

STRUGGLE FOR RAKAPOSHI

By MIKE BANKS

PREPARATIONS

AT the outset and on paper it sounded quite neat and cosmopolitan : the ' British-American Karakoram Expedition ' (note ' British ' and not ' Anglo ' in deference to our founder-member, Hamish MacInnes). The pleasantest phase of an expedition is the early planning when you can be sublimely indifferent to steepness and altitude and when fatigue is a failing displayed only by the faint-hearted (such chaps would not be on your expedition). You are not yet bent double with the fardels of money raising, equipment or travel. We were wise and brave enough to choose as an objective the Muztagh Tower, quite certain that no other party would be so foolish as to choose so impossible-looking a target ! This idyllic first phase in our case came to an abrupt end when John Hartog invited me round to his place for a chat. Walking into his drawing-room an enormous enlargement of Sella's famous picture of the Muztagh Tower stared me in the eye. He was ahead of us with his application and further added to our misery by telling me that a French party was also out for the Tower. We of B.A.K.E. had better look elsewhere.

Our party at this juncture was four-strong : Hamish (my old, piratical, teasingly Anglophobe friend), myself and two Americans, Bob Swift and Dick Irvin. Americans, as film-goers well know, are either gangsters or millionaires. These were different : they were quiet and broke ! Bob and I, when our grandiose plans for raising money fell down, both flogged, with heavy hearts, our Austin-Healey sports cars to raise funds. We chose as an alternative objective Rakaposhi, primarily for the very ignoble reason that, for a mountain of its stature, it was commendably cheap (i.e. accessible). Furthermore, it had been oft-attempted and therefore fully reconnoitred. It was merely a case of going straight for the South-west spur, and trying to get up it.

When it is explained that Bob started from California, Hamish and Dick from New Zealand, and myself from Britain, it is remarkable that, with such an enormous time-lag inherent in settling all questions by mail, we managed to congregate in Karachi in mid-May in some form of order. Furthermore, we contrived to arrive there with equipment, food and money in judicious proportions. We then had to get the Government of Pakistan to alter our objective from the Muztagh Tower to Rakaposhi, a transaction which had to be passed by three separate Ministries. We were compelled to ignore Kipling's good advice about not trying to hurry the East, and almost got ulcers in the process.



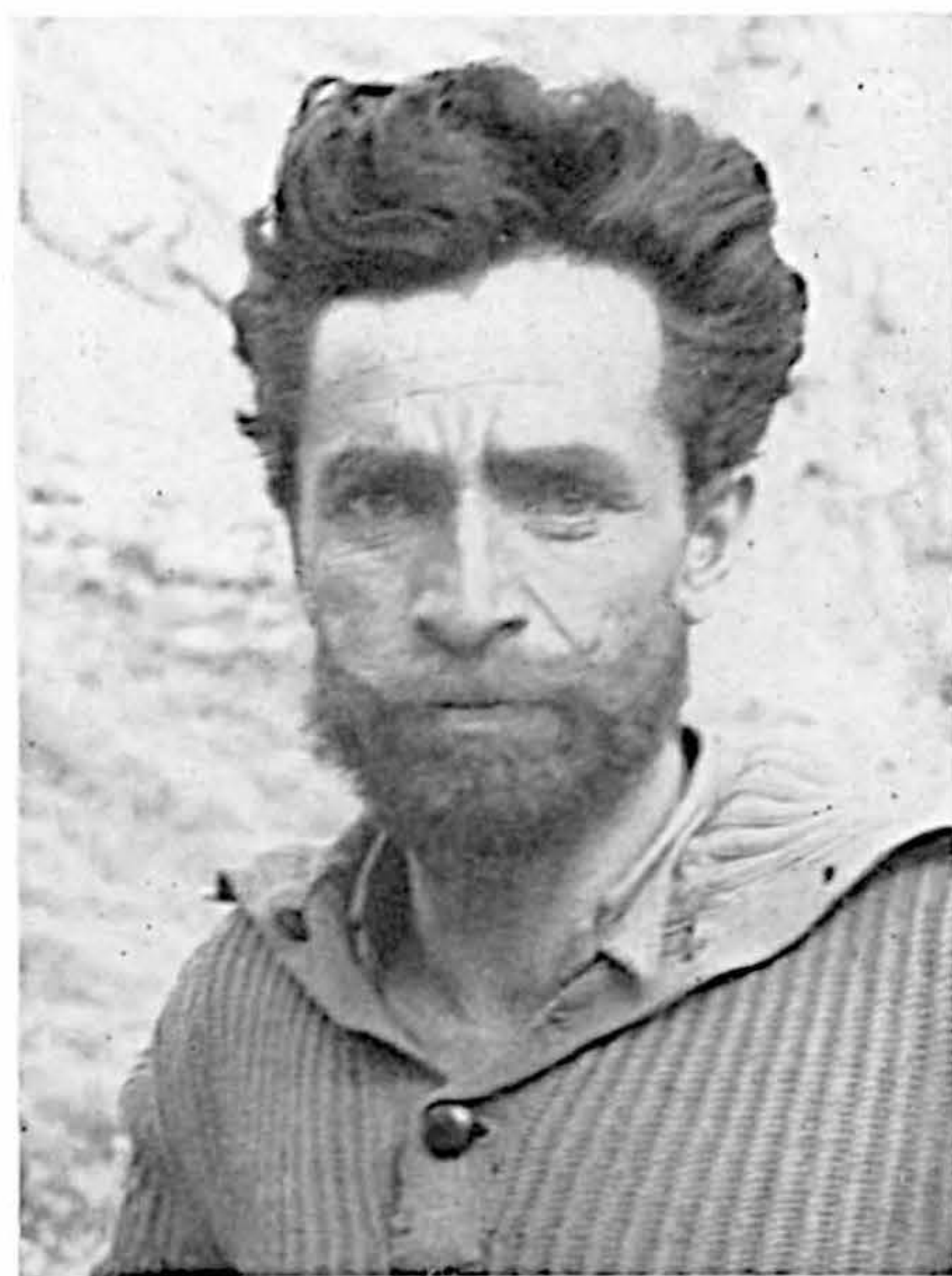
HAMISH MACINNES.



MIKE BANKS.



BOB SWIFT.



ISSA KHAN, THE HEAD PORTER, AND A VETERAN
OF K2 AND NANGA PARBAT.

[To face p. 456.]

In Rawalpindi we enjoyed the generous and open hospitality of the two elder Goodwin brothers until we flew off to Gilgit on May 23, having first been joined by our Liaison Officer, Captain Fazal-i-Haque, of the Pakistan Army. The flight, past the isolated but stupendous massif of Nanga Parbat, is said to be the most exciting scheduled flight in the world. The enjoyment of it is only slightly marred if one ponders the implications of an engine failure, perhaps just as the ancient Dakota scrapes over the Babusar Pass (13,690 ft.).

APPROACH

Gilgit was green, cool and lovely, and after a pleasant day's stay as guests of Mr. Kiani, the Political Agent, we 'jeeped' up the Hunza road, stopping after seventeen miles to ferry ourselves and our equipment across the turbulent Hunza river on an utterly unsafe contraption called a 'zakh', which was constructed of four inflated cow-skins lashed together by bits of stick. It was a miserable alternative to the almost equally terrifying rope bridges. However, an ancient and grizzled Charon rowed us across with the skill and imperturbability which no doubt he and his forebears have been displaying for millennia. He was a superb waterman by heredity.

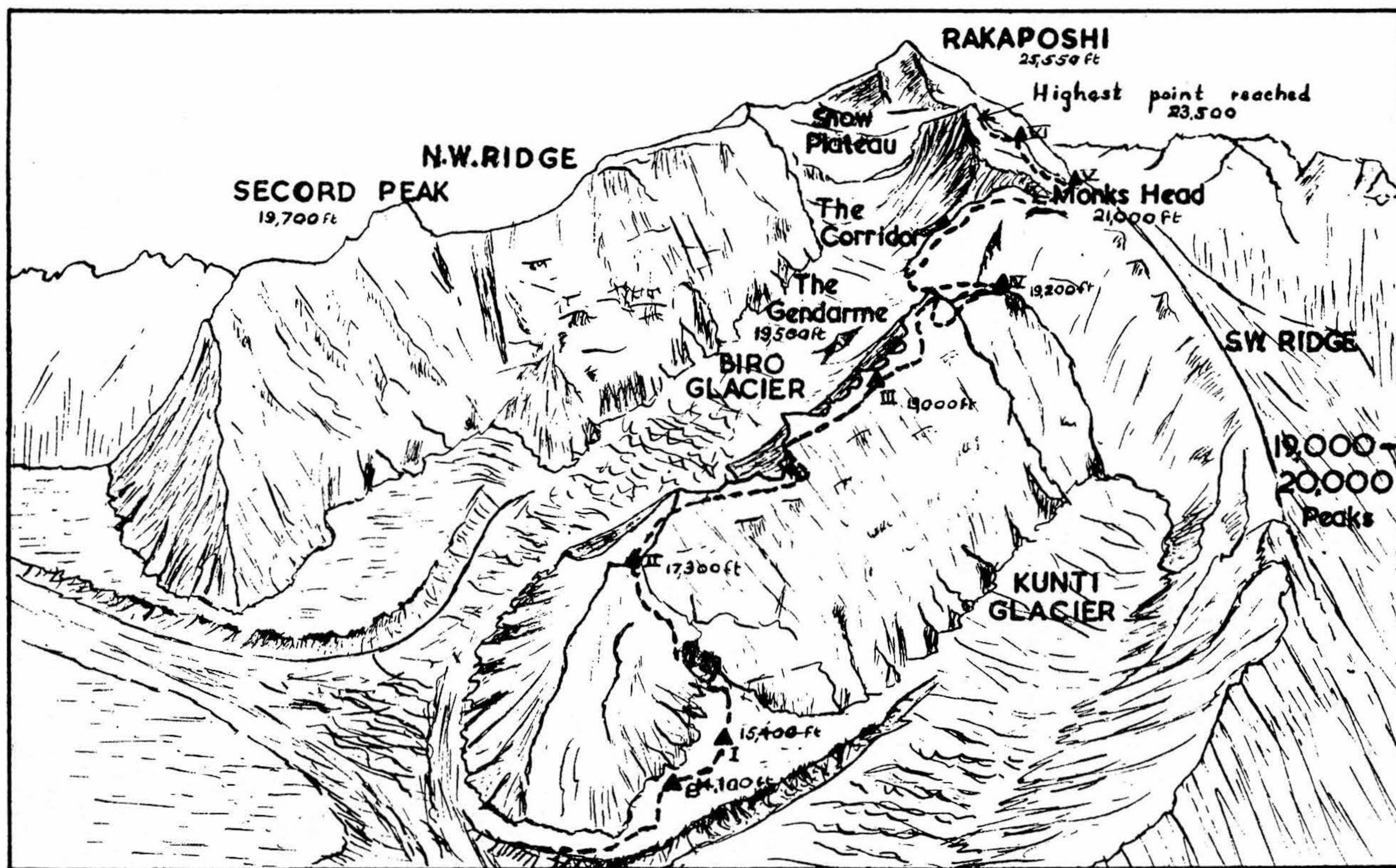
Three days brought us to the foot of the South-west spur where we made, like Tilman and Band before us, our Base Camp. During this period we experienced the usual emotions of an approach march: the first exciting glimpse of the peak, fatigue, and diarrhoea. Working on the village-to-village trade-union haul, the coolies carried uncomplainingly and well. We established Base Camp on May 27—a convenient date, well in advance of the monsoon yet sufficiently late for the lower snows to have vanished. Making base is always a great relief, for the worry of losing that one crucial crate containing, say, all the rum, so vital to the success of the expedition, is banished from the mind.

HISTORICAL

A word now to describe our route. The mountain, starting with Conway in 1892, had been well looked at. The Southern and Northern approaches were deemed unassailable and have never been tried. Secord and Vyvyan's party failed on the North-west ridge in 1938.¹ Tilman and Secord in 1947 again having been repulsed on the North-west ridge tried the South-west spur. This route was blocked by a formidable snow and ice face christened the Monk's Head which deterred even this celebrated pair.² Tissières in 1954 led a Cambridge expedition of young and strong climbers, including Band, to the peak, but they again failed on the North-west ridge and their attack along the South-west spur petered out above the Monk's Head, at something

¹ *A.J.* 51. 231 sqq.

² *A.J.* 56. 329 sqq.



under 21,000 ft.³ Band wrote : ' We had proved that the climb was possible to the top of the Monk's Head and beyond that seemed reasonable easy terrain.' This was the route for us.

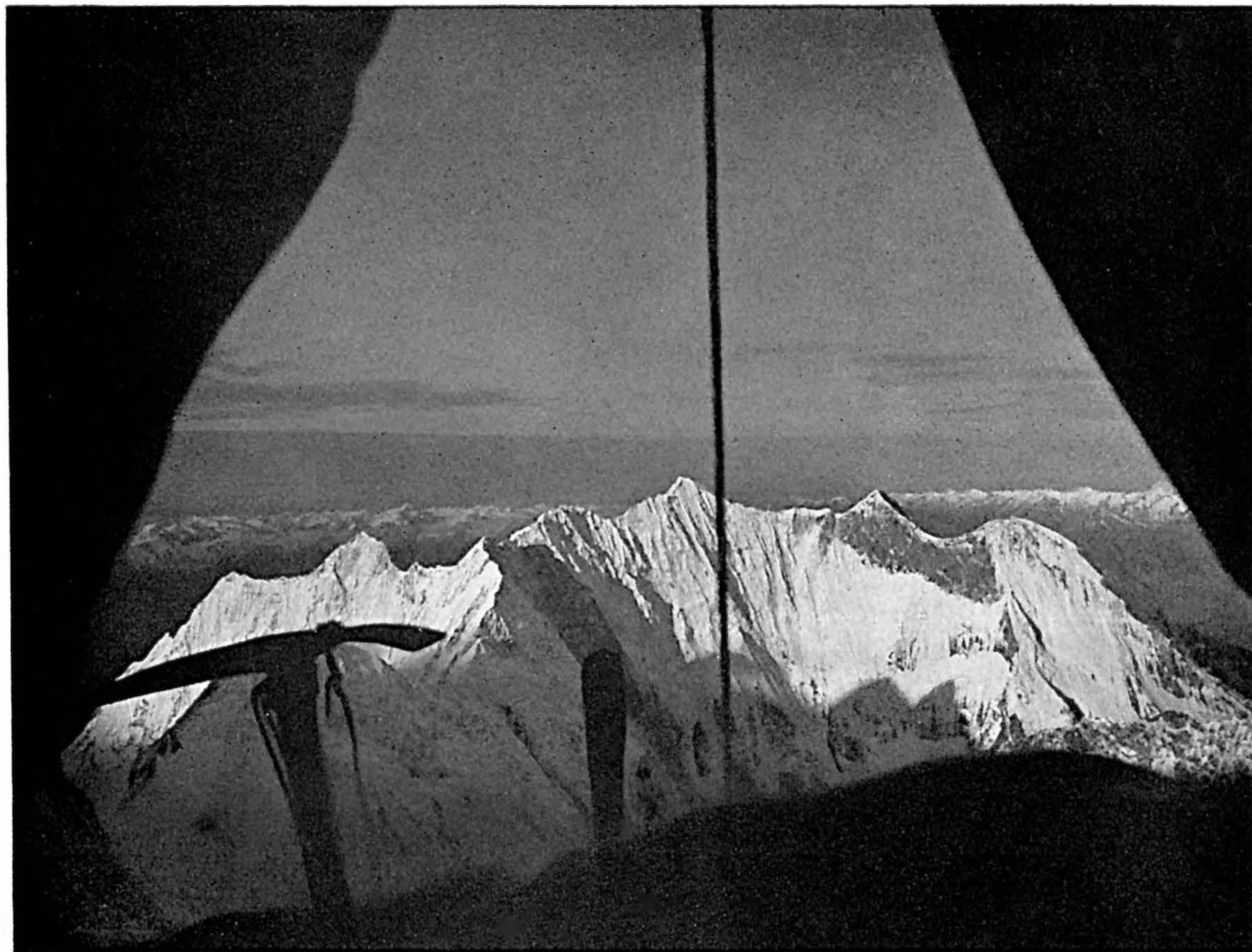
TO THE MONK'S HEAD

Our Base Camp was made at the foot of the South-west spur from whence a long grind of about 3,200 ft. would bring us to the crest of the spur itself. A long, icy and exposed ridge climb with a formidable 300-ft. gendarme half-way along would carry us in two camps to the foot of the Monk's Head. This approach ridge was a nice climb in its own right but was a precarious highway for our porter train and far too long to be made safe by fixed ropes. Part of it was open to avalanche danger and the whole route would become hazardous in deep or slushy snow. What struck us most at base was what an immense horizontal distance away from us the summit was.

We had four high-altitude Hunza porters recruited by the Mir of Hunza ; they were headed by Issa Khan, one of the best-known Hunza porters and a veteran of Nanga Parbat and the Italian expedition to K2. We could not indulge in the pleasure of acclimatising on some minor peaks and from the very outset we concentrated our total efforts on the single purpose of pushing our camps up the South-west spur. We placed a food and equipment dump a thousand feet up the scree from Base, to shorten the long carry to the crest of the ridge. This we called Camp I, our Camp II being on the crest itself, about 2,000 ft. higher. We moved into Camp II, only to be assailed there by a seven-day storm, the boredom of which was only slightly relieved by plugging through some 900 pages of *Don Quixote*.

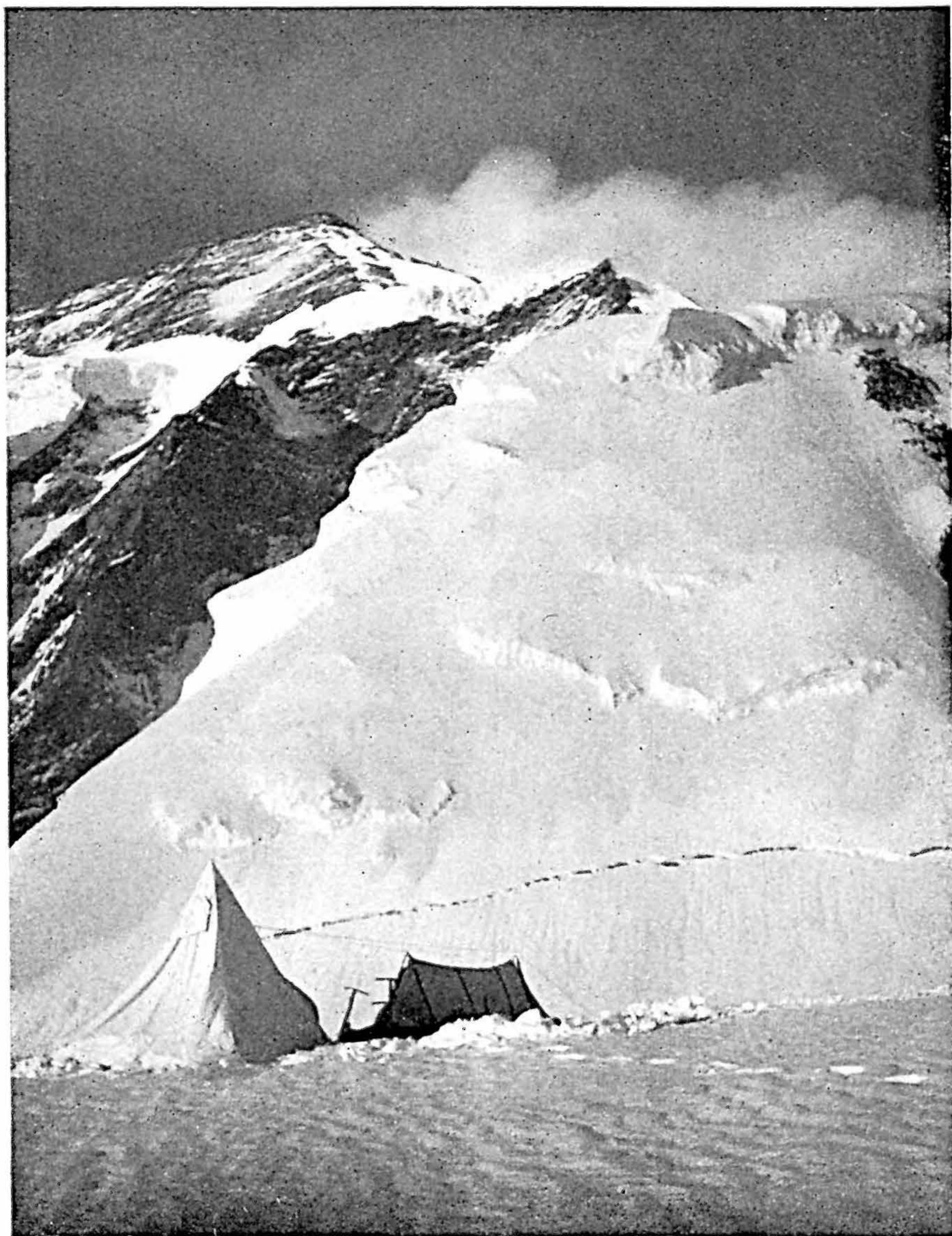
With much step-cutting and placing of bamboo markers we transformed the ice slope and ridge above Camp II into a suitable highway for our porters, who, working competently and independently under Issa Khan, steadily built up the stores behind us as we prepared the way. Our Camp III (19,000 ft.) was under the 300-ft. ice and rock face of the gendarme—an impressive barrier : impressive enough to make Issa Khan pronounce that there was nothing like this on K2 or Nanga Parbat and that the porters would carry no further, due to the difficulty of the climb. We had rather expected this and from now on it would be ' coolie-sahib '. And this is where the mountain began to win without our properly realising it. The summit was still 6,550 ft. above us and a considerable horizontal distance away. It would call for an all-out effort from all of us to get a camp within striking distance of the top. Would we then have any reserve of strength left to make the summit bid ? If anyone fell ill, had an accident, or succumbed to altitude the attack would peter out for lack of weight.

³ A.J. 60. 48 sqq.



Photo, M. E. B. Banks]

VIEW FROM CAMP III, 19,200 FT.



Photo, M. E. B. Banks]

CAMP IV AND THE FACE OF THE MONK'S HEAD BEYOND.

The gendarme was a fine climb and, after weathering out a twelve-day storm, we roped it from top to bottom. Our Camp IV was pitched at about 19,300 ft. at the foot of the Monk's Head. This was a miniature North face of the Argentière—a little less steep and a little less long. Its ice face was about 1,000 ft. high and it took us two days to climb it and fix ropes, using ice pitons. It was an exhilaratingly steep climb on which twelve-point crampons were a great advantage. In all we scaled it three times with loads of a little under 40 lb., carrying fourteen days' food and three tents above it to Camp V (21,000 ft.) at the junction of the South-west ridge and spur—and 4,550 ft. to go. This remaining slope in the estimate of everyone from Conway onwards should have been a pleasant if somewhat airy walk. How wrong they were! Foreshortening had deceived them all.

FIRST ASSAULT

We now saw that from the col where the South-west ridge and spur joined the mountain swept up to its summit in three giant steps. The first step, which now faced us, was steep and crevassed and glittered evilly with ice. Camp V was at the foot of this slope and Camp VI two thousand weary feet higher, on a nick in the ridge, the only camping ground for miles. It took six-and-a-half gruelling hours to make the climb. We estimated that Camp VI was at 23,000 ft. This put us 2,550 ft. below the summit, not near enough really. On a mountain of Rakaposhi's height one's top camp should be about 1,000 ft., certainly not more than 1,500 ft., below the summit to be reasonably sure of knocking it off. We thought about trying to get one camp higher, but the lack of tents and strength argued against it. So we picked the summit pair. Hamish was one, for this wiry, irrepressible Scot had been going like a bomb. Bob, Dick and I were much of a muchness, so principally for reasons of international diplomacy, it was decided that an American should accompany Hamish; Dick was chosen. Bob and I were to carry for them and, on July 9 we set them up at Camp VI with four days' food. Bob and I descended to Camp V, it having been agreed that Hamish and Dick would attempt the summit the next day if the weather were fine. Bob and I would climb to Camp VI again the next day to support the conquering pair or, if they had failed, to have a try ourselves the following day. We had been very naughty about roping (we could offer the excuse that we had used nearly all the climbing ropes as fixed ropes) and on the way down Bob slipped on some ice and seemed to be well on his way to the Biro glacier 4,000 ft. below when he stopped among some snow and rocks. Not to be outdone I later fell into a crevasse, not very seriously, and also tumbled down a fairly inoffensive snow slope, executing some neat somersaults.

The next day was fine and clear so Bob and I, assuming that Hamish

and Dick would have tried the summit, went up again to Camp VI. We found that they had not left camp due to pains in Dick's legs. We were not to know it at the time, but this lost opportunity probably cost us our only chance of having a good crack at the top. The four of us then had to spend an appalling night crammed into a tiny two-man tent. Sleep was impossible and we agreed that it was worse than being benighted. Feeling very washed out after so miserable a night, we all four of us set off on a summit bid just at dawn next morning : it was bitterly cold with stinging drift scudding over the hard-crusted snow. The slope above us, the penultimate step of about 1,500 ft., was, as usual, steep and crevassed. We crossed an awkward crevasse and the party then looked on and shivered while I cut steps (far too slowly for them) up an abrupt snow bulge. Beyond was a maze of crevasses and we inevitably made a few false sallies which cost us dearly in time and strength. Bob was feeling the cold badly, and, as we moved into the shade, he felt his feet going numb. Wisely he stopped and warmed them up. Then we plodded on, moving sluggishly up the hard snow, still buffeted by a cold and nagging wind. We sought the meagre lee of a boulder which was about 500 ft. above Camp VI, that is at an altitude of about 23,500 ft. Far, far away K2 stood out proudly. All around us improbable mountains faded into impossible distances. We had taken a very long time to make those 500 ft. and our summit prospects were not bright. Crouching with our backs against the wind we took stock of the situation. We felt that the summit was not to be gained that day. Bob and Dick elected to give Rakaposhi best and to descend to lower and more healthy altitudes. Hamish and I, holding that the summit was attainable, decided to make a fresh start and have a really good go at the top on the morrow (which would surely be fine like the last few days). So we descended to Camp VI, Dick and Bob continuing down to Camp V on the same day.

Hamish and I spent a comfortable night and emerged from our tent just after the dawn with high hopes of achieving the summit. The ominous look of the horizon dashed our prospects. We had gone only a few steps from camp when a storm broke. We retreated into our tent and listened to thunder for the rest of the day. We had virtually no food left and we had to accept the frustrating fact that we would have to retreat the next day without having been able to make an all-out try for the summit. A typical Himalayan story : you plan for months, you flog a complaining body for weeks to establish that final camp high up in the rarified air, and then, with the prize almost within grasp, it is denied you by some un-thought-of caprice and all the labour is brought to nothing. To nothing ? Well, not completely, for the vastness of the scale and the inevitability of events remove all bitterness, so that retreat is not failure.

RETREAT

Below us on that stormy day drama was being enacted. Bob was descending the Monk's Head with Dick. Thunder was crashing about them (it was frightening Hamish and me in our tent), and lightning was discharging from cloud to cloud. Suddenly Bob felt himself being charged ('as if my head was in the electric light points'); he began to feel weak ('I chucked off my rucksack hoping it would fall down the Monk's Head to the snow basin below but the goddam thing went 4,000 ft. down to the Biro glacier instead'). He stumbled and fell upside down but was saved by having clipped himself onto the fixed rope. Luckily that cloud did not discharge and the pair got down to Camp IV. Spending several very chilly nights they staggered down to Base. Hamish and I, benefiting by the fresh steps they had kicked followed a day later.

For six unremitting weeks we had been labouring relentlessly on the South-west spur and we were very spent. Our diet had been inadequate and we had all lost about twenty pounds in weight, all our muscles having fallen away. A rest was imperative so we walked down the valley and gorged ourselves on mutton. We discussed policy: Dick and Bob now decided to leave the mountain. Hamish and I looked up again towards the summit. We thought of the six camps still pitched, with most of them stocked with food, and we succumbed to an irresistible desire to pit our strength once again against the mammoth peak towering above us. We fully realised the odds against us.

SECOND ATTEMPT

Hamish and I, therefore, supported by Issa Khan and Nadir, set off up the mountain for a second attack, but at Camp II (17,300 ft.) Hamish felt very ill indeed. He had lots of disquieting symptoms: aching joints, eyes hurting, breath reeking repulsively, and a general condition of fever. He felt awful. There was only one thing to do: to make Base before he became a stretcher case. He literally stumbled down the ice and rock, taking many hours to complete a one-and-a-half-hour journey.

THIRD ATTEMPT

Hamish rested for four days and then very gamely volunteered to have a third attempt. We sent Issa Khan and Qambar ahead to cut ice steps for us above Camp II, but Qambar fell and pulled Issa down about 400 ft., which bruised them and ruined their morale for the rest of the expedition. Hamish and I went up to Camp II with Nadir and Dilap. From then on we were on our own. We made Camp III (19,000 ft.) the next day, July 29, but it was a gruelling seven-hour slog.

We had nothing like regained our full strength, even after our few days' rest.

We were then assailed by the granddaddy of a storm ; a storm which flooded the plains and disrupted the railways and roads. In the foothills it washed out all the bridges and turned the village streets into cataracts. It almost buried Hamish and me in deep soft snow. After two days it was quite apparent that Rakaposhi would be out of condition for a long time. It was also obvious that Hamish and I, in our weakened state, would be quite incapable of ploughing a furrow through the snow up to the summit. Indeed, the snow was so deep and soft that our sole preoccupation was to get off the mountain alive. We did not dare tarry, so we set off down to Camp II while the storm was still raging.

The snow was knee- or thigh-deep and we made pitifully slow speed. We tried a bit of a short-cut which only contrived to land Hamish half into a large concealed crevasse. It was snowing steadily, so we had to take off our goggles to be able to see where we were going.

When we came to a nasty steep section of ice overlaid with soft snow, I told Hamish that I thought it was very unsafe and asked him to get a good belay.⁴ Sure enough the snow avalanched away under me and I fell. Hamish's axe was jerked out but, with a turn round his hand, he laid back and held me with one arm—a fine feat considering I, like Hamish, was carrying a 60-lb. rucksack. We could not camp, we could not go back, so we had to face a long traverse over this dangerous mountainside. It was nerve-racking. The snow was too deep to cut decent ice steps underneath and too soft to offer a safe kick-step. It was all done by treading delicately. We were by now very tired and wet to the skin, even through our windproofs and down jackets. Hamish was shuddering with cold. That traverse went on for at least ten years ! At last it was over and we descended the long ice slope towards Camp II. Suddenly I heard a bellow of ' Mike ! ' as Hamish sailed past. I jabbed my axe into the fluffy snow and waited. As the nylon stretched I was relentlessly pulled off and Hamish and I went bouncing down for about 300 ft. We came to rest in a heap of avalanche snow, hardly daring to twitch lest it start again. We then managed, in several ropes' lengths, to climb to some scree and made camp just at dusk. We had no primus pricker in the tent and the stove would only work at a

⁴ The reader will note with relief that we have now taken to using a rope ; this was not easily achieved. Hamish, who moves superbly and safely on difficult ground, would describe derisively as ' cream puffs ' those lesser mortals who live in the hope that their chums will hold them in the case of a fall, or at least be decent enough to accompany them to eternity. I think I stood it, cream puff that I was, until Hamish and I had to do a tricky descent of the gendarme tied together with nylon boot-laces. After that we had a little talk—and the rope was used ! See also the Editor's footnote, *A.J.* 61. 332.



Photo, M. E. B. Banks]

RAKAPOSHI (25,550 FT.) FROM THE FOOT OF THE S.W. SPUR. THE HIGHEST POINT ATTAINED, 23,500 FT., IS MARKED BY THE CROSS.

flicker. Shivering we went to bed. I noticed that the light of the candle hurt my eyes. At about ten o'clock we both went snow blind.

Next day I could hardly open my eyes, so we rested, descending to Base Camp the day after, August 4. The struggle for Rakaposhi was over.

CONCLUSION

If any reader is tempted to have a go at Rakaposhi himself, he is due for a disappointment. We heard from various officials that Pakistan is reserving the mountain for her own mountaineers. Good luck, however, to the Pakistani expedition of the future—they have chosen a worthy objective.

What was it like, climbing with a couple of Yanks? How did they get along with the Limeys? Always excepting the horror of mondial planning and organising (I cannot honestly recommend it unless you have about two years to mount the expedition!) the international liaison was an unqualified success. Very soon we were made to realise that all American climbers were not for ever dangling from expansion bolts and the Americans came to understand that we had advanced in technique and attitude since Whymper. Soon we became so integrated that one was almost oblivious of the nationality of one's companion of the moment.

Dick had climbed extensively from Peru to the Canadian Rockies. Bob had one incurable fault—he had to be watched continuously to make sure he did not carry twice as much twice as far as he should have done. He was one of the most public-spirited and self-sacrificing persons I have ever met. They both possessed that unerring American sense of humour. As for my colourful old friend Hamish, when this adventurer, with his rucksack full of pitons and poetry books, goes clanking off on his next expedition I would be very happy to be with him.

Rakaposhi was a tough nut. The route was extraordinarily long and steep, and the porters were only able to help over the lower, easier part of the way. The Sahibs had to work like blacks and for this reason it would be wise for any future party to be at least six strong. I was very happy to have been to the mountain, with the friends that I went with.