The Other Side of the Mera

The First Ascent of the SW Pillar of Mera Peak (6487m), Hinku Valley, Nepal

Mal Duff

Plates 37–38

I'd never previously contemplated an underground pitch whilst wandering up a glacier. This was different. We were both severely scared. What we had thought would be a reasonable glacier approach was turning out to be a full test of our mountaineering abilities.

The huge séracs tumbling from ice-fields way up to the right of the pillar were obvious. They were acceptable—nasty, but unless we were unduly unlucky we would blast through the impact area in an hour or so. With a prudently early start things had gone like clockwork. I ruefully recalled our premature elation. The crevasse pitch Tat (Ian Tattersall) had led, and afterwards confessed that it had been the wildest climbing he had ever undertaken. 'No way would I have tried that normally, except that it was the first time we had climbed together, and I didn't want you to think I was a wimp.' Front-pointing down vertically to bridge to a central tower, axe into this just as the jumbled blocks collapsed into a hole so deep that the bottom was invisible. My tight-rope reaction in the confusion of whirling snow-dust. Relief when I realized Tat was somehow still alive, my horror when, craning over the edge, I could see him, a knee hooked over a block, one axe in and everything else dangling, nowhere obvious to go, and going a definite requirement. It was 6m down and 6m out and a further 6m to the other side, a gap he crossed on support impossibly tenuous. Much mental debate when it came to my turn, weighing the chances of jumping in (12m down, 12m pendular, jumar up), it was that bad. I climbed instead. The following groove, where the grit-impregnated ice glowed and sparked as we blitzed our axes in, all the time threatened and worried by tottering ice-blocks above. We were now facing a cul-de-sac, with an underground crevasse the only way out; 45m away a light glowed at the end of the tunnel. With little option we prepared to proceed. Much as the ball-bearing which in a pinball machine has little control, we, the players in this rather more serious game, were bouncing from place to place, our sole intention being the preservation of our fragile existences. Gaining height, although desirable, was less of a priority. Tat moved off into the gloom, jumped as if shocked (his foot having gone through the floor), reappeared, looked up, around, muttered a bit, gathered his cloak of courage around himself and once more entered the darkness. First he bridged horizontally, then front-pointed on the sidewall to reach a tiny ridge of snow which appeared from the depths below. Edging up this he gradually disappeared from view, as he crept crablike around a corner. Without visual contact my nerves shuddered with every tremor or jerk on the rope.

I followed, concentration wound to the limit, ticking towards Tat with hope of better things above. Round the corner the view ahead was revealed. Tat was

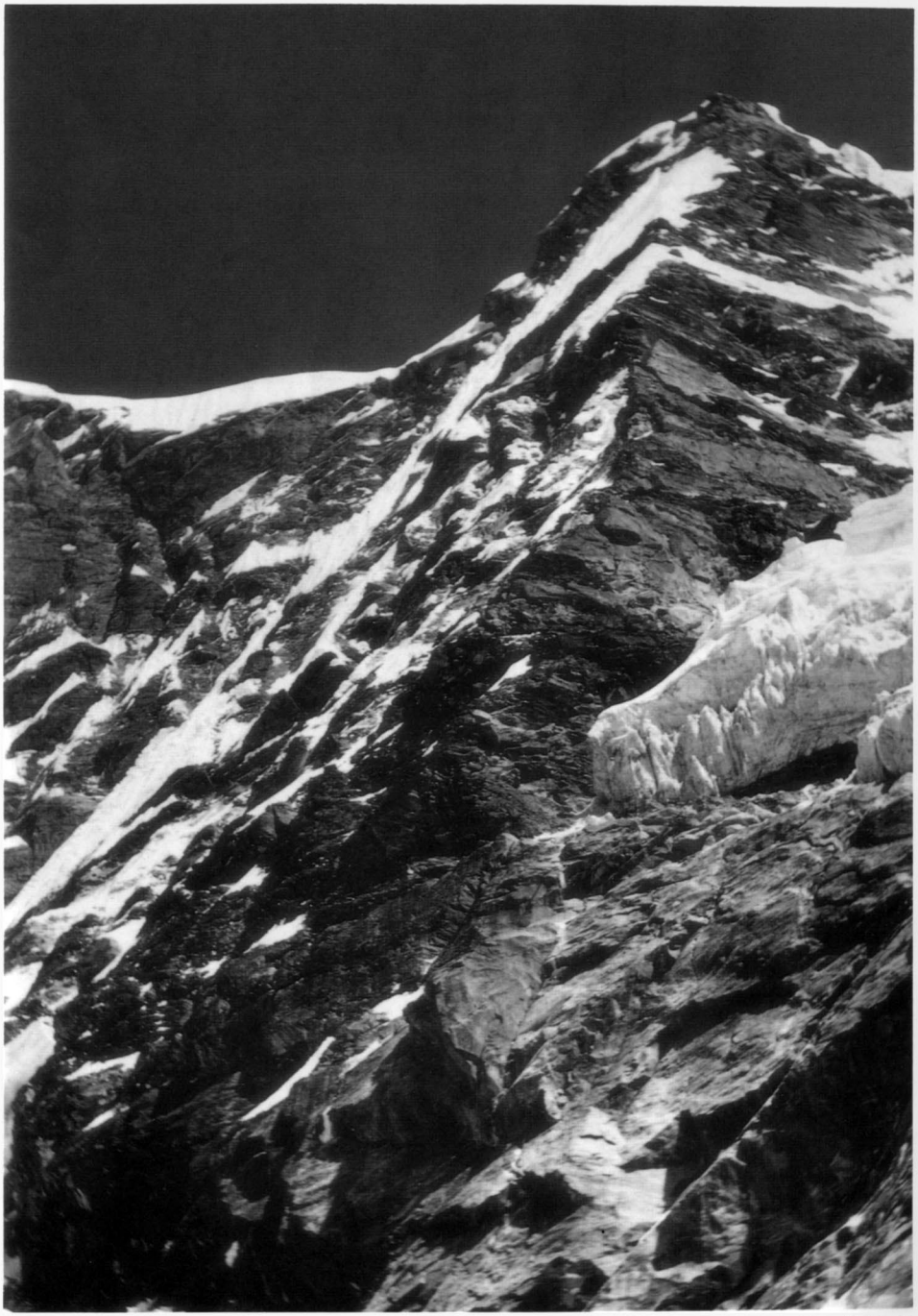


Photo: Mal Duff

37 The SW pillar of Mera.

sitting on a snow-bridge: it seemed unwise for me to climb up to and on to this until he had departed. Beyond, our canyon was blocked by a tangle of collapsed or collapsing séracs. Both side-walls overhung considerably. Below was of course unimportant, but in any event all was velvet black. The utter chaos, the manifest impossibility seemed insurmountable, but eventually years of seeing lines of possibility revealed a minor weakness. Nevertheless it was very obvious that climbing with a rucksack was out of the question. Unencumbered, Tat overcame a leaning sérac, a steep wall, an icy groove and finally a cornice-like headwall. As our rucksacks were gradually hauled skyward I reflected that I had never heard of this being required in a glacier approach before. Nevertheless, with that pitch we thankfully reached the foot of our route. The huge unclimbed SW pillar of Mera. 1800m lay between us and the summit. It was 2pm, the glacier difficulties had been unexpected, beyond our powers of imagination. Mentally drained, we opted for an early bivouac. At 4pm our casual brewing was interrupted. The glacier shuddered—our line of approach slowly and then with awesome momentum collapsed below us.

In the cold light of dawn, the steep compact buttress above displayed all the aspects of nastiness associated with this particular time of day. My Scottish origins came to the fore and, it being my turn to lead, I opted for a lacework of icy grooves on the W face. The ice was consistently good, belays of impeccable security appeared every 50m, and, if on occasion this was stretched to 60 or 90m, no matter, we were cruising. The vastness of the Himalaya enveloped us as our view expanded. The peaks and ridges around us reverberated in pink, blue and golden light. The air was still, the sky blue and all was well with the world. Nothing moved except us, the choughs and the sun (with its attendants, the sharp dark blue shadows, delineating every undulation on the mountains and slopes around us). The ridge was gained, we sat and smoked, drinking our precious water, warmed and made lazy by the heat, until eventually we continued, coaxing a few more rock pitches out of our tiring bodies.

One of the strange things about bivouac ledges is that they always appear more attractive initially than they turn out to be by midnight. This one was no exception. As we dozed and brewed, wriggling to accomplish the impossibility of comfort, the wind increased, at first imperceptibly and then with vigour, great buffeting lumps of wind keening over the ridge above and suctioning on our bivouac tent. Whirling snowcrust snapped from the higher ice-fields spun past. Very exciting, but we'd been cunning and were tightly notched into the lee and could enjoy the rising crescendo and appreciate that glorious contrast where security is absolute and the elements hammer and crash outside. In darkness pierced only by the red-hot coal of cigarettes we lay expectantly as the storm climaxed.

Dawn arrived with that sparkling clarity which signifies extreme cold. Above, a cracked overhanging prow barred our way and, although we had brought rockboots with us for this eventuality, we decided to go left. This was shaded and my feet rapidly numbed, so, with Tat belaying, I contorted and struggled, removing crampons and boots, warmed the offending digits, changed into new socks and reversed the procedure before stiffly making my way to the stance. Above was harder stuff, steep ice and creaking granite which

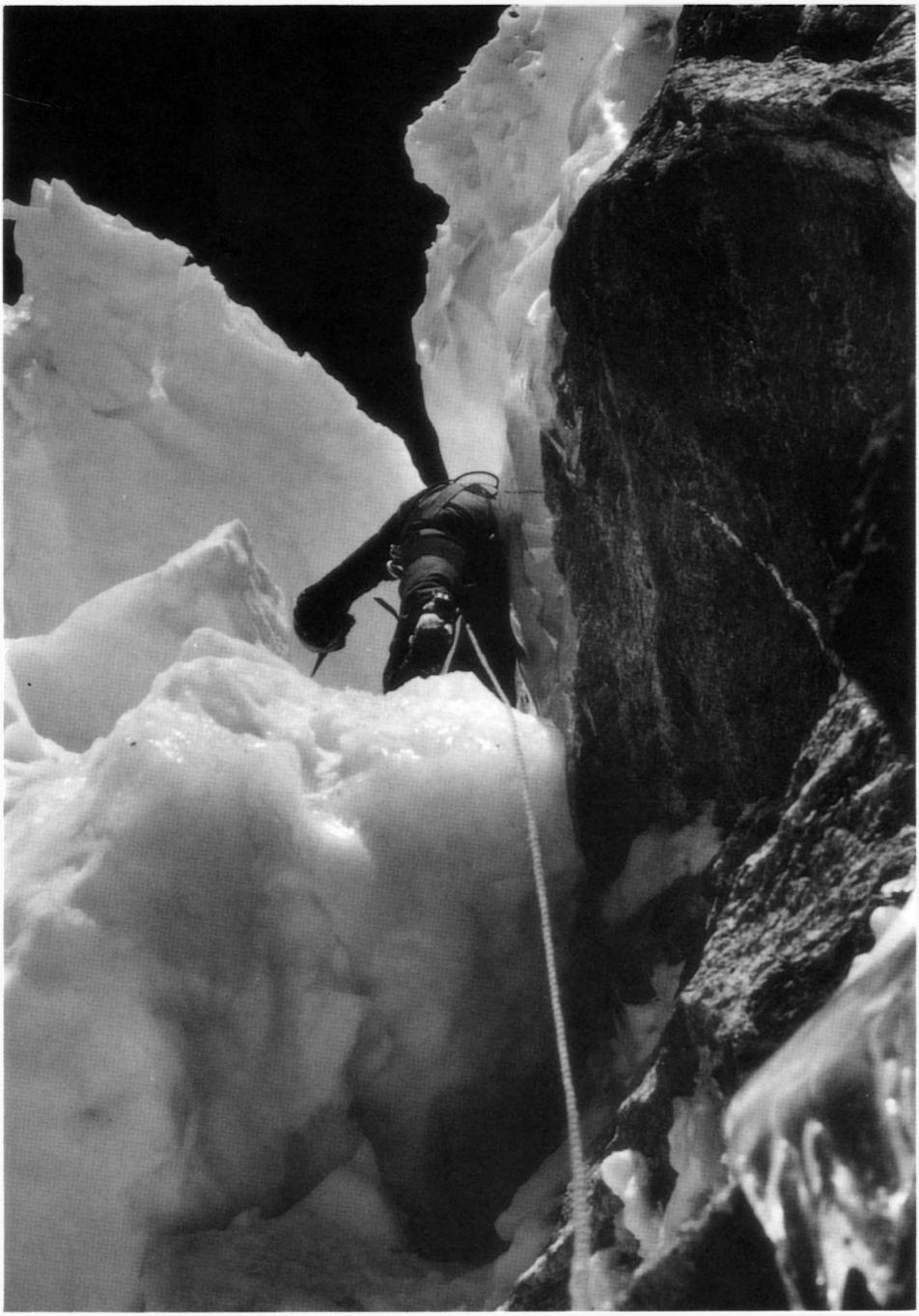


Photo: Mal Duff

38 *Tat leading in the glacier (without rucksack).*

led ultimately back to the crest. This was awful, so we climbed diagonally down the S face for a pitch on appallingly rotten rock and gained a bay. When I arrived Tat was sunbathing, looking relaxed and grinning. The next pitch, mine, was not the sort of stuff to climb casually, so I wound up the nerves and elevated on rattling flakes, scaring myself rather well in the process. Fortunately, by gaining an icy groove we were then able to regain the crest where, tired once more, we prepared to bivouac. We hacked and cut and cut and hacked and got more tired until eventually, by pinning up the tent, we were able to ignore the severely sloping floor. Whilst I was enjoying the first brew, my comfortable contemplations were rudely disturbed when Tat sat up tensely and casually asked 'Hey Mal, do you think the anchors are OK?' 'Hell, you placed them.' Tat leant outside and tugged vigorously on his tape. I declined to do likewise, just in case; but I did slip a nut into a poor crack nearby, as a sop to my conscience. During these manoeuvres we had both noticed away out west a huge dark swirling bank of clouds. 'What do you reckon on the weather?' 'Not too bright, I think that lot will be over here sometime tomorrow.' 'Aye, better plan to go early and blast for the top.' With that cheerless thought we dozed, slipping and sliding into the night.

Up early, we cleared the ledge in fast time. Urgency had entered the game. We fairly motored up a snow arête, but this gradually petered out on to an ice-field, and the perfect névé ribbon we were following narrowed and diminished, finally blanking into sun- and wind-polished 70 degree glassy ice. Tat up ahead placed one of our two ice-screws, but the ice was rockhard and the head snapped off; the other, choked from previous use, he hammered into a fracture crack and thereafter for 150m we carried our nerves as, moving together, we crept towards the security of the tower above. Tat is married and a father and, moreover, good; so he climbed faultlessly until, finally reaching the rock, he slumped exhausted in a flurry of belaying. Our energy drain had been enormous, but we knew that only five or six pitches lay ahead, and these, the key, were over to the left. The storm was gradually building up. Above looked desperately hard; we knew we had to go left to reach a notch in the roofs above, but in diminishing visibility the way was less than obvious. As I crept up the hail trickle became a flood, masking the holds. Carelessly dislodged rocks added unrequired drama. A concert of discord. We climbed to survive, individual moves no longer fun, just a necessity. Slowly we reeled in a couple of pitches until on a small sloping ledge everything blanked out—or seemed to—but up and left, possibly within reach, a tiny smear of glassy ice trickled over a bulge. Tat eyed this warily. 'You're the winter buttress specialist, so I designate this pitch as yours.' This forceful invitation was hard to ignore and, as time was pressing, I ventured forth. I picked and hooked and leant this way and that, finding that progress was possible. Occasionally upwards. By dint of luck, and forcing a few dicey moves, a groove with a rich seam of quality ice was reached.

In the cloud, through the cloud, we spied the elusive gap and, better still, a rock ledge whispering off towards it. Tat wasted no time: within minutes we were zeroing into the summit. The route was finished. Only effort was required as we cruised down the standard route into the twilight and the embrace of friends below.