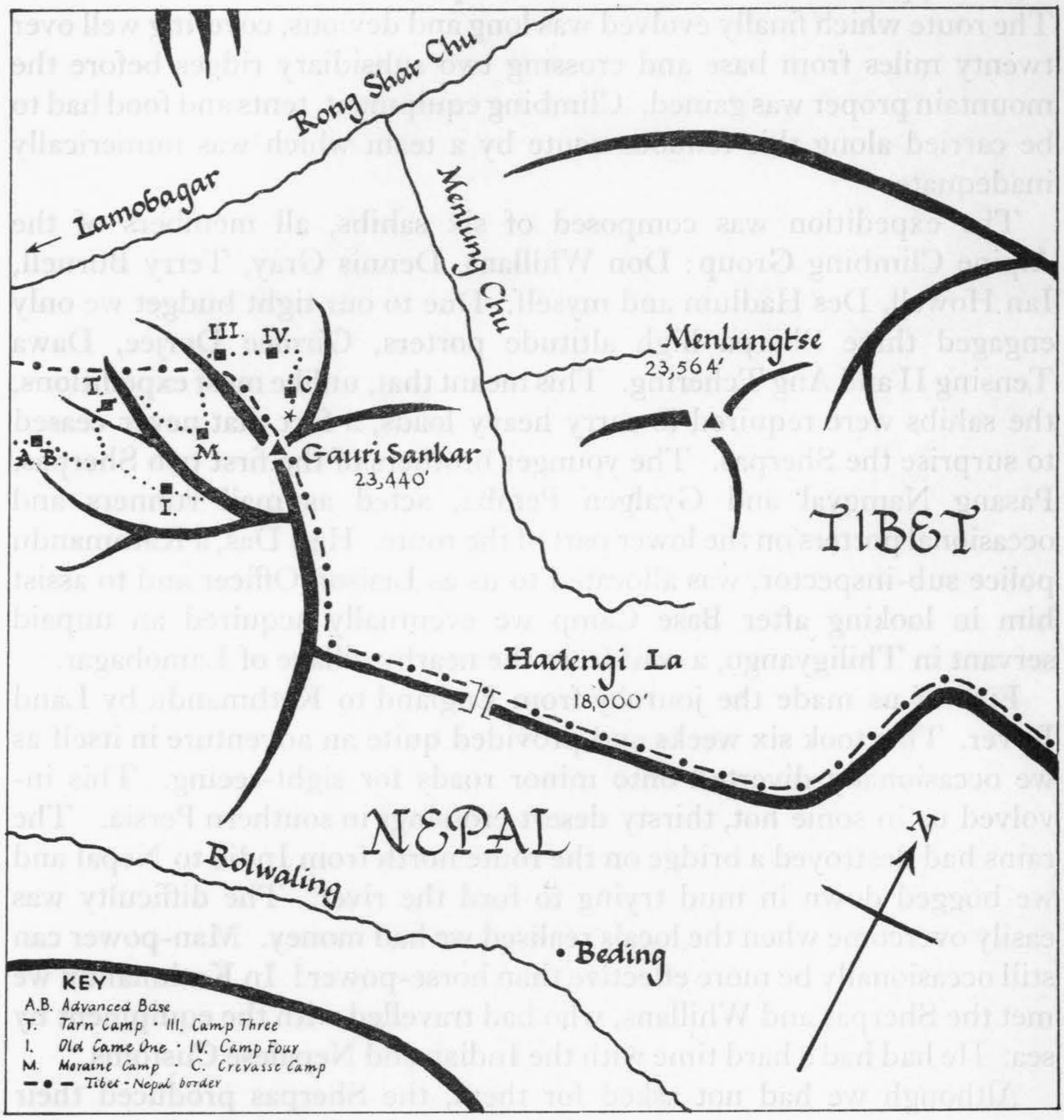
*(Ten illustrations: nos. 29–38)*

SHIVERING with cold despite my down-filled suit, I stood anchored in a small step hacked from the ice, paying out the rope which safeguarded my companion as he continued to cut a line of steps across the smooth sweep of the Ice Bowl, a 60° slope of ice which plunged below our feet for 2,000 ft. to the glacier. Don Whillans and I were trying to repair the damage, caused by avalanches a couple of days previously, to the fixed ropes which secured the route we were slowly forcing in our attempt to reach the summit of Gauri Sankar, a mountain of 23,400 ft. in the Rolwaling Himalaya.

As I stood there, dry powder snow trickled down from the rocks above. I tried hard not to notice for the Bowl was a dangerous place; a place occasionally swept by large avalanches of ice blocks which fell from the tottering towers above us. It was bitterly cold. The temperature here at 21,000 ft. on a Himalayan peak, with winter approaching, was constantly below freezing but this morning was especially cold. I kept stamping my feet but even so my toes slowly lost all sensation. I was afraid I might be in danger of having them frost-bitten. Looking back at the ropes we had already replaced the previous day, I remembered the way the securing pegs and screws had been torn and twisted, some broken and pulled out, one of the ropes severed completely, another frayed and tattered; three days' arduous labour eradicated overnight by avalanches. But was not Sankar another name for Shiva, the Hindu God of Destruction ?

Don, at thirty a veteran Himalayan climber (Masherbrum 1957, Trivor 1960), and leader of our six-man expedition, was still cutting foothold after foothold in the ice—'chip, chip, chip', and the tinkle of falling ice particles. Then 'clunk', the whole great plate of ice gave a groan of protest. Don paused, looked round, grimaced, and continued in his task. It was indeed dangerous work. Now Don kept stopping and looking warily upwards, conscious of the danger of avalanches. My dead toes made me even more worried. If we continued all day I would almost certainly lose them. 'Don, my toes have gone. We'd better pack in for the day.' 'Aye,' the reply came, 'I've been thinking of packing in altogether. This place has got a nasty atmosphere now. Someone is liable to be killed if we press on. I've got a red warning light and it's telling me to pack it in now.' And that was that. We left our surplus equipment hanging at the furthest point and traversed back down the

Bowl to our tent which was pitched inside a natural cave in the ice, sheltered from wind and avalanche danger. We took the tent, stove and our personal effects and descended to join our companions at the camp 2,000 ft. below, on the glacier at the foot of the face. The retreat had been sounded. Gauri Sankar would remain virgin for another year or two.




SKETCH-MAP OF THE ROUTE ON GAURI SANKAR.

It had been a long, hard struggle since we had first looked out of the mouth of our Base Camp cave in the deep valley at the foot of the mountain and seen the gleaming summit snows; over six weeks. It was little short of a miracle that we ever got so near to climbing the peak as, though we were a much smaller team, our task was in many ways greater than that of climbing Everest. We were obliged to establish Base Camp in a cave at only 8,000 ft. whereas most expeditions place theirs at about 14,000 (Everest was at 17,900), so that although our peak was not

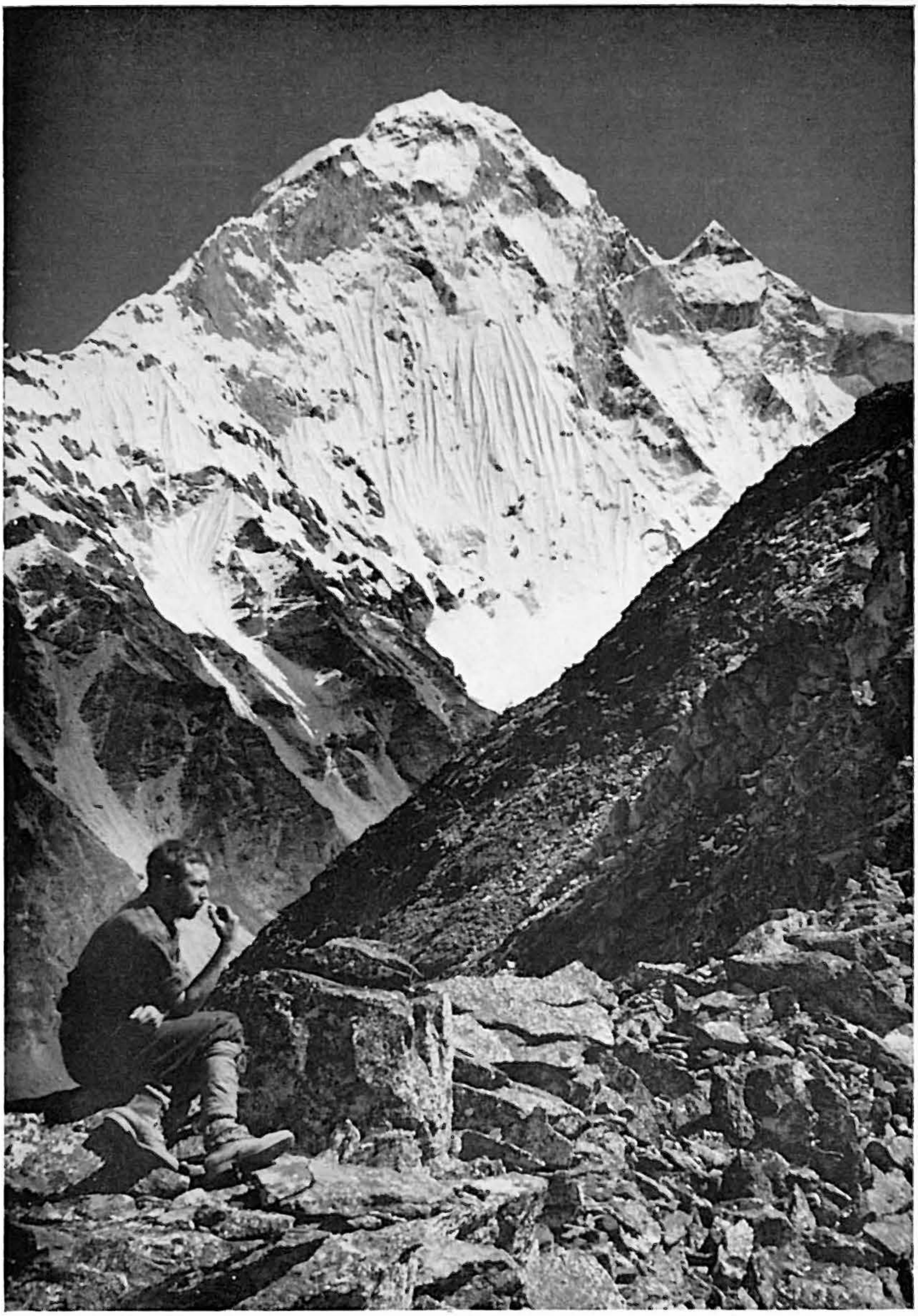


*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

HADLUM ON TARN CAMP COL WITH GAURI SANKAR BEHIND (WEST RIDGE ON LEFT).

**(No. 29)**

particularly high by Himalayan standards, the height we had to make up, from base to summit, was greater even than on Everest. The Tibetan (Chinese) border was only half an hour up the valley from the cave. This political complication was the basic source of most of our difficulties since Gauri Sankar is a massive mountain straddling the border and our permit was to approach the mountain from Nepal; we could not enter Tibet. The route which finally evolved was long and devious, covering well over twenty miles from base and crossing two subsidiary ridges before the mountain proper was gained. Climbing equipment, tents and food had to be carried along this tenuous route by a team which was numerically inadequate.

The expedition was composed of six sahibs, all members of the Alpine Climbing Group: Don Whillans, Dennis Gray, Terry Burnell, Ian Howell, Des Hadlum and myself. Due to our tight budget we only engaged three Sherpa high altitude porters, Girmee Dorjee, Dawa Tensing II and Ang Tchering. This meant that, unlike most expeditions, the sahibs were required to carry heavy loads, a fact that never ceased to surprise the Sherpas. The younger brothers of the first two Sherpas, Pasang Namgyal and Gyalgen Pemba, acted as mail runners and occasional porters on the lower part of the route. Hari Das, a Kathmandu police sub-inspector, was allocated to us as Liaison Officer and to assist him in looking after Base Camp we eventually acquired an unpaid servant in Thiligyango, a waif from the nearby village of Lamobagar.

Five of us made the journey from England to Kathmandu by Land Rover. This took six weeks and provided quite an adventure in itself as we occasionally diverted onto minor roads for sight-seeing. This involved us in some hot, thirsty desert crossings in southern Persia. The rains had destroyed a bridge on the route north from India to Nepal and we bogged down in mud trying to ford the river. The difficulty was easily overcome when the locals realised we had money. Man-power can still occasionally be more effective than horse-power! In Kathmandu we met the Sherpas and Whillans, who had travelled with the equipment by sea. He had had a hard time with the Indian and Nepalese Customs.

Although we had not asked for them, the Sherpas produced their testimonials from previous expeditions, mostly glowing in their praise. Dawa Tensing drew one from his sheaf and proudly announced, 'This from Hillary'. It was obviously one of his most prized possessions. 'Dawa is a strong load carrier, cheerful and reliable . . .,' it began, '. . . but unfortunately he is big and clumsy, is technically incompetent and precipitated the accident on Makalu'! Dawa, who could not read, was at a loss to understand our mirth. In fact there was some truth in these allegations but we found his other qualities sufficient compensation.

Four of us went ahead of the main party to make a lightning reconnaissance, for although several parties had been to the mountain before

us (the Swiss under Lambert in 1954, Gregory's Merseyside Expedition in 1955 and a Japanese expedition in 1959), none had succeeded in finding even a possibility of a route. Raymond Lambert, an experienced Himalayan climber, had even gone as far as stating that the mountain was 'impossible above 18,000 ft.'. We met Lambert on our return to Kathmandu and received his *congratulations*. 'You did not fail,' he said, 'I still think it is impossible above 18,000 ft. but you went to 22,000!'

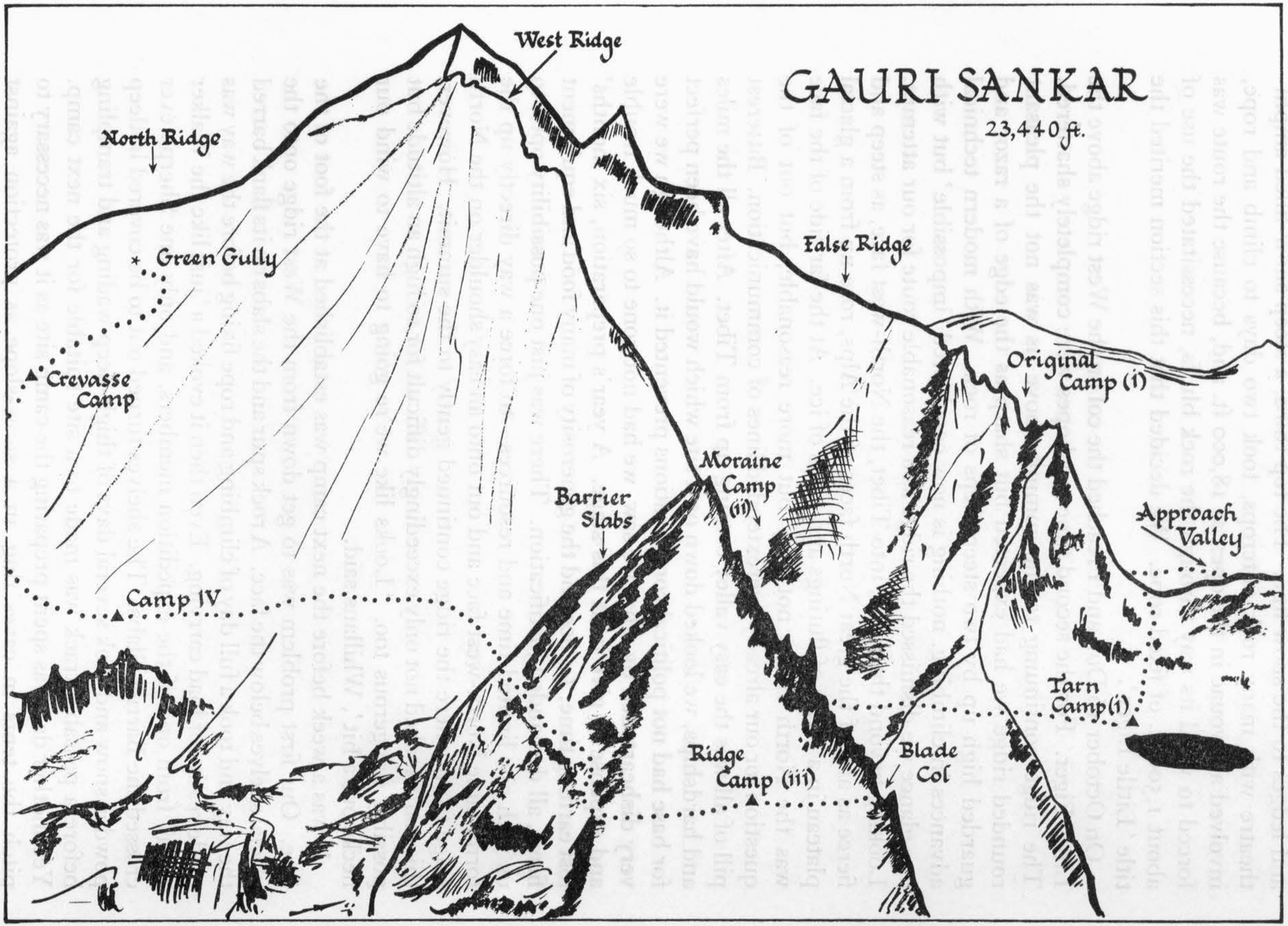
The approach march seemed to be interminable ups and downs with daily rain and leeches, the monsoon not being quite finished. We usually ended each day's march quite early in the afternoon and then had to spend a couple of hours squatting miserably under our umbrellas until the coolies caught us up with the big tarpaulin under which we slept. The leeches got everywhere. We woke on several occasions to find blood clotted in our hair where they had enjoyed a midnight feast. One didn't often try to look at the view while on the march (there rarely was anything but mist anyway) but kept eyes trained on the ground ready to take avoiding action against the black, evil little creatures which stood on their heads and waved their tail suckers hopefully from side to side. In addition to minute by minute checks while on the move, we developed the habit of taking off boots and socks each hour or so but even then we sometimes found over a dozen leeches on each foot! When, after about twelve days' march, we reached Lamobagar we were told we would have to go to Hum, another day up the Rong Shar gorge. The coolies refused to go on but we managed to persuade some Tibetan refugees to carry for us instead. Hum turned out to be a single derelict dwelling. We spent several days there cutting a way up a thickly overgrown ridge on the advice of a Tibetan who claimed that he used to live at Hum and had grazed his cattle on pastures below Gauri Sankar. Eventually the crest of the ridge was gained and, in a glimpse through the mists, Burnell saw Gauri Sankar—still miles away. Meanwhile, on the off chance, Whillans and I had made a quick sortie up a steep valley which branched off from the Rong Shar gorge only five minutes short of the border of forbidden Tibet. This had to be the way, so we moved base to a cave not far from the entrance to the valley.

Our problems and setbacks thereafter were countless. The approach valley was very steep and densely wooded so that though we had set up base by September 19, it wasn't until a week later that we finally emerged from the trees onto a fan of moorland at the head of the valley, this lengthy period being spent hacking a foot-by-foot trail with locally purchased kukris. Long grasses, bamboos, twisted rhododendrons and a tremendous variety of other undergrowth had to be cleared and for two days most of the party was engaged in building a log bridge across the fast flowing streams where a fixed rope had been used for previous fordings. One

member of the party suggested that all would be 'a piece of duff' once we had climbed the . . . trees! It was hard, unfamiliar work smashing away all day with a heavy kukri and some of us developed hands which were so skinned with cuts, sores and blisters that they looked like raw meat. Advanced Base was placed on the tree line at over 14,000 ft. but the journey took so long, even with a good trail, that we had to have an intermediate Dump Camp. Even in the trees, fixed ropes were necessary on several sections of the route!

When, on October 2, the next camp, Camp I, was placed below a little glacier at the head of the valley we thought we were really making progress. When, however, Whillans and I peered over a col at 19,000 ft. the following day, the first clear day of the expedition, we were bitterly disappointed. Our mountain was not easy of access as we had hoped, but at the opposite side of a deep valley coming up from Tibet. But setbacks must be overcome. The col we had looked over was too high to be considered as a route to the mountain but some miles further down the same false ridge we found a more suitable one (17,000 ft.). At this level though, the ridge had bifurcated so that instead of one col we had two to cross before descending to the valley below the South face of the mountain proper. The original Camp I, which was now off route, was removed. A new camp was set up in a little hanging valley between the two cols beside a picturesque lake which was so reminiscent of English Lakeland that the site became known as Tarn Camp. All this time, while the pair at the front explored and pushed the route forward, the rest of the party were consolidating the camps along the route and maintaining a supply of food and equipment. This was already becoming hard work with so little man-power and by the end of the expedition we were terribly extended in our supply lines, this contributing to some extent to our failure. Except for a few isolated days of good weather it was usually misty and often raining, for the monsoon was late in petering out. Thick mist and foul weather prevented the establishing of a permanent camp in the valley under the South-west face of Gauri Sankar for four days but eventually Moraine Camp was placed on screes at the snout of the glacier and the weather became fine and settled. The route between Tarn and Moraine Camps was quite complicated and involved the traversing of a steep spur where fixed ropes were needed as a safeguard.

From the photographs of the mountain we had been able to obtain before leaving England we had decided that the West (frontier) ridge gave the best chance of a route to the summit. Now it was towering directly above us. Moraine Camp, in the bed of the valley, was at about 15,500 ft. The point where we hoped to emerge onto the West ridge and establish our next camp was about 19,000 ft. The first two-thirds of the face leading to the ridge presented few problems, first a great scree slope,




DIAGRAMMATIC SKETCH OF THE ROUTE ON GAURI SANKAR.

then a rock buttress up which we wound our way by zig-zagging terraces and ledges to the snow line. The top third, a steep snow-filled amphitheatre with many rock outcrops, took two days to climb and rope, involved a bivouac in the open at 18,000 ft. and, because the route was forced to wind its way through the rock bluffs, necessitated the use of about 1,500 ft. of fixed rope. We decided that this section merited the title 'Little Eiger'.

On October 16 Don and I reached the col on the West ridge above the Little Eiger. For the second time our hopes were completely shattered. The ridge continuing to the summit above us was not the pleasant rounded ridge we had expected but sharp as the edge of a razor and guarded high up by two steep steps of rock. With modern technical advances in climbing, nothing is now considered 'impossible' but with one glance we dismissed the ridge as a reasonable route for our attempt. Looking beyond the ridge, into Tibet, the North-west face, as steep and fierce as any of the great North faces of the Alps, rose up from a glacial plateau in a series of flutings and walls of ice. At the far side of the face was the North ridge, not easy but more reasonable, but out of the question for our already overextended lines of communication. Bitterest pill of all was the easy valley coming up from Tibet. After all the miles and hardships, we looked down on a site which would have been perfect for base had not political complications prevented it. Although we were very disheartened by what we saw, we had not gone to so much trouble and expense to give in at this stage. A year's preparation, six months' lost earning time, £4,000 and the generosity of many food and equipment firms, all demanded justification. There was just one possibility open to us with our limited time and resources—to force a way directly up the formidable North-west face and out onto an easy shoulder on the North ridge from where the ridge continued gently to the summit. However, this route looked not only exceedingly difficult for so high an altitude but possibly dangerous too. 'Looks like we're going to have to wind our necks out a bit', Whillans said.

It was a week before the next camp was established at the foot of the face. Our first problem was to get down from the West ridge onto the glacial shelves below the face. A rock spur and the slabs on its flank barred the way and took a full day of climbing and rope fixing before the way was made ready for load carrying. Even then it evoked a 'just like the Walker Spur' from one of the expedition members, and only one Sherpa ever crossed the Barrier Slabs. The shelves turned out to be covered in deep powder snow and took several days of thigh-deep wading and trampling before a passable track was made to a site suitable for the next camp. Yet another day was spent preparing the camp site as it was necessary to pitch the tents in caves dug in a snow-slope as protection against avalanches. During the whole of this week we studied the face and were

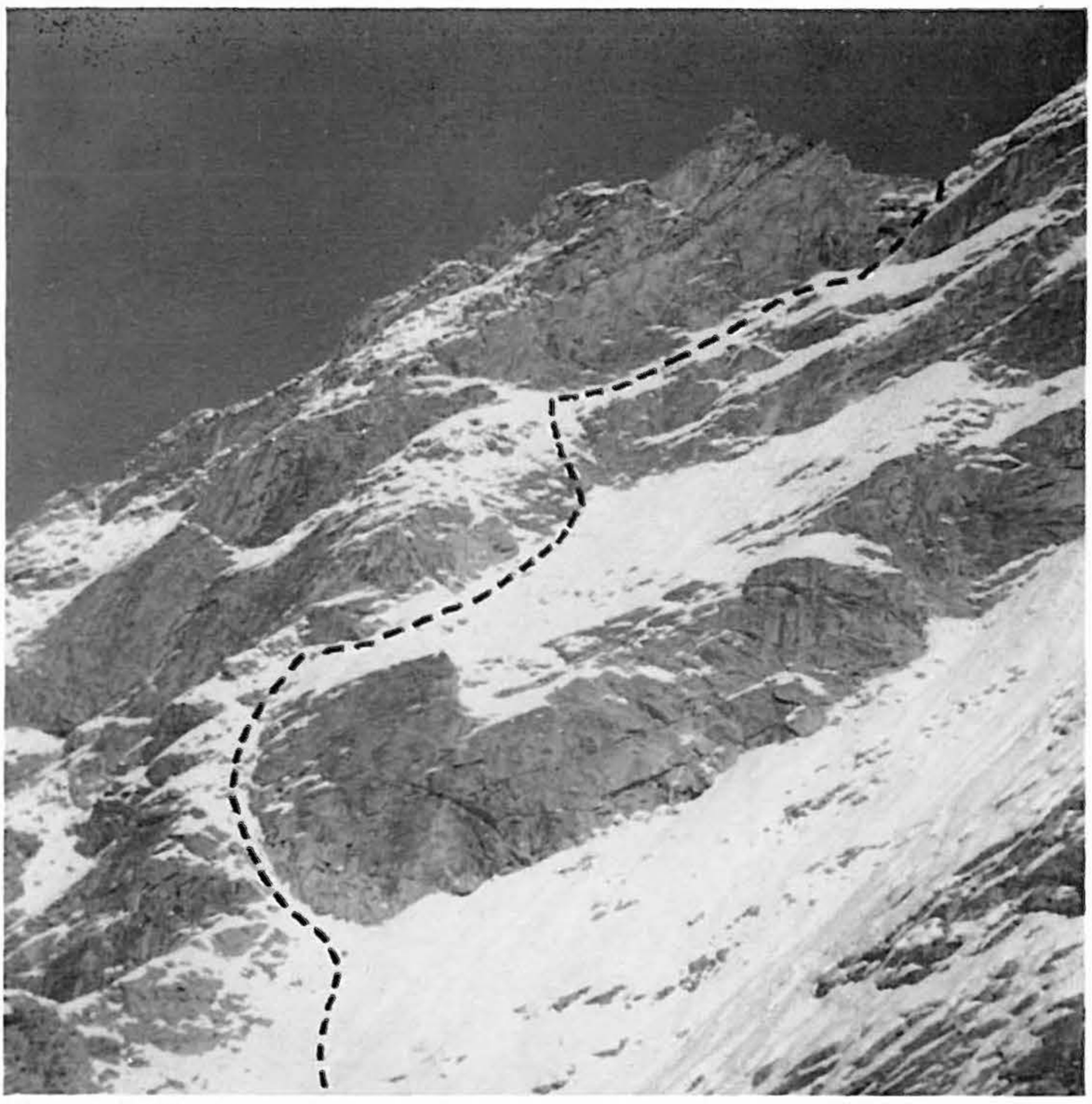


*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

THE ROUTE UP THE 'LITTLE EIGER'.

**(No. 30)**



*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

TRAVERSING OUT INTO THE LOWER BASIN OF THE 'LITTLE EIGER'.

**(No. 31)**

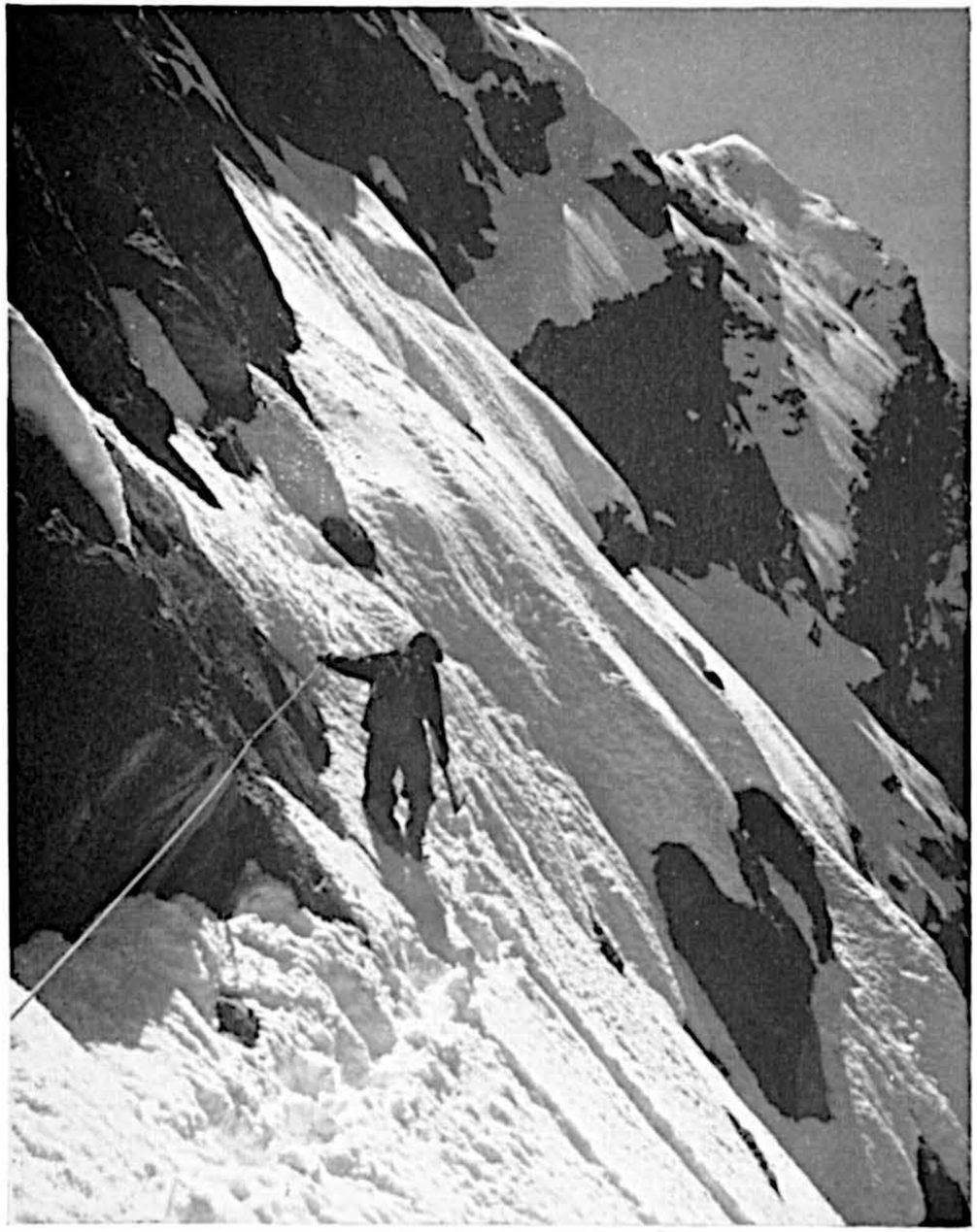


*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

WHILLANS ON THE TRAVERSE UNDER THE FINAL ROCK WALL OF THE 'LITTLE EIGER'.

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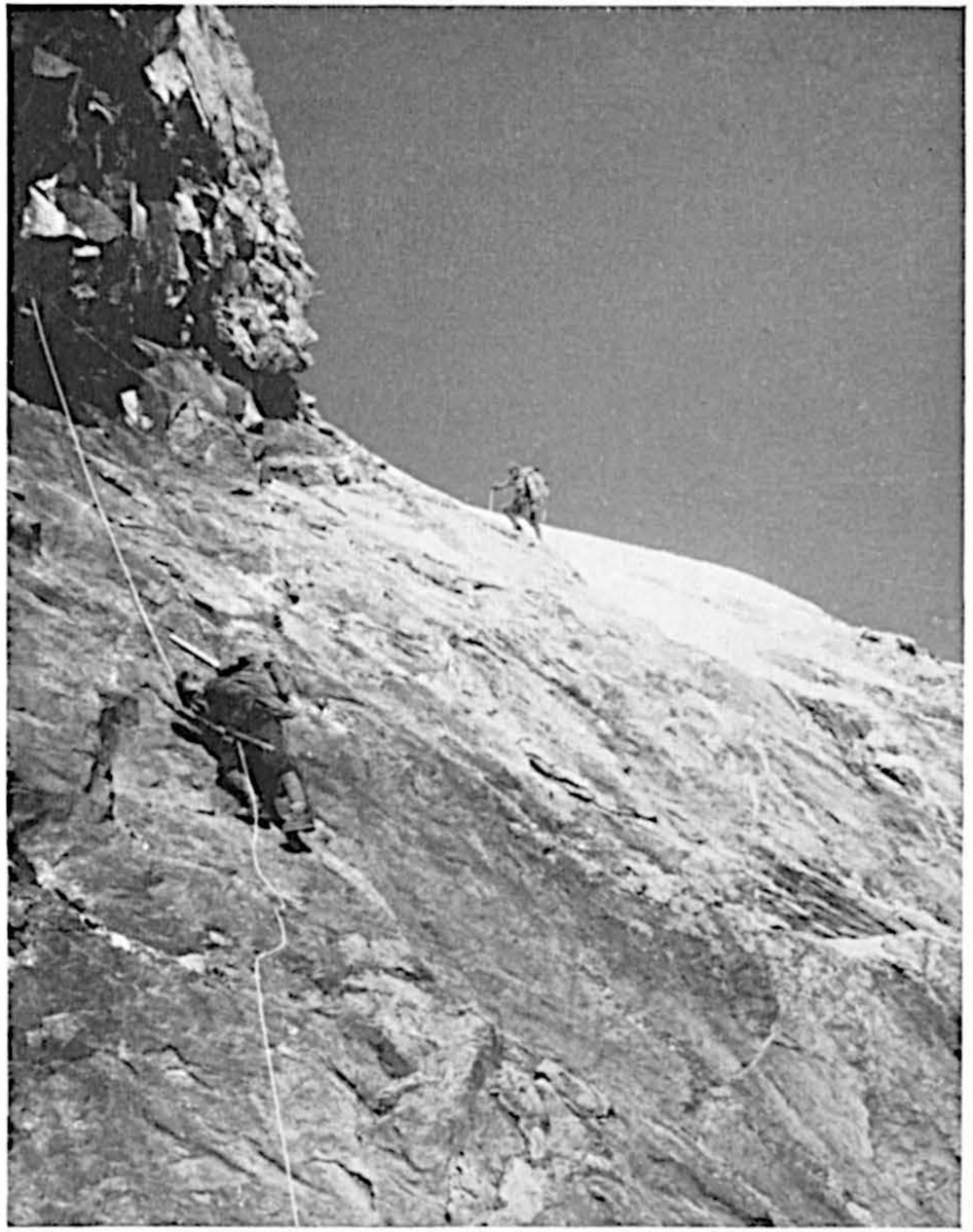


*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

HADLUM AND BURNELL ON THE FIXED ROPES OF THE FIRST PART OF BARRIER SLABS.

**(No. 33)**

relieved to the extent that only two avalanches occurred and these not on our proposed route. The digging-in of this camp, however, proved to be a wise precaution as, later on, a large avalanche roared by only ten yards away.

At this stage we received a terse note which informed us that Nepalese militia had been brought in to guard and protect Base Camp which was threatened with imminent attack by Tibetan bandits! This did not sound to us either preposterous or amusing since the 1959 Japanese expedition to Gauri Sankar had been attacked by bandits in the nearby Menlung basin and all their equipment and stores had been stolen before they had done more than look at the mountain. However, our Base Camp had been virtually cleaned out of all items useful for the mountain so we were not unduly worried. It wasn't until our return to base that we heard the full story from Hari Das, our Liaison Officer and guardian of the cave. A Lamobagar policeman, on leave, had been in the nearest Tibetan village and heard that there had been a meeting of the village council to decide on whether or not to attack our Base Camp. On his return to Lamobagar he called at our cave and informed Hari Das of their intentions. Hari went to Lamobagar and, using his authority as a police sub-inspector, returned with half a dozen armed soldiers to act as guards. He suspected one of the Lamobagar Tibetan refugees of being in league with the bandits, at least of being their tip-off man, and while in the village collecting his troops he saw him and threatened that if there was an attack we would come to him immediately, kick his house down and decapitate him! Perhaps the threat was effective as no more was ever seen or heard of the bandits.

On October 24 and 25, Whillans and I made the first sorties up the face. Up to about 21,000 ft. was steep snow where we were able to kick steps which consolidated and left a good trail. We rarely used a rope for this section, working on the theory that it was better to be able to move freely and quickly in the eventuality of avalanches. It demanded a certain amount of technique all the same. Sherpa Girmee Dorjee said it was as difficult as the steepest fixed rope sections on Gyachung Kang, which mountain he had been on with the Japanese that spring, a mountain reputed to be of great technical difficulty. This led up directly below the North ridge shoulder and between two of the big fluted ice-ridges into a great bowl of clear, hard ice where every step required many blows of the ice-axe in its manufacture. We arrived at the left-hand side of the Ice Bowl which was overhung by rock bands. The only route was a rising traverse across the Bowl to join a steep snow ridge which led up through the rock bands. It would obviously take quite a long time to cut steps all the way across the Bowl (about 800 ft.) and technically it would be the hardest part of the climb as the ice was very steep, even steeper than the ice-fields of the Eiger's North face. For once we had a stroke of luck,

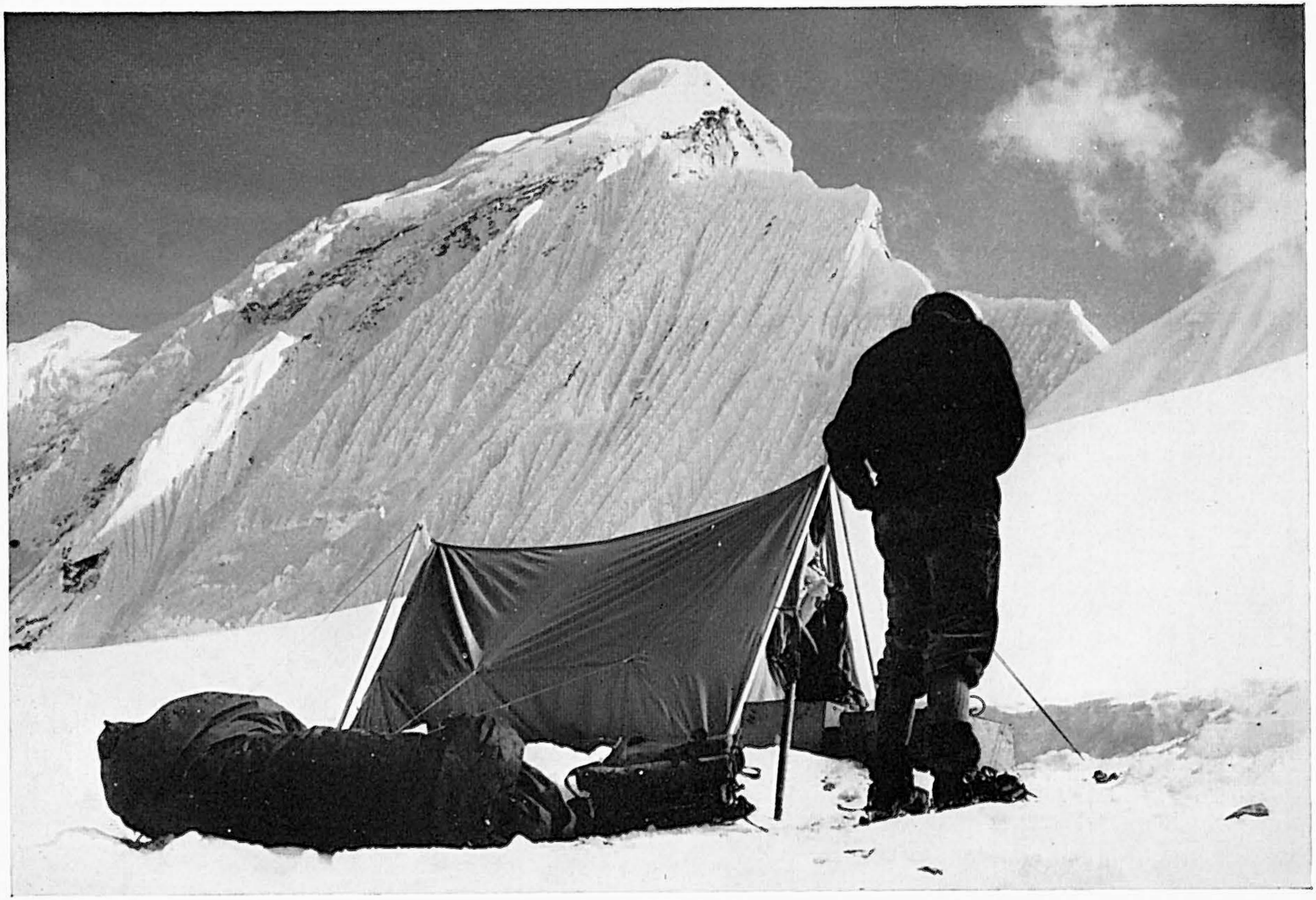


*Photo: Ian Howell*]

NORTH-WEST FACE OF GAURI SANKAR FROM CAMP III (NORTH RIDGE ON LEFT, WEST RIDGE ON RIGHT). THE NORTH-WEST SHOULDER IS A LITTLE LEFT OF THE SUMMIT, AND THE ROUTE ATTEMPTED LAY IMMEDIATELY BELOW THIS.

**(No. 34)**

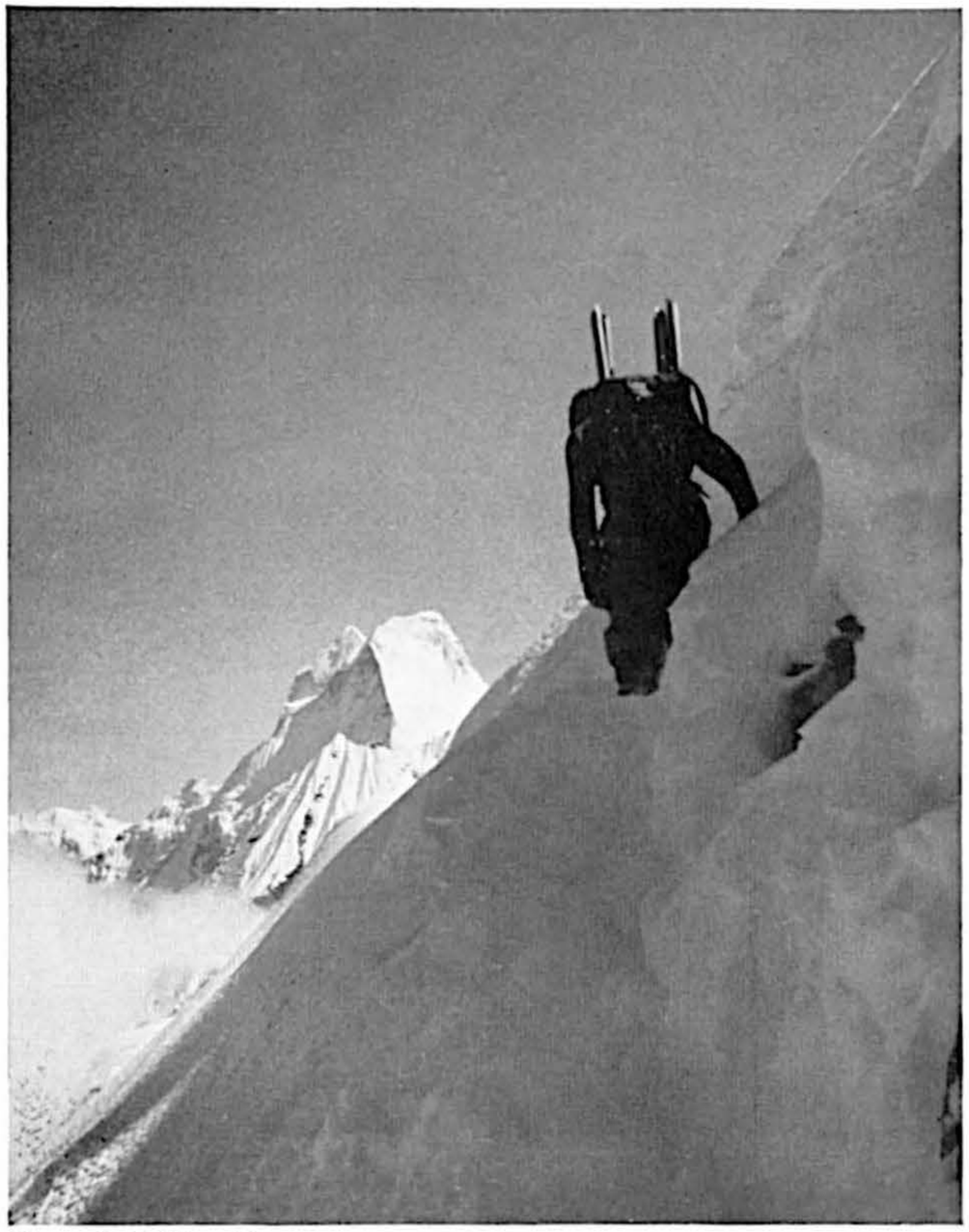


*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

WHILLANS BREAKING TRAIL BETWEEN SECTIONS OF THE BARRIER SLABS. MENLUNGTSE IN BACKGROUND.

**(No 35)**



*Photo: Ian Howell*]

CROSSING THE FIXED ROPES ON THE MAIN PART OF BARRIER SLABS

**(No 36)**

literally. While cutting steps in the lower part of the Bowl, Don broke into a cave hidden in the ice, the interior of a crevasse. It was just big enough to take one of our smaller tents so, with the assistance of Hadlum and Girmee Dorjee, we took up residence.

After two more days of laborious climbing, working from Crevasse Camp, we had crossed the Ice Bowl and climbed the snow ridge out onto what appeared to be easier ground. The whole stretch was fixed with rope attached to ice-pegs and long tubular stakes. We had by now used up all our 5,000 ft. of fixed rope and most of the climbing ropes too. The way seemed ready for lifting a camp to the shoulder of the North ridge, the Top Camp, the camp from which, in one day, we should be able to make our summit bid.

The day was October 28. Don and I climbed up to the end of the fixed ropes with our loads of personal equipment and, leaving them there to be picked up later, continued making the route while Hadlum and Girmee, who had come up from Camp IV, followed in our steps carrying the necessities for the camp. All went well enough, although the snow was still so steep that Girmee (our best and most experienced Sherpa) said he had never seen anything like it. Then at 1 p.m. we traversed into a gully which appeared to lead at a reasonable angle up through the final ice-walls to the shoulder. We were now at 22,000 ft., only about 1,500 ft. below the summit. Don jolted to a halt, dismayed. The gully was full of gleaming green ice. We couldn't possibly get out onto the shoulder that day. We were terribly disappointed as our day's efforts were almost entirely in vain; we would have to repeat the operation the next day. We started making the way up the gully while the other pair dumped all but bare necessities and set off down to repitch the tent in the crevasse. We had soon had enough and began to follow the others down.

I was standing on the edge of the gully, paying out the rope as Don descended, when there was a fearsome roar as a huge avalanche came hurtling down the Green Gully like an express train through a tunnel. I hung onto my ice-axe driven hard into the snow, crouched, and put an arm above my head to protect it as I disappeared from Don's view in a shroud of flying snow and ice. Luckily I was only on the fringe and when after a few moments all was quiet again I was able to shake the snow from myself, shattered but quite unhurt. We hurried down, sick with anxiety lest the others had been caught, but fortunately they had both just entered the crevasse and the avalanche had roared harmlessly over their heads. They in their turn had feared that the avalanche had caught us in the gully. It had been a near thing. The fixed ropes had been slightly damaged but we hoped to repair this and make the way up the Green Gully the following day. The others would come up again to help carry the equipment.

But this was not to be. We had had our chance; had reached our highest



*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

GAURI SANKAR: THE ICE CAVES OF CAMP IV. IN THE BACKGROUND ARE 'THE BLADE' AND BLADE COL (THE SITE OF CAMP III). BARRIER SLABS IN MIDDLE DISTANCE.

**(No. 37)**

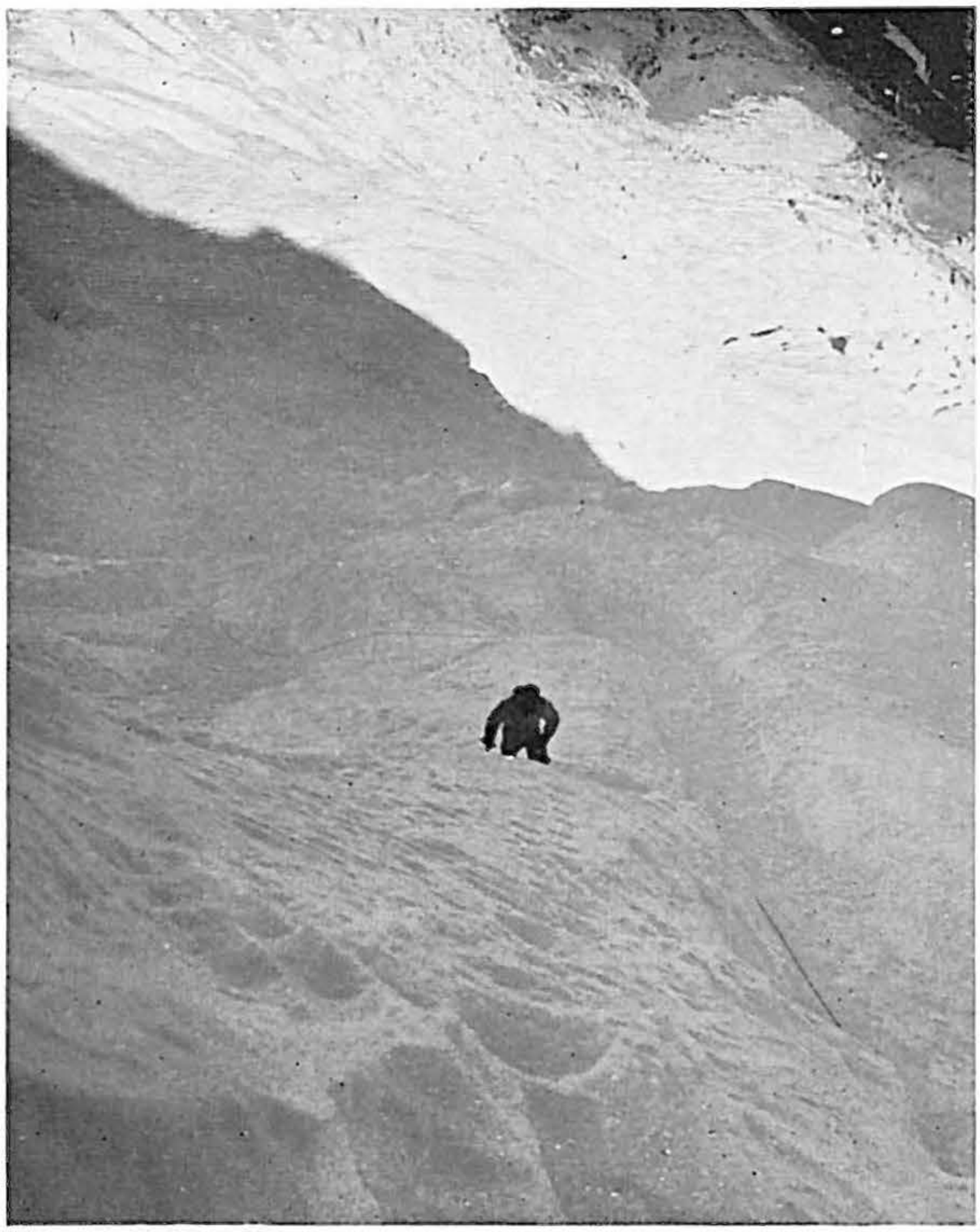


*Photo: I. S. Clough*]

WHILLANS ON THE LOWER PART OF THE NORTH-WEST FACE OF GAURI SANKAR.

**(No. 38)**

point. Next morning when we looked out of the crevasse there was a huge gap in the fixed ropes, torn by overnight avalanches. We went down to the camp below for a rest day (the second of the expedition), then returned and spent a nervous day repairing half of the ropes and re-cutting the steps in the critical zone. But all in vain. We were defeated by cold and demoralised by the danger. Our necks had been out far enough. In the evening of the day on which we finally evacuated the North-west face another huge avalanche swept down the Ice Bowl, a last contemptuous gesture. Sankar the Destruction God had won.