

The Mountain Lover

Dennis Gray

Photograph 36

For many days of rain, of seasonal monsoon rain, rain that dribbled, dribbled everywhere

We sat, sitting in the waiting room at Raxaul station, sitting on the frontier to Nepal, we waited, waited, waited

Patiently for trains, for equipment, food, for sunshine, friendship and for laughter.

This waiting had become all powerful, all pervasive, cutting out our small talk; imposing its silent reign; boring into us.

The tin roof of the waiting room had been tuned with perfect pitch for rain to drum, drum, drum upon.

It beat soft, then loud, distant, then near, kettle, then snare; but drum, drum, drum; drum it beat incessantly.

For the umpteenth time that day, a day exactly like the preceding five, I raised myself off the wooden bench

To wander again outside.

I struggled along the rainswept platform, climbed over luggage, avoided crouching human figures, and gained the open street

And found it all the same, all as it was before; rickshaws standing by the kerb, the wet, scant-clad coolies;

'Baksheesh Sahib!'

Across the wet and muddy road the bazaar had gathered a lively group of Indians round its portals in apparent but not certain argument;

I set forth, intent on finding out what animated those turbanned figures, clutching as a talisman the paper-back

I had tried to read all morning.

For some reason, I can not yet explain, I stooped as I crossed the road and, in mid stride, looked up into the sky,

Away, and to the horizon —

Yes! There! A break in the clouds! The first for days! But what was that among the swirling mists? . . . It could not be,

For the Himalaya was some tens of miles away. Clouds,

It must surely be the clouds formed to such distinction by the movements of pressure?

I had never seen anything so impressive for it was gigantic, a mountain the like of which one only dreams of,

So perfect in its form.

Suddenly at my sleeve, I felt a tug. 'Oh God!' I thought, 'yet another Haridjan, Baksheesh, Baksheesh, Baksheesh' — 'Clear off and leave me in peace!'

I swung round, abruptly, forcibly.

There confronting me, was a rickshaw wallah, dressed only in a faded dhoti, his thin frame racked with cold and hunger.

First I saw his eyes; black, shining, beautiful; beautiful, shining, shining; humble yet proud; submissive yet defiant —

‘It is Makalu Sahib!’

‘Makalu’, he repeated, rolled around the tongue with the usual Hindi inflexion, but said with awe, wonderment, indefinable

Longing.

I looked, disbelieving, first at him, then to that vision floating in the clouds.

I looked, and back at him and felt so full of pity for him and myself.

I choked, then gazed northwards just once more as the clouds re-asserted their supremacy, and the rain began to slither once again.

Makalu slowly disappeared before my eyes.

I moved away, back whence I had come but the coolie remained, Immobile, transfixed;

With eyes turned to that distant horizon; a brown, wet, fellow human being.

I choked out an affirmative, ‘Makalu — Yes’ then stomped back angrily across the road, to slink back into the depths of the station waiting room

Where I continued waiting.



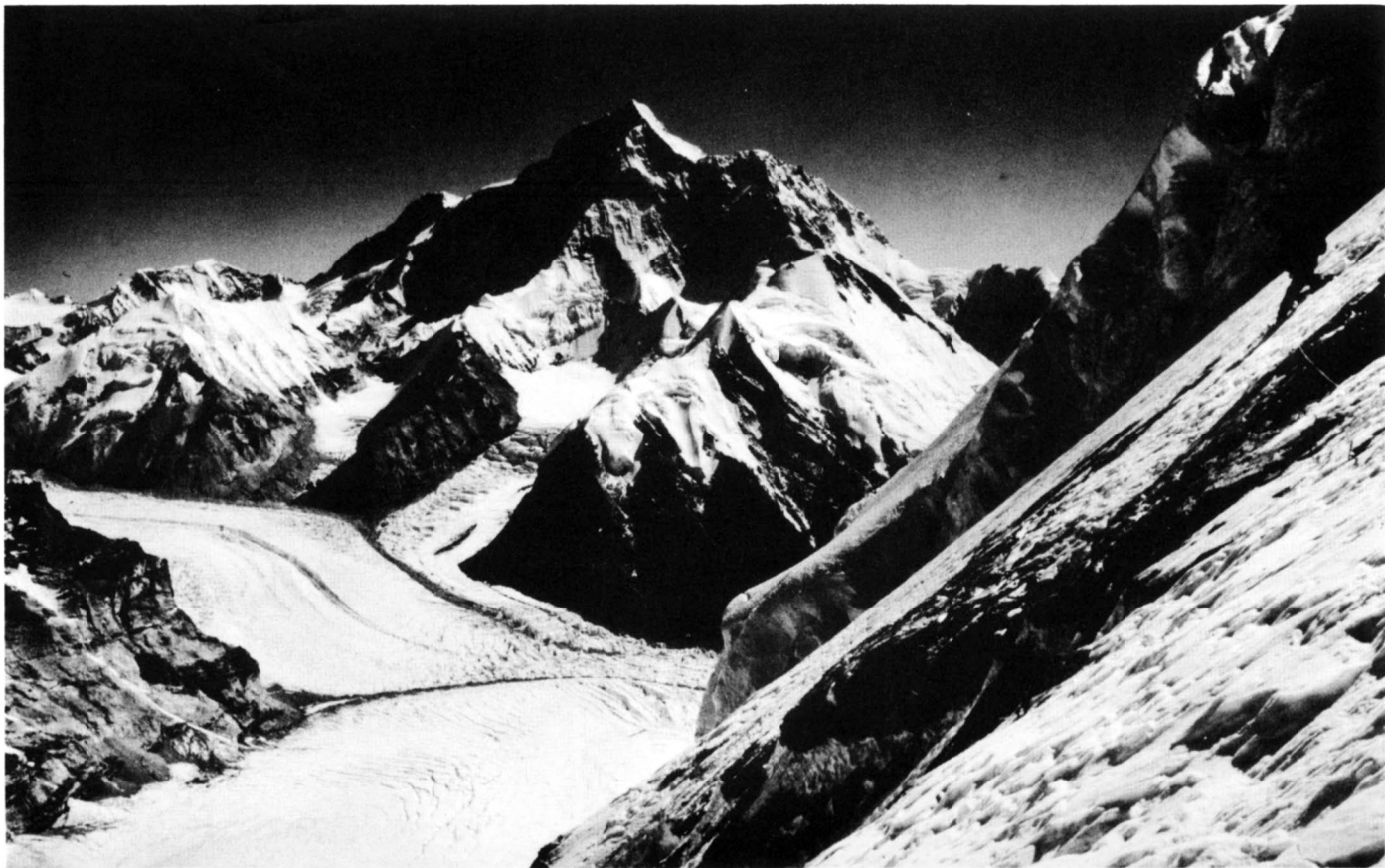


Photo: Doug Scott

36 *Makalu from N face of Chamlang East with the Chamlang glacier below. Beyond, the moraine marks its merger with the lower Barun glacier. 'Corner Camp' is at the base of the rocks of Peak 4 just where the ice-cliffs in the foreground obscure the rock*