CHAPTER XIII

THE SECOND ATTEMPT: THE NORTH-WEST RIDGE

On May 10, the day after the accident, Professor Dyhrenfurth, Kurz and Dr. Richter arrived from the Base Camp, and a conference was held on the situation. " Conference " is perhaps a little misleading. It is a word conjuring up a picture of frock-coated gentlemen seated round a long mahogany table, the highly polished surface of which reflects waistcoats ornamented with gold watch-chains, and earnest countenances on which responsibility and a heavy lunch sit heavily. In the present instance I must ask the reader to imagine the sombre interior of the large porters' tent, the thick canvas of which reduces the light within to a faint depressing green, whilst a pungent reek of smoke struggles with a faint, yet perceptible odour of unwashed bodies that have lain there during the previous night. In the middle a heterogeneous collection of packing cases do duty as a table. Seated on other packing cases are a number of unsavoury looking ragamuffins with unkempt hair, frowsy beards, cracked sun-scorched countenances, and eyes bleared by the snow glare.

The first suggestion made by those who had remained at the Base Camp was that the attack on the ice wall should be renewed, but this was very properly rejected by all those who had shared in the attack. The sole remaining alternative was to attempt the North-west Ridge which rises from

the western tributary of the Kangchenjunga Glacier. This ridge ends in a snow and ice terrace beneath the Kangbachen summit, 25,782 feet, of Kangchenjunga. Even supposing the terrace to be reached, however, the most we could hope for was to ascend the Kangbachen summit, as there was no possibility of traversing to the highest summit, as both distance and difficulty were too great. Personally, I must confess to a longing to flee from the mountain altogether, and be able to lie in a sleeping bag at nights and sleep undisturbed by the fear of annihilation from ice avalanches. I suggested, therefore, that we should retire, cross the Jonsong La, and attempt the Jonsong Peak, 24,344 feet high. This idea met with no support, and it was decided to attempt the North-west Ridge. Should we fail, as it seemed certain we must do, judging from appearances, at all events we could ascend the Western Tributary Glacier, explore its head, and possibly climb the Ramthang Peak.

In order to do this, it was decided to move Camp One across the glacier to the foot of the rocky spur separating the Western Tributary Glacier from the glacier falling between the Wedge Peak and the Ramthang Peak. This new site would have the advantage of being considerably safer than the present one, for it was by no means certain that we were safe in the event of an exceptionally large ice avalanche falling from Kangchenjunga or the Twins. This uncertainty was emphasised the same afternoon in a startling fashion.

We were aroused from an after-lunch siesta by the thunder clap of a great avalanche. We issued from our tents in alarm. Thousands of feet above us on the face of

Kangchenjunga masses of hanging glacier were collapsing. Sweeping the precipices with appalling violence, the avalanche crashed down to the glacier, and roared straight across at us.

Huge clouds of snow were raised by the wind blast from the surface of the glacier, and came rushing down upon the camp. They concealed the falling ice, and it was hard to tell whether the camp was safe or not. My own inclination was to run for it, and I was about to bolt precipitately when I saw Duvanel calmly turning the handle of his ciné camera with that sang-froid peculiar to his calling, the tradition of which demands that the handle of a ciné camera shall be turned in the face of charging elephants, and at shipwrecks, fires, explosions, earthquakes and other catastrophes. Fired by his example, I pulled my own folding camera from my pocket, and took a hurried snap. As will be seen from the accompanying illustration the avalanche resembled the white clouds of some new and deadly form of gas attack. The God of Kangchenjunga is evidently well up in the technique of modern warfare. The roar of the avalanche subsided. We knew that we were safe from ice débris, but the clouds of snow continued to pour down the glacier towards the camp with extraordinary velocity. The next moment a wind blast struck the camp, and a blizzard of snow sent us scuttling into shelter.

The blizzard lasted some minutes, and when it had cleared the upper part of the glacier was seen to be covered in nearly an inch of wind-blown snow. The actual ice débris of the avalanche had stopped well short of the camp, but it had swept quite half a mile down the glacier. This was not

THE ICE AVALANCHE THAT FELL TOWARDS CAMP ONE

the only avalanche; other lesser ones fell, but none of such terrifying dimensions. It was obvious, however, that it was a mere question of volume and momentum whether or not the camp was to be swept away by a future avalanche. If it was a rest day for tired bodies, it was scarcely so for nerve-racked minds.

It was a simple matter moving camp the next day, and the new site on the other side of the glacier was safer than any we had yet discovered. We had not been able to bring down all our equipment from Camp Two, so some porters under the charge of Kurz went up to fetch it. Schneider and Duvanel, meanwhile, descended to the Base Camp, the former in order to make a new track up the glacier to our new Camp, the latter to develop some ciné film. I was left in charge of the evacuation of the old camp, and took the opportunity of donning a pair of ski, and making short runs on the glacier. The snow was excellent and similar to late Spring Alpine snow.

The new Camp One was pitched in a fine situation. There was a delightful view northwards up the moraine-stacked Jonsong Glacier winding sinuously up towards the little notch of the Jonsong La. The background was dominated by the rocky mass of the Jonsong Peak. Farther to the east, rose a ridge of icy peaks running northwards from Kangchenjunga and the Twins, from which the Tent Peak, 24,089 feet, rose head and shoulders above everything else. It is as aptly named as the Wedge Peak, for its horizontal summit ridge with its small points at either end resembles a tent, the ridge of which sags between its supporting poles.

Some useful stores arrived from the Base Camp that day,

among them being synthetic rubber ground sheets for the tents. Though light and spongy, and weighing but a pound or so each, the difference they made to our comfort was amazing, and we were able to sleep then and afterwards far more warmly and comfortably than we would have done otherwise, insulated as we were from the snow. There is no question that they are far superior to any ground sheet, and form an item of equipment that no future Himalayan expedition can afford to leave out, for they induce the sleep which is so essential if climbers are to keep fit.

Relieved by the thought that we were tolerably safe from avalanches, we slept well that night. It would have been wise to have started early the next morning while the snow was still hard from the overnight frost, but we did not get away until the sun had thawed its crust sufficiently to let it break beneath our weight. The obvious route up the Western Tributary Glacier was a trough between the glacier and the rock ridge forming its northern containing wall. The trough was snow-filled for most of its distance, except for one section where a scree slope interposed. These troughs, which form such a convenient line of least resistance up the glaciers of this district are perhaps the only thing vouchsafed by Kangchenjunga which seems to have been intended for the benefit of the long suffering mountaineer.

Wieland and I, with some porters, were the first to set off. Hoerlin, Kurz, and some more porters were to follow, but at the last moment Kurz, who was again not feeling well, decided to return to the Base Camp.

The snow in the trough was in the worst possible

condition. We floundered waist deep into holes between concealed snow covered boulders, and wallowed in hollows where the snow was soft and watery. An hour passed ; we had made but little progress. I suggested to Wieland that we should leave the trough in favour of the ice-fall of the glacier. In making this suggestion I was actuated by the fact that at one place the trough seemed likely to be swept by falling stones from the cliffs above. Hoerlin, however, was of a different mind ; he would stick to the trough. As things transpired, he was right ; the danger was more apparent than real.

Ascending the ice-fall was fatiguing work on account of the soft snow. Snow-shoes eased the porters' labours to some extent, but there were not enough pairs to go round. Considering how broken was the ice, it was remarkable how few crevasses there were, but these few were dangerous ones, subtly concealed. We toiled up and down over hummocks, or threaded our way between pinnacles. The devil of doubt began to gnaw at our hearts ; would we be able to get through the ice-fall ? The sun beat down upon us mercilessly, and glacier lassitude sapped the strength of sahib and porter alike. At last we saw a sort of corridor leading from the ice-fall into the upper part of the trough. We could see that the trough was perfectly safe, but had it been dangerous, we should still have preferred it to the sweltering gullies and hollows of the ice-fall, for glacier lassitude tends to undermine the judgment and warp the conscience of the mountaineer.

A crevasse barred the way. We stepped gingerly on to a fragile snow bridge. Icicles were dislodged and went tinkling down into the green depths with a noise like the

banging together of small chandeliers. The corridor stretched ahead ; its smooth, snow floor looked innocuous, but Wieland suddenly disappeared up to his waist in a concealed crevasse : it was merely one of Kangchenjunga's little jokes.

At the top of the trough, where it debouches on to the glacier, above the worst of the ice-fall, there is a short section liable to be swept by ice avalanches from a hanging glacier forming the edge of a snow plateau on the Ramthang Peak. While still within the danger area we were startled by a sudden crash, but all that came down were a few boulders and blocks of ice.

The porters were by now very tired, and they begged us to camp as soon as possible. We promised to do so as soon as we were out of range of ice avalanches. The sun was declining, and evening mists gathering around us as we reached the smooth slopes above the ice-fall, where stretched Hoerlin's straggling track, man's first score on these snow-fields. Here we decided to camp, while Wieland went on with ski to bring down Hoerlin, who had camped some distance further up the glacier.

The evening was strangely still save for an undercurrent of sound, as though the goblins and witches who haunt the cliffs of Kangchenjunga above were murmuring at our coming. As usual, it was the wind. An upward glance disclosed the snow eddying and swirling from the polished ice cliffs defending the snowy terraces. The sun set calmly. Barely had its last rays faded when they were replaced by silver moon sheen behind the North Ridge of Kangchenjunga. The snow blown off the ridge by the wind was illumined from behind, and Kangchenjunga

took to itself a glowing aureole of light. Imperceptibly the upper snowslopes were resolved from the darkness ; ghost-like, unreal, they shimmered far above the world. Mindless of the cold, we stood outside our tents entranced by the glorious spectacle. At long last the laggardly moon peered over the ridge in a shy, self deprecating sort of way. It seemed to wither and shrivel as it mounted into the frosty sky and its radiance, at first soft and wan, became a hard, cold electric blue. Details stood forth as clearly as in daylight. Only the shadows were black, and in these lurked the darkness of a pit.

The cold gripped us. We crawled into our tents, and with numbed fingers laced-to the flaps. As Sir Leslie Stephen wrote : " Bodily fatigue and an appreciation of natural scenery are simply incompatible." He might have added cold and discomfort.

The sun reached us early the next morning, and we were off betimes. Our first business was to move camp farther up the glacier to a site that would form a convenient upper base for operations against the North-west Ridge. As we marched up the glacier we were able to examine the latter. First impressions are not always accurate and it is never easy to assess the difficulties of a mountainside or ridge at their true worth. As that great mountaineer, Captain J. P. Farrar used to remark : " You can never tell what rocks are like until you have rubbed your nose against them." Yet, even bearing these things in mind, no ridge I have ever examined affected me with the same feeling of utter and complete hopelessness as that of the North-west Ridge of Kangchenjunga. Picture a ridge rising 4,000 feet. Thin, trim and whittle down its edges

until they are as keen as a Gurkha's *kukri* ; then hack deep gaps into these edges and perch rocky towers hundreds of feet high on them. Armour every smooth bit with ice, and mask every ledge with snow, and you will perhaps obtain a faint glimmering of an idea of the North-west Ridge of Kangchenjunga. The ridge attempted by the Munich party is formidable, but it cannot compare to the North-west Ridge. Ice pinnacles alone had to be surmounted on the former ; spiky rock pinnacles bar the way on the latter, and between these are some of those extraordinary ice ridges peculiar to the Himalayas. In appearance and sensationalism they are comparable to those on the Wedge Peak. There are the same tottering masses, the same biscuit-like flakes through which the sun gleams, the same extravagant forms, hacked and torn by the wind, lurching and tottering at the behest of gravity, and the same ice flutings to emphasise by their graceful lines the appalling steepness of the slopes they decorate. If we had been forced to attack the ridge from its base, I think we would have relinquished any idea of attempting it at the outset, for the lowest rock towers are hopeless from a climbing point of view. It looked possible, however, to gain the crest of the ridge above these initial pinnacles, by a steep snow-filled couloir about 600 feet high, leading upwards from the glacier to one of the gaps in the crest of the ridge.

Camp was pitched on the glacier, and leaving the porters to make it comfortable we set off to climb the couloir. The lower half was simple ; then the angle steepened. It was not difficult, but care had to be taken that the footsteps kicked in the floury snow that masked rock slabs and ice did

THE NORTH-WEST RIDGE OF KANGCHENJUNGA

not collapse. The last hundred feet were very steep. The angle must have exceeded 60 degrees, but we were comforted by the thought that we could fix a rope to facilitate descent. A small cornice leaned over the summit. The leader, Hoerlin, hacked and flogged it down, and squirmed through and over to the gap, Wieland and I following one by one. The ascent had taken only forty-five minutes, indicating that we had become well acclimatised to altitude.

My first impression was probably somewhat similar to that experienced by a house-breaker, not a burglar, but one of those phlegmatic gentlemen who stand on the dizzy edges of aged and tottering walls knocking bricks off into space with a pick-axe. But surely no house-breaker has ever stood on top of such an unstable wall as we found ourselves on. A modern £25 down and balance in rent villa could scarcely be more "jerrybuilt" than the place on which we stood. On either side of us the rocks were piled in loose masses needing but a touch to send them crashing down on either side of the ridge below us. On the opposite side of the ridge to that which we had ascended loose yellowish precipices dropped to the head of the Ramthang Glacier. From our gap it appeared possible to descend to the glacier down another steep gully, scarred with falling débris. Such a descent would, however, involve unavoidable dangers. And far above this scene of perpetual decay rose the great ice slopes and ice walls of Kangchenjunga.

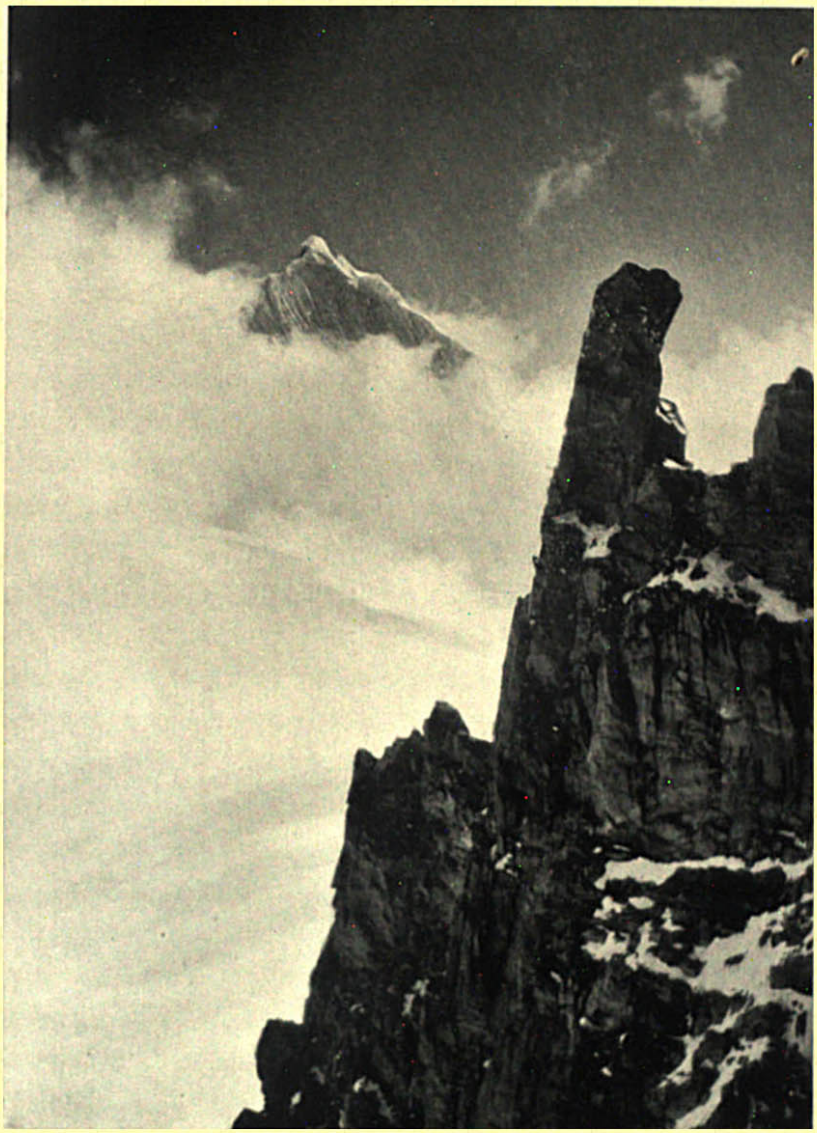
Is there any hope of ascending Kangchenjunga from the Ramthang Glacier? The answer must be, no, unless the climber is prepared to take his life, *and* the lives of

his porters, in his hand. Like the face above the Kangchenjunga Glacier, that above the Ramthang Glacier is defended by enormous walls of ice running across the mountainside. At one point only is there any hope of climbing the *lowest* of these ice walls, and this point is also liable to be swept at any moment by ice avalanches from another and tottering ice wall above. Kangchenjunga was not built for the mountaineer.

Leaving rucksacks and spare rope, we commenced to climb along the unstable ridge. Almost immediately, we were forced off the crest to avoid a decrepit rocky tower. A traverse had to be made on the southern side of the ridge over steep, loose rocks, here and there treacherously covered in snow. It was a place not so much difficult as dangerous. There was not a reliable rock round which a rope could be placed to secure the party, and had a slip occurred, it would in all probability have been attended by the worst results.

From the traverse, an upward ascent brought us into the mouth of a loose gully, the head of which consisted of slippery slabs disagreeably covered by a few inches of unstable scree.

It is curious how on any climb the mental equilibrium of the mountaineer is liable to be upset by bad rock. Difficulty is one thing, danger another. The nerve-stressed mountaineer needing a safety valve for his feelings frequently finds an outlet for them in forceful language. I make no excuses, therefore, for certain improper remarks when clambering up these rocks. I cannot remember what Hoerlin and Wieland said, I had not yet learned the English translation of the German epithets that they held



UNKNOWN PEAK SEEN FROM NORTH-WEST RIDGE

in reserve for such occasions, but once, Hoerlin turned and remarked to me in perfect English, "These rocks are * * * !" sentiments which, happily, I was able to return with interest.

The principal advantage of taking photographs on a mountain is that the mountaineer is thus enabled to stop at frequent intervals and recover his breath. That is why most elderly mountaineers carry cameras. Taking a photograph is a much more convincing excuse for a halt than a boot-lace or braces that need adjusting. All those liable to be touched in the wind should take a camera. With what the reader will no doubt consider admirable foresight, I had brought up my camera with me, and not left it at the gap. I was not blown, but the ridge beyond the top of the little gully appeared so uninviting that I decided to stop there and photograph Hoerlin and Wieland doing it.

Seated in a sheltered place, with the sun glancing warmly down upon me, I was able to appreciate the situation to the full. For a short distance the ridge appeared possible, and although extremely loose, not excessively difficult. But beyond the next tower it was very different. It rose abruptly in a huge pinnacle, quite three hundred feet high, and above this pinnacle, connecting it to the next pinnacle, was the first of those appalling ice ridges. As I sat there I tried to think of an Alpine ridge comparable to it, but I could think of none. The Pétéret, the Brenva, the East Ridge of the Jungfrau, none would fit.

How were porters to be got up? Even supposing ropes were to be fixed the whole way up the smooth slabs of the first great pinnacle, they would not be able to climb with anything but a light load ; also we had lost so much rope

in the avalanche that we certainly had not enough to spare for even this first pinnacle. There was, however, no necessity for experiencing renewed pessimism. What we were now seeing simply confirmed the opinion that some of us had formed when gazing from the glacier below.

Hoerlin and Wieland were moving slowly and carefully, but even so they could not avoid dislodging many rocks which thundered down the precipices of the Ramthang Glacier. They turned a corner, and disappeared from view, but presently I saw them on the top of another minor pinnacle. There they remained, and I conjectured that they could not advance farther.

The usual mists gathered, but without threatening anything beyond desultory snow flurries. Occasionally, they rolled aside to disclose a beautiful snow mountain, unknown and unnamed in a south-westerly direction, apparently on the ridge separating the Yalung and Ramthang glaciers. This peak was in shape something like the Ober Gabelhorn, and possessed the same sweeping lines as the graceful Zermatt peak. Jannu should have been visible beyond, but mists obscured it. Almost immediately beneath us was the camp we had just established. We seemed to be looking almost vertically down upon it so steep were the precipices below. It seemed that a jump would have landed us on our tents. Above the camp, the Western Tributary Glacier swept up serenely to the col separating the Ramthang Peak from the first rock towers of the ridge we were on. The Ramthang Peak itself was playing hide-and-seek in a fitful mist but what was visible of it reminded me forcibly of the Mönch seen from the Jungfrau Glacier. There were

the same graceful lines and flowing yet defiant massiveness.

It was late when we returned to camp, where we found Professor Dyhrenfurth, Schneider and Duvanel, who had come up that day from Camp One. I fear none of us were particularly optimistic over the day's work, and it was refreshing to find that Professor Dyhrenfurth did not agree with an opinion that the ridge was hopelessly inaccessible and considered that we should continue with the attack towards the terrace above.

For once, the afternoon clouds, instead of thickening for a snowstorm, dissolved. The evening was a calm and beautiful one, sky and world were unsullied by a single speck of cloud, a profound silence brooded over the sanctuaries of the snows, and only an occasional streamer of wind-blown snow sallied into space from the upper reaches of Kangchenjunga. Slowly night's floods filled the valleys, and the peaks became steeped in gaudy hues, like waxen deities covering their countenances with rouge and lipstick. Imperceptibly, the aerial pageantry died, but its riot of colourings was superseded by an afterglow which released the peaks from night's bonds for a few instants revealing them as cold statues of purest alabaster against a sky of deepest indigo. It was of such a day's end that Mr. G. Winthrop Young once wrote :

When in the hour of mountain peace,
The tumult and the passion cease,
As the red sunfloods sink,
And the pale lords of sovereign height,
Watch the cold armies of the night
Mustering their first assault.

Who would suspect evil to lurk in such a sunset? Yet, somehow, its superlative colourings put me in mind of a sunset I had once watched from a tiny ledge 12,000 feet up on the south face of Mont Maudit. *That* had been a sunset preceeding a heavy snowstorm in which retreat had been no easy matter.

I awoke some hours later to hear the pattering of snow on my tent. In the quietude it sounded like the light tread of fairy feet. Presently, I became aware of a faint undercurrent of sound like the far off throb of a train down some pastoral valley. The train approached, its distant murmurings rising gradually to a booming crescendo of sound. A gust of wind struck the tent, hurling the snowflakes against it with rude fierce spatterings. The gust passed, but soon came another and stronger gust. In a few minutes the blizzard burst, furiously sweeping upon our encampment. I snuggled more closely into my sleeping bag, for strong though the tent fabric was, it was not entirely proof against this bitter onslaught at a height of 20,000 feet. We had thought to be sheltered by the North-west Ridge, but it afforded no protection, for the wind seemed to pour over it like a cataract, and descend almost vertically upon the camp.

The gusts grew stronger, they wailed and shrilled, rising to a roaring sort of boom like an express train racing through a tunnel. I could feel the tent floor rise as though malicious wind devils were undermining it with the object of my abode flying upwards into space. The wind dug viciously at the sides, or strove with strong fingers to tear apart the flaps, and burst the tent asunder. I prayed that Nemu had driven the pegs firmly and deeply into the snow,

and then I recollected that the guy ropes were pitifully thin, no thicker than a sashline. There seemed every possibility of the tent carrying away ; if it did, there would be little fun in being overtaken by such a disaster clad only in underclothes, so I struggled out of my sleeping bag, pulled on my climbing clothes, and packed my rucksack with some necessaries.

The storm had now reached a pitch of intensity I had never before experienced when camping, and the night was filled with thunderous volleyings. Sometimes the wind would sink to a mysterious calm, during which it was possible to hear the storm snarling and worrying on the North-west Ridge as a preliminary before gathering its forces for a fresh charge on the camp. It was during one of these temporary lulls that I heard a sort of wailing outside, a wailing more human than storm-like. Peering through the flaps, I could just perceive a figure crawling through the snow. It approached my tent. In the light of my electric torch I saw the white, frightened face of Nagpa, the cook.[1] " Sahib ! Sahib ! " he cried, " Tent go ! Tent go ! " Opening the flaps wider, I glanced out, the porters' tent was intact ; the cook had merely lost his head. I was unwilling to have him for a bedfellow, and told him to go back. The cook, however, was completely demoralised, and shielding his face from the blast, he crawled down the line of tents with his constant wailing of " Sahib ! Sahib ! Tent go ! Tent go ! " Eventually, he found sanctuary with Wieland and Schneider, but as they explained later, they took him in not for love or charity, but simply as additional ballast for their own tent ! It

[1] Tencheddar had been left at the Base Camp.

was the solitary untoward incident of the storm. Well and truly had our tents been pitched.

An hour or two later the wind began to subside, and ere dawn it withdrew with some last mutters and snarls, leaving a clean sky picked out with stars against which the windy banners of Kangchenjunga softly lit by moonlight streamed in ghostly rivalry to the starry constellations.

We awoke to a warm sun glancing benevolently over the Twins. The North-west Ridge was plastered with new snow, and our steps in the couloir had been obliterated. As there was a possibility of avalanches occurring, we decided not to renew the attempt that day, and devoted the morning to building a wall of snow blocks on the windward side of the camp. Hoerlin was not feeling well ; somehow he had contracted a severe chill. Duvanel was also by no means fit, and only his devotion to his cinematographic duties had torn him away from the Base Camp.

At the head of the glacier on the ridge separating the Ramthang Peak from the North-west Ridge of Kangchenjunga is a small point about 20,800 feet high. This Wieland climbed by himself, using ski most of the way, and returned reporting that he had had a splendid view of the Ramthang Glacier and the North-west Ridge. It was decided, therefore, that the whole party should ascend to this point the following day, and carefully examine the latter to see whether it was worth while persisting in the attempt to climb it.

The following morning, May 15, dawned fine. Unfortunately, Hoerlin was so ill that there was no option but for him to return to the Base Camp. This was a serious loss

to the climbing party ; at the same time, the prospect of getting any distance up the North-west Ridge was so utterly hopeless that it did not really matter.

After the experiences of the past fortnight, it was with something more than relief that we set out to climb something that could be climbed. It has been said that on Everest the climbing party were so heartily "fed up" with the mountain, its weather, and the effects of altitude that their sole wish was to get the job over and done with, no matter who did it. Our attitude towards Kangchenjunga was the same. I do not think there was one of us who was not sick to death of work on the mountain. At exactly what height mountaineering ceases to be pleasurable is not easily defined, the matter is rather one of individual temperament, but I do not think there is one mountaineer who has climbed on Everest or Kangchenjunga who can honestly say that he enjoyed the work. Achievement may be good for the soul, but it is not necessarily enjoyable. It was a relief to turn away from our exacting opponent for a day and *enjoy* ourselves.

The 20,800 feet point is easily reached along the ridge connecting it to the Ramthang Peak, but from sheer exuberance we chose to ascend by a little rock face rising from the glacier. We raced each other up by various routes, and subsided puffing and blowing on the summit. What a summit it is—one of the most extraordinary that I have ever stood upon. From the Western Tributary Glacier it appears a mere knob, an insignificant excrescence, but had we stood on the Ramthang Glacier we should have seen an "impossible" peak. Seldom have I gazed down such abysmal precipices as those falling to

the Ramthang Glacier. They were as long as the south-eastern face of the Finsteraahorn, and as steep as the Dolomite wall of the Winklerthurm. The seamed and wrinkled surface of the Ramthang Glacier was spread out beneath us like a relief map, and we gazed down upon it like pilots from the nose of a bombing aeroplane. The upper portion of the Ramthang Glacier rises very steeply in an almost continous ice-fall. From the col we had reached in the North-west Ridge we had been separated by but a few hundred feet from it, but the drop from Point 20,800 must be at least 4,000 feet, and as this point is separated from the col by only about a mile, the inclination of the glacier is a steep one.

At its extreme head the Ramthang Glacier forms a snowy plain beneath the west face of the Kangbachen summit of Kangchenjunga. This face resembles closely the north face above the Kangchenjunga Glacier. There are the same impregnable ice walls stretching across it from which ice avalanches fall at least as big as those that fall from the north face. At the southern end of the face, where it abuts against the main West Ridge of Kangchenjunga, which separates the head of the Ramthang Glacier from the Yalung Glacier, there appeared to be a remote possibility of ascending between the ice walls and gaining the West Ridge. But, like the route we had already tried to the North Ridge, the possibility of success was more than counterbalanced by the possibility of annihilation, for the whole of the route was liable to be swept at any moment by ice avalanches. Even if the West Ridge was gained, what then? At the best it could only lead to the Kang-bachen summit. To traverse the ridge between the

THE SUMMIT OF POINT, 20,800 FEET

Kangbachen summit and the highest summit, over the third highest summit, would be beyond the powers of any party. Therefore, it can be said without hesitation that Kangchenjunga is definitely unassailable from the Ramthang Glacier.

But if this side of Kangchenjunga is disappointing as regards its climbing potentialities it is hardly so otherwise. Great tiers of ice, gleaming steeps, and terrific red granite precipices combine to form a mountain face of a magnificence and grandeur worthy of the high summits it defends.

We had looked upon the last portion of Kangchenjunga to be properly seen by man, and what we had seen but confirmed out opinion that there are no group of mountain tops defended so impregnably as the " Five Treasures of the Snows." We tore our eyes away from those terrible ice walls and glanced for relief along the winding trench down which flows the Ramthang Glacier, and up over the sea of peaks to the west. Woolly clouds were rising from the valleys and draping themselves about the shoulders of the peaks. Once the cloudy waves rolled back ; in a distant trough a great peak rose in noble solitude above the world. Someone said, " Everest." Then the mists closed in, and we saw it no more.

We turned to the North-west Ridge. Our view of it was an end-on one, but if it was impossible to gauge its length, its height and difficulty were apparent. Below us on the glacier was the camp, a mere smudge on the immaculate expanse of snow. The terrace we must gain was 4,000 feet higher. The North-west Ridge was the connecting link. I have already described its knife-like edges of ice and its

rocky towers. Seen thus, end on, they were jumbled one against the other, and one gained but little idea of the real length of the ridge. Perhaps it was this that deceived Professor Dyhrenfurth into deciding to continue with the attack. To those used only to Alpine scale, it is easy to be misled by the length of these Himalayan ridges. But if the length was not apparent, the difficulties were, and one could not but wonder how porters were to be got up, and camps established along that tremendous crest. There was no answer to this question. Even supposing the upper ice wall, against which the ridge abutted, to be climbed, and the terrace gained, what next? There was no possibility whatever of reaching any of Kangchenjunga's summits. The terrace did not extend right across the mountain to the North Ridge, there was a cut-off of impassable precipices. At the best, we could only hope to reach the Kangbachen summit, and that was separated from the terrace by 1,500 feet at least of formidable granite precipices. The most we could do was to climb as high as possible, perhaps even as high as the Bavarians, but what was the practical use of that? I fear my companions thought me a pessimist, but what else could one be taking everything into consideration? Anyway, the decision was made. We were to go on. This settled, we sat and lazed two or three hours away in the warm sun, happy hours, but trammelled by the thought of the morrow. The evening mists saw us jogging down the glacier to the camp.

The party that left the next morning consisted of Professor Dyhrenfurth, Schneider, Wieland and myself, with two porters, Lewa and Nima, the last named not to be confused with Nemu, my servant, both experienced

Everest men. The couloir was in bad condition, and steps had to be kicked or cut through an upper layer of powdery snow a foot deep. The porters were not happy ; neither of them had experienced similar climbing before. Lewa stuck gamely to the task, but Nima was constantly slipping from his steps. I was next to him on the rope, and had several times to hold him. The ridge itself was also in a worse condition than it was during our reconnaissance.

We climbed on two ropes, Schneider, Wieland, and Lewa on the first, and Professor Dyhrenfurth, Nima, and myself on the second. The duty of the second party was to drive in pitons and fix ropes to the rocks. Nima caused us some anxious moments. It made one shudder to see the way he climbed on the loose rocks, hauling himself up on his hands without testing loose holds. So poor a show did he put up that we decided to leave him on a broad and safe part of the ridge, a decision that relieved him as much as it did us. Lewa was, however, an excellent rock climber, and followed Schneider and Wieland without difficulty to the top of the pinnacle, which had been the farthest point reached during the reconnaissance.

From the top of the pinnacle a vertical and holdless slice of granite drops to a gap. The climber must descend the granite slice on the rope, and alight on a sharp edge of snow. A piton was driven into a crack on the pinnacle, and a double rope fixed to it. Schneider and Wieland then descended hand over hand down the fixed rope, while being held at the same time from above on another rope by the remainder of the party. It was the sort of place fiction writers would make much of. Their descriptions would bristle with " unfathomable abysses," " like a fly on a

wall," "beetling precipices," and so forth. The mountaineering guide-book writer would, however, describe it simply as "a twenty feet absail"[1] and as a grudging compliment to the place add "sensational." In this case, however, the fiction writer would convey a better picture to the mind of even the most sophisticated reader than the guide-book writer. To add to the sensationalism might be added the fact that the cracked and disintegrating pinnacle on which we stood exhibited a distinct tremor if rudely handled. I distinctly remember thinking, a trifle morosely, what a grand finale it would make to the expedition if the thing collapsed, and toppled into the "unfathomable abyss" with its human load.

As Wieland swung over the edge, the dirty and battered topi he was accustomed to affect looked strangely incongruous in these surroundings of rock, snow and ice, and, as he bumped and rasped down the rough granite, I half hoped that it would be knocked from his head and go spinning down the precipices, arriving at the camp below a pulped and shapeless mass. No such diversion occurred, and soon he had joined Schneider in the gap on the snow ridge.

Professor Dyhrenfurth and I remained on the pinnacle for an hour or two. We were privileged in witnessing one of the finest feats of climbing we had ever seen. Immediately above the gap rose a semi-detached mass of rock; beyond was another small gap, above which rose the great pinnacle in three hundred feet of slabs set at an angle not far removed from the vertical. Ice in the interstices of these slabs had forced them apart in many places and dangerously

[1] A German term for double roping.

unstable flakes rested against the face. Every ledge was loaded with snow or ice. On an Alpine climb of exceptional severity the ascent of this pinnacle would be a formidable proposition ; at 21,000 feet it bordered on the impossible.

Wieland ensconced himself on top of the semi-detached mass, and Schneider descended, without much difficulty, into the secondary gap, and began the ascent of the slabs. Methodically he worked his way upwards. The exertion of hard rock climbing at such an altitude was obviously severe, and after each upward heave he was forced to halt and rest. At length he reached a small stance, a tiny triangular recess, where Wieland joined him. Above this rose a slanting crack formed by the edge of a projecting flake the upper part of which bulged out unpleasantly. It was not a place to linger over, and Schneider did not linger. A foot scrape on the wall, a hand wedged in the crack, a quick upward caterpillar-like movement with nought but tiny hand holds to prevent a backward topple, and the hardest part had been accomplished. In the silence, unbroken save by an occasional whisper of wind, I could hear the sibilant sucking in of breath by sorely stressed lungs. A few feet more of difficult, but not such exacting climbing brought him to a sloping shelf. Wieland followed, and although burdened by both ice-axes and a rucksack, he came up without relying on the rope.

So far, so good. For a few feet the work was easier ; then the slopes steepened once more. In places they were dangerously ice glazed, and their sloping icy shelves were masked by snow. Ice-axes were called into play to clear holds. Now and again loose flakes of rock were dislodged.

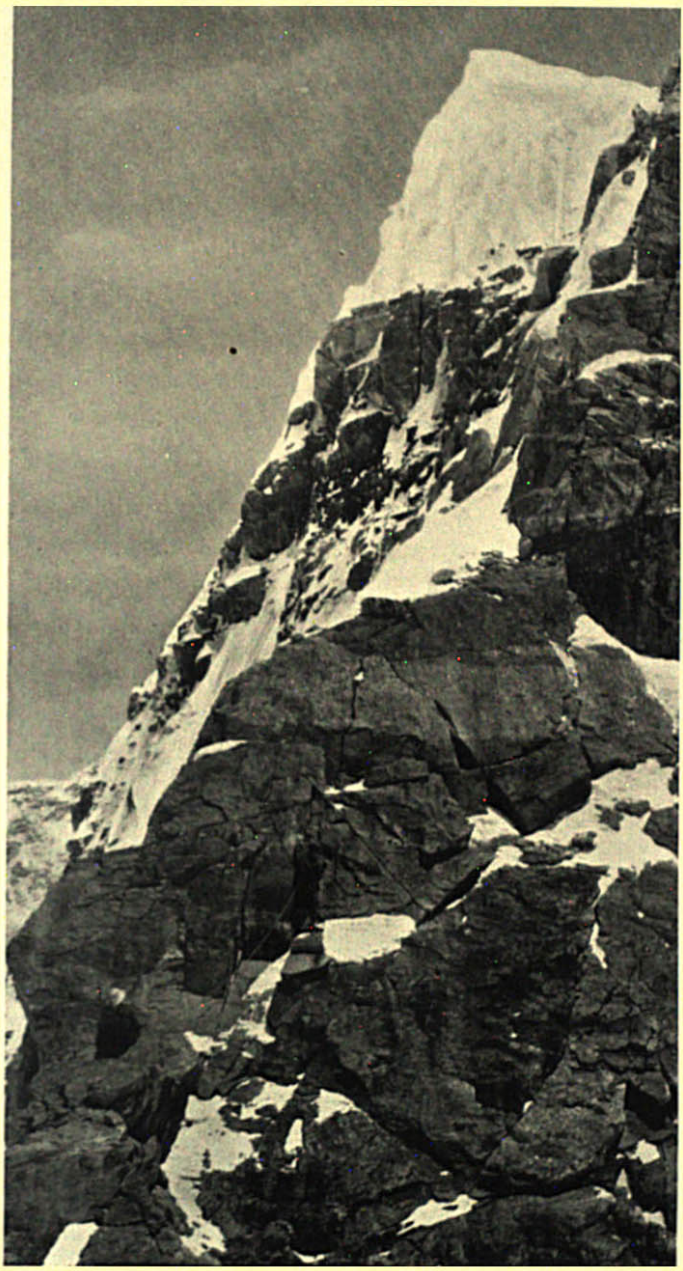
Hurtling madly down the cliffs towards the Ramthang Glacier, they loosed other rocks until a perfect torrent of crags set the echoes thundering from the cliffs of Kangchenjunga.

Two hours work, two hundred feet of ascent, such was the climbing on the great pinnacle. Professor Dyhrenfurth and I watched the struggle with intense interest. It was, probably, the finest piece of rock climbing ever done at such an altitude. We forgot for the moment that the real problem was not the ascent of the ridge by the Europeans but the establishing of camps and the getting up of porters over this gaunt, inhospitable backbone of rock and ice.

The weather restored pessimism, grey mists came flying up from the west, a chill wind sobbed over the ridge, driving before it small moths of snow. Schneider and Wieland were out of sight now. Occasionally we could hear their voices, whilst an occasional stone crashed out news of their advance. We rose, stretched our cramped limbs, tied on Lewa, and started to descend.

We had collected Nima but were still above the col when we were startled by an enormous roar. Millions of tons of ice had broken away from the ice wall and were thundering down to the Ramthang Glacier. Instantly, the whole upper basin of the glacier was filled with a writhing hurricane of snow. Whirling up at us, it enveloped us in a blizzard, that whitened and sheeted our clothes in snow. The sky was darkened ; the whole district seemed to be filled with the wind-blown snow dislodged by this monstrous avalanche.

Such an avalanche, had it occurred in the Alps would command widespread attention, newspapers would refer



GRIM WORK ON THE NORTH-WEST RIDGE : SCHNEIDER AND WIELAND ON THE GREAT PINNACLE

to it as a " Cataclysm of Nature," and questions would be asked in the Swiss Parliament about it. But on Kangchenjunga, such avalanches are not the exception, but the rule—almost an everyday occurrence in their season.

Kangchenjunga is by no means the only Himalayan peak to discharge avalanches of such magnitude, but it is probably safe to say that there is no other Himalayan peak that discharges them with such frequency. This is due, of course, to its great snowfall, the quick downward movement of its glaciers.[1] A good instance of the size of a Himalayan avalanche is that which occurred during the late A. F. Mummery's attempt on Nanga Parbat. The party had bivouacked on a rock rib which projected some five hundred feet from the mountainside, but when they returned to their bivouac site after an unsuccessful attempt on the mountain, they found that their gear had been swept away by an ice avalanche. The avalanche had fallen diagonally and taken the five hundred feet rib in its stride ! The size and destructive power of Himalayan avalanches is the first thing that should be studied when climbing in the Himalayas. A purely Alpine-trained mountaineer finds it difficult to appreciate the scale on which such avalanches occur. Mummery paid the penalty of not realising this when he made his final and disastrous attempt on Nanga Parbat. No trace of him and his two Gurkha followers was ever discovered. We narrowly missed paying the same penalty too, and had we been wiped out during our attempt to reach the North Ridge of Kangchenjunga, we should have received our just deserts.

[1] See Appendix : " Glaciology : Snow Conditions and Avalanches."

It must be remembered that Himalayan ice avalanches *habitually* sweep the whole breadth of glaciers. To illustrate this I can but add that were the peaks in the vicinity of the well-known Concordia Hut in the Bernese Oberland enlarged to Himalayan scale, the mountaineer staying at the hut would not be safe from ice avalanches falling from the peaks on the opposite side of the Aletsch Glacier.

It was a relief to leave the rotten rocks, and to stand once more in the col ; and it was pleasant to escape from the cutting wind, and seizing the fixed rope that hung down the steep upper part of the couloir step blithely down the capacious ladder of holds towards the camp.

We glissaded down the lower part of the couloir, and for the first time that day Nima's worried expression gave place to a broad grin of delight. The porters are children at heart, and they have all the enthusiasm for a glissade down snow that a child has for a toboggan. For the benefit of the uninitiated I should explain that there are two methods of glissading. One is to stand upright, and the other is to sit down. The former is best employed on hard snow, the latter on soft snow. A certain degree of expertness is necessary for the stand-up glissade. Many commence in elegant style. With ever increasing speed, they slide down the slope. Presently, as the speed becomes faster and faster, they become flustered. From stability, they are reduced to instability ; their elegance, their dignified deportment is lost, their balance is upset, they struggle wildly to regain it, then the snow comes up and hits them on the nose. They go head over heels, their ice-axes are snatched from their hands, their hats torn from their heads, their rucksacks wind themselves round their necks, endeavouring to

strangle them, snow is forced down their collars, up their sleeves, and into their pockets and trousers. Over and over they go in a series of somersaults, to subside finally at the bottom where they rise to their feet vowing it was good fun. On this account, the inexpert and less venturesome prefer to glissade sitting.

There is one other variety of glissade worthy of mention, and that is glissading on a rope. This is one degree worse than ski-ing on a rope. What usually happens is this : the leader, without troubling to enquire whether the second man is ready, shoots off with great velocity, despite the agonised cries of the latter. In a moment or two, the rope tightens on the second man who has barely had time to start, snatching him forward on to his head, and squeezing the breath out of him. The jerk arrests the leader, who hurls an uncomplimentary remark over his shoulder at the unfortunate second man, who meanwhile slides, or somersaults pell mell past the leader. Then, before the leader has time to continue, he is in his turn dragged in the wake of the second man. And so it goes on, a vicious cycle, until they have reached the bottom, where they sit side by side in the snow roundly abusing one another.

We reached camp in desultory snow squalls. Mists concealed the North-west Ridge, but now and again they blew aside and we scanned the rocks a little anxiously for signs of Schneider and Wieland. It was not until evening that we saw them descending, mere dots silhouetted against the jagged skyline. Dusk was falling when they returned. They reported immense difficulties, difficulties both of rocks and ice. Short of roping the great tower up from top to bottom, there was no possibility of getting the

porters up it, and even with ropes, it would most likely prove impossible for laden men. The prospect of further advance beyond the tower was doubtful in the extreme. The whole crest of the first knife-like ice ridge would have to be hacked away before a passage could be won. At the end of this ridge, there was another tower, not so high as the first, but more difficult, in fact, probably impassable. Its summit was capped by a boss of ice which flowed down its sides like icing on a cake. There was no avoiding this tower, for the precipices on either side were sheer and offered no hope of a traverse. Above this tower, other ice ridges rose, a whole series of them, up to the terrace. Nowhere, said Schneider, was there a place on which a camp might be pitched. There were not even any ice pinnacles of a type suitable for bivouac caves. And the weather? What would be the position of a party caught high up on this great ridge in bad weather or high winds? The storm on the glacier three nights previously had been bad enough, but what would it have been like on the ridge? Retreat would be impossible. It would probably mean two weeks hard work to reach the terrace, even supposing camps could be established, and porters brought up, and by then the monsoon would most likely have broken. Each of these facts taken separately was sufficiently weighty to militate against any attempt; accumulatively, they were overwhelming.

There was no alternative but to abandon the project, and the following day Wieland and I accomplished the dreary task of collecting and bringing down the fixed ropes. Kangchenjunga had beaten us, beaten us not by bad weather, so much as by sheer difficulty. We had

examined every portion of the faces above the Kangchenjunga and Ramthang glaciers. Nowhere was there a chink in the armour of the giant ; nowhere was there a route at which the mountaineer might look and say, " Well, it *might* go." Others sceptical as to the truth of these assertions may follow in our footsteps, but they too will return disappointed, and like us they will lie awake at nights and tremble, even as the ground trembles, at the roar of the great ice avalanches that seek their destruction, and like us, their hope and optimism will be ruthlessly crushed beneath the icy heel of Kangchenjunga.