CHAPTER XIV

THE RAMTHANG PEAK ON SKI AND FOOT

I have already had occasion to mention the beautiful snow and ice summit rising from the head of the Western Tributary of the Kangchenjunga Glacier. This peak, which is about 23,000 feet high, had inspired the appellation of Madonna Peak, for its sweeping robes of snow and ice suggest an unapproachable virginity, but Professor Dyhrenfurth had, in the interests of topography, subsequently rechristened it Ramthang Peak in deference to the Ramthang Glacier which is fed by its southern snow-slopes.

On May 18, the day after our decisive and final defeat on the North-west ridge of Kangchenjunga, we decided to push camp as far as possible up the mountain and so bring the summit within reasonable reach. With this end in view, it was agreed that Schneider and I should start before the main body of the expedition, and explore the route, with a view to ascertaining whether it was possible to establish a camp on a snowy shoulder at the foot of the eastern ridge of the peak which we hoped to follow to the top.

I was the first to leave, and soon after the sun had struck the camp strapped on ski and started alone up the glacier, which in its upper portion is practically devoid of crevasses and perfectly safe for a solitary ski runner.

The morning was a lovely one ; scarcely a zephyr of wind disturbed the delicate ice crystals formed by a sharp

overnight's frost on the surface of the glacier ; a host of hoary peaks lifted silvered heads into a sky of gentian blue. Slowly the sun flooded over the snow-fields, his slanting rays revealing the most delicate folds and unsuspected wrinkles and undulations on the time-worn countenances of the peaks. I almost felt myself to be the invader of some moonscape, fantastic, unreal and beautiful.

A load of care had been lifted from my mind by the abandonment of the attempt on the North-west ridge. Now at last we were to attempt something that offered some prospect of success. Even my ski seemed to hiss joyfully beneath me, like a carefree ostler grooming a horse, and my ski-sticks drove into the crusted snow with a light triumphant plop at every forward lunge.

Impelled by sheer exuberance I climbed quickly, too quickly, for soon my lungs began to labour reminding me that I was not on the slopes of Mürren but 20,000 feet up in the Himalayas. Gladness departed ; what was mere flesh and blood that it should stride about the mountains in this way ?

I halted, and puffed myself into a more sedate frame of mind. Like walking uphill at great altitudes, so with skiing, rhythm. And, once cultivated, an easy rhythm. Despite the heavy hickory boards, I found myslf climbing more steadily, and making height more quickly, than if I had been on foot. Unconsciously, I began to keep my upward lunges in time with the slow beats of an old and sentimental music-hall ditty. I had not heard it, or sung it, for years, yet now, high up on the Ramthang Peak, it jogged through my brain in harmonious time with the forward movements of my ski.

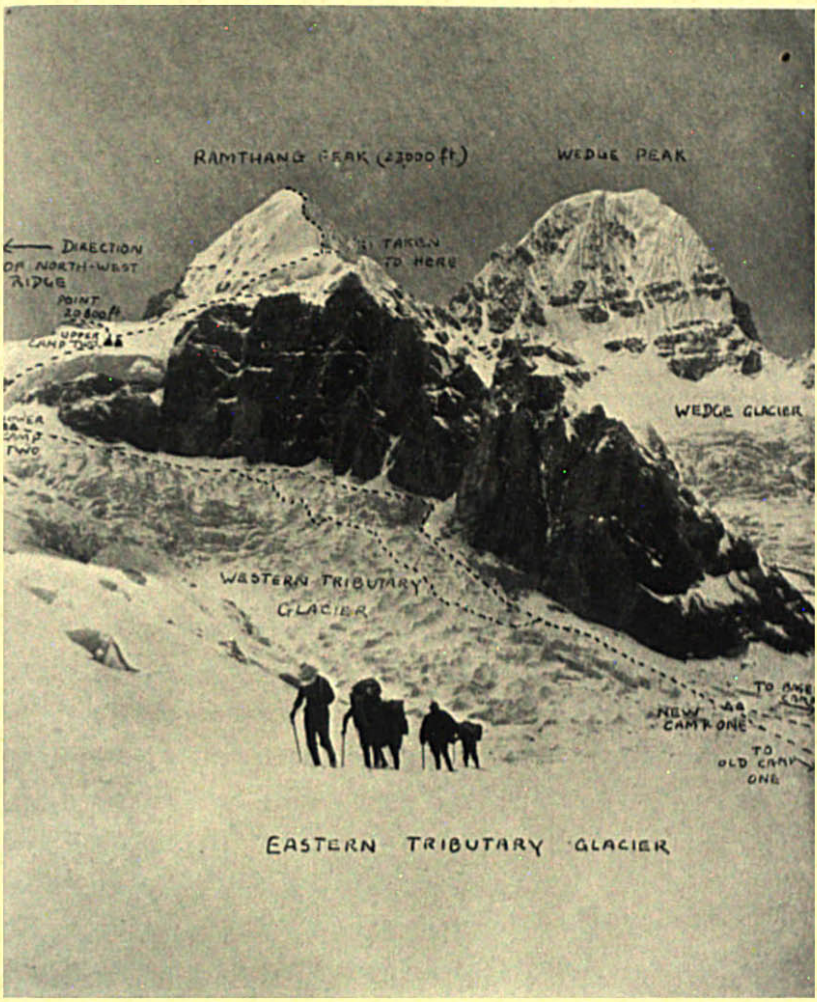
Leaving Point 20,800 feet on my left, I climbed up and round in a wide arc, and began to ascend to the snowy shoulder. The slope I was traversing gradually steepened, and presently, on glancing down, I saw that an ice cliff two or three hundred feet high was below me. For fifty yards, where the snow was resting but a few inches deep on hard ice, a ski jump down the ice cliff was the penalty of slipping, and I advanced cautiously, stamping my ski well in at every step.

The slope eased off, and I found myself on the shoulder. From beneath it had looked almost flat and a good site for a camp ; actually, it was by no means flat and was, moreover, exposed to the full force of the wind. At all events, there was little object in advancing camp thus far, when only half an hour's extra work would be entailed on the morrow if we pitched it as high as possible up the glacier.

Above the shoulder rose an ice slope nearly 1,000 feet high, and forming a cut-off in the eastern ridge of the peak. The ice was too steep for crampons to be effectively used, whilst an evil glitter from its polished blue-black surface suggested a long and hard bout of step cutting.

Schneider joined me. Together we lazed in the sun. The view was an extensive one. The whole of Kangchenjunga's northern precipices were outspread before us. Our gaze swept along their granite façets, with their tiers of icy escarpments that stretched across the face of the mountain like the galleries of some colossal stadium. Now and again avalanches boomed through the still morning air telling of an ever restless and malignant activity.

South-westwards rose Jannu, 25,294 feet high. It would be difficult to conceive a more inaccessible looking mountain.



THE ROUTE TO THE RAMTHANG PEAK

Like many Himalayan peaks it is wedge-like in formation, with two summits set at either end of an almost horizontal ridge. Once gain this ridge and the ascent of either summit should be feasible. But how to gain the ridge? On the side facing us the precipices lifted in one smooth, terrible façade of granite ; on the other side, to judge by photographs, are equally fearsome cliffs. Can either summit be reached directly? The answer is, No. Both ends of the wedge end in hopeless precipices. Such is the problem presented to the mountaineer by Jannu, a rival of the famous Mustagh Tower in the Karakorams, and one of the most appalling rock peaks in the world.

Northwards, was the Jonsong Glacier, its irregular moraine strewn surface looking as though it had been riven by the picks and drills of a million mad navvies. Far up it stretched the ugly moraines, and it was only at its head that the forces of ruin and decay relinquished their grip, and gentle snow slopes stretched upwards to the snowy notch of the Jonsong La. West of the Jonsong La, the Jonsong Peak, 24,344 feet, rises grandly, its massive summit forming the culminating point of the ranges of North-eastern Nepal and North-western Sikkim. On this side, the south-eastern face, it throws down great cliffs friezed like Kangchenjunga with hanging glaciers. Dr. Kellas had, we knew, attempted it from the north-west. Given sufficient time before the arrival of the monsoon, that would be also our line of attack.

Then the range of peaks directly to the north of the Base Camp attracted our attention : fine precipitous rock peaks standing out from torrential glaciers. One of them, with a horizontal roof-like ridge rising to an acute spire

at one end, bore a curious resemblance to a church.

At first we were observant and critical, but as we reclined in the snow, warmed by the sun, mind and muscles relaxed, and the peace of the high places laid soothing hands upon us. Through half closed eyelids I gazed at a world unsubstantial and dreamlike. Once again I seemed to hear music, but this time music solemn and slow, a majestic symphony from the massed orchestras of the hills. Its slow pulsating waves bore me away into space—the music was drowned in a sudden roll of drums. I tried to escape from the insistant din. I could not. It closed in on me, surrounded me. There was a thundering crash. I awoke. My opened eyes were dazzled by the snow glare, but the thunder still smote on my ears—a great avalanche was roaring off Kangchenjunga.

There is no peace to be found on these mountains. Solitude, yes, but peace, no. Every hour the mountaineer is reminded of the destructive forces that are ever at work ceaselessly endeavouring to reduce the grandeurs and beauties of the mountains to the uninspiring uniformity of the plains. To discover the peace that dwells upon hilltops you need go no farther than our Homeland hills. On them, among their rocks and heather, you will be given something that not even the lords of the Himalayas are able to give.

We unclipped our sealskins, thrust them into our rucksacks, and strapping on ski set off down towards the little worm-like caravan of porters who were toiling up the glacier far beneath.

I had barely started when Schneider was half way down to the glacier. He is a splendid ski runner, combining the

dash of the first-class racer with the shrewd judgment of the mountaineer. To him, as with me, ski are something more than wooden boards, and ski-ing something more than a winter sport.

We had reached a height of between 21,000 and 22,000 feet, and I found ski-ing downhill at this height more tiring than ski-ing downhill at Alpine levels. One good point about mountaineering on foot at high altitudes is that it is no more fatiguing to *descend* moderately easy ground than it is in the Alps. The same does not apply to ski-ing. Balancing at low levels is automatic, but at 20,000 feet a conscious effort is required, whilst a swing is distinctly hard work. After a few swings the knees tend to become weak, and balancing more difficult. For a moderate class runner like myself, really to enjoy a long descent, it is best to stop and rest now and then.

The snow was of a delightful quality, hard, but with a loose crystalline surface into which the ski edged well. On such a surface the jerked Christiania was a simple matter. So much for the technique and the drawbacks of ski-ing at high altitudes ; how can I describe the delights ? The swift rush with body tensed and crouched, the song of the wind, the slow procession of the mountains, the fierce exhilaration of pure speed, and far below a little line of laden porters ascending the glacier, halted in amazement at these strange pranks, rushing upwards towards me. As Mr. Arnold Lunn once remarked, " Ski-ing is the finest form of locomotion known to man."

Camp was pitched on the gently sloping glacier under Point 20,800 feet. Unfortunately, Professor Dyhrenfurth, Wieland and Duvanel were not fit, and it looked as if

Schneider and I alone would be able to make the attempt on the morrow. Duvanel was worst ; he had worked very hard on the taking of his film, and had not spared himself. The unfitness of the party was due, partly, to the wrong kind of food, and partly to nerve strain. Owing to transport delays, we had been forced to exist for ten days on food scarcely suited to the peculiar requirements of high altitudes. Now, thanks to Colonel Tobin, Wood Johnson and Hannah, the transport had been reorganised and food cases were arriving every day at the Base Camp. But the harm had been done, stomachs had rebelled, and constitutions had been undermined. Yet, compared to nervous strain, food is of secondary importance. We had escaped annihilation on Kangchenjunga only by a miracle, and during the eighteen days we had been on the mountain we had never felt safe from ice avalanches. At the back of our minds there had been always the feeling that we were only there on sufferance, and did Kangchenjunga choose, it could kill us. However philosophical a man may be, and as regards danger he *does* become philosophical at high altitudes, such mental strain tells on the physique. The period spent on Kangchenjunga was the most nerve racking that I have ever experienced. Wieland and I had been up the whole time, and we were both tired, mentally as well as physically. We were sick of the unvarying glare of snow, and longed to feast and rest our eyes once more on green grass. Schneider alone was brimful of energy, for he is of a type impervious to " nerves," besides being a man of extraordinary physique.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon seated on the snow ridge above the camp between Point 20,800 feet and

the first rock towers of the North-west ridge. Among other dainties that had come up from the Base Camp, were some boxes of fruit jellies, and I lay contentedly in the snow eating them for hours, with the appreciative mechanical regularity of a small boy possessed of a generous, if misguided uncle.

Mists gathered ere evening, their light luminescent filaments serving to enhance the beauty of the peaks. Once again I thought I saw Everest, like a blue jewel resting on cotton-wool clouds.

Towards sundown a chill wind rose, and I was glad to retire to the camp. We had thought it to be protected from the wind, but that capricious element poured over the ridge above and descended on us in a bitterly cold douche. There were fifty degrees of frost as we vainly endeavoured to boil some hot tea over a Meta cooker, and so quickly did the heat radiate from the aluminium cooking pan, that it was impossible to get more than a lukewarm brew.

Among other good things that had arrived were some tins of cranberries. These mixed with condensed milk formed a delicious dish, and Duvanel, who had undertaken the onerous task of cooking, distributed them to us.

We were glad to get into our sleeping bags and warm numbed hands. The wind increased in force during the night, and once I awoke to hear the driven snow lashing my tent like raw-hide whips.

At dawn the wind had not dropped, and the cold was still severe, but, nevertheless, Professor Dyhrenfurth gallantly blew the conventional three blasts on his horn. But for once he blew without effect ; there was no competition

among my companions to " show a leg." A few minutes later I heard him passing down the line of tents endeavouring to rouse their occupants to a sense of duty. Eventually he stood before mine. " Herr Smythe, it is time we started." No answer. Louder : " Herr Smythe, it is time we started." I emitted a lusty snore. A few minutes later the camp was slumbering peacefully again. It was not until eight, by which time the wind had abated and the sun was warm, that we were tempted outside.

By 9 a.m. Schneider and I were away. The wind had dropped completely, and the morning was as perfect as that of the previous day. Following our former tracks, we were soon on the shoulder. There we took off our ski, and made preparations for the final climb.

More as an experiment than anything else I had brought with me the pair of expedition boots that had been supplied to me. These weighed no less than eight and a half pounds the pair, and each boot bristled with over sixty nails. So far during the expedition I had not been able to pluck up enough courage to put them on, except when camping, and I had worn ordinary light Swiss-made climbing boots, which had kept my feet perfectly warm. The expedition boots were designed to guard against frostbite, and their uppers, which came half-way to the knees, were lined thickly with felt, whilst their soles were constructed of layers of rubber, felt and leather. As regards weight, the same remarks might be applied to the climbing suits supplied to the expedition. These again were excellent for use in camp, but were too clumsy and heavy for difficult climbing on a mountain. My own favourite garb consisted of Jaeger combinations and shirts plus several

light Shetland sweaters weighing about two or three ounces each, with a wind-proof jacket on top, a pair of strong tricot breeches, one pair of socks, and one pair of stockings, and as additional protection to the legs, a pair of light and warm Kashmiri puttees that I had got from General Bruce. Two or three light Balaclava helmets on the head afforded ample protection to the ears and neck, whilst in the event of a particularly strong, cold wind, a leather flying helmet could be added. Fleece-lined leather fingerless gloves, are superior to all others.

In addition to the portmanteau-like expedition boots, it was necessary to wear crampons. These weighed about four pounds the pair. Thus, I was carrying a load of twelve and a half pounds on my feet, nearly an additional stone of weight, and I felt something like a cross between a leaden-footed diver, and one rooted to the spot in a nightmare after a heavy dinner. Thus attired, I began to lift my two foot portmanteaux up the snow slopes, with a slow, tread-mill-like action, trying to keep up with Schneider who was wearing ordinary light climbing boots. I felt fortunate in being with Schneider, for he exults in hard work on a mountain, and would, I hoped, make all the steps. If he did, it might be just possible for me to raise myself, plus boots and crampons, to the top of the mountain.

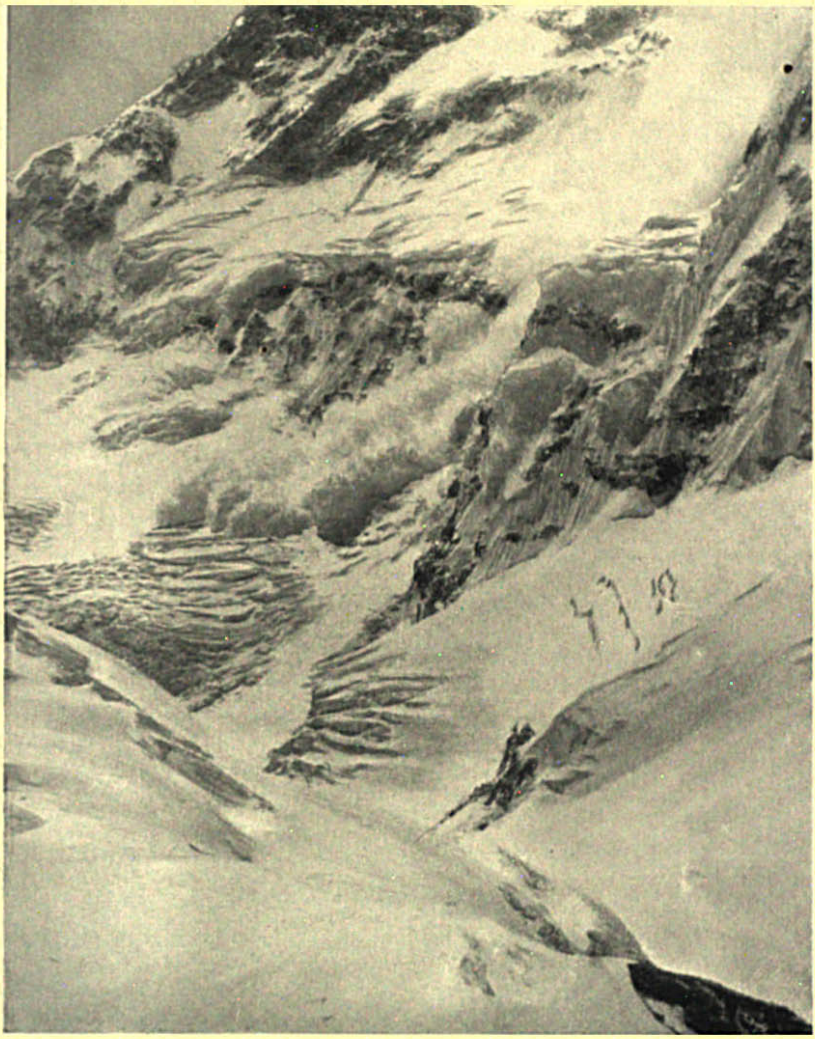
The slope soon steepened, and step cutting became necessary. Schneider went at it with a will, swinging his heavy ice-axe with that graceful yet vigorous style of the born ice-man. The ice was blue-black, polished and hard. Step after step was hewn out. The slope seemed interminable, and it needed a glance backwards down the long ladder of steps to assure us that we had made progress.

Professor Dyhrenfurth, Wieland and Lewa arrived on the shoulder, and sunned themselves, while waiting for the work to be finished. Cutting went steadily on ; the thud, thud, thud of the ice-axe becoming gradually monotonous to the ears. I occupied myself with enlarging the holds.

Suddenly came a mighty roar. We looked round. Huge masses were falling from the edge of the upper terrace of Kangchenjunga. Sweeping downwards with fearful force, a million tons or more of ice poured on to the Eastern Tributary Glacier. Sweeping forwards with lightning speed, the avalanche seemed to leap across the glacier, obliterating our former route between upper and lower Camp Two, and so far as we could see the site of lower Camp Two. The clouds of snow raised by the wind shot cannon-like across the mile-wide glacier and beat furiously against the precipices of the Twins. It was a tremendous avalanche, the largest we had ever seen. It confirmed, if confirmation was needed, the fact that nowhere within a mile or so of Kangchenjunga's north face is the mountaineer safe.

As quickly as possible I got my camera out of my pocket, and bracing myself firmly in my ice steps, took two hurried snaps. The illustration on the opposite page is one of them. It shows the head of the avalanche about to sweep the route between upper and lower Camp Two. The roar subsided, but it was long before the clouds of wind-blown snow began to settle. We turned again without a word to our task.

About half-way up the slope we decided to try our luck by traversing to the left to where snow appeared to overlay the ice. Our speculation was justified, and to our delight we found ourselves on hard snow in which only a couple of



THE GREAT ICE AVALANCHE SEEN FROM THE RAMTHANG PEAK.

good kicks were necessary to make a step. Without further difficulty, we gained a subsidiary ridge falling from the main east ridge of the mountain. The snow here was wind-blown, hard and icy, and without crampons another hour's cutting at least would have been required. As it was, we walked, our faithful spikes biting well home. The angle, at first steep, gradually eased off. We found ourselves on the main ridge. It was almost horizontal at its junction with the subsidiary ridge, and we sat down for a welcome rest. My legs felt as if they had been afflicted with varicose veins since birth, and I anathematised the foolish spirit of experimental inquiry that had led me to don the expedition boots.

If Schneider is included in a party, that party does not get much rest. Now, he was fairly bubbling with suppressed energy and enthusiasm, and unable to wait, untied the rope, and set off along the ridge, which appeared quite easy for a considerable distance. A minute or two later he disappeared over a snowy hump, and I was left to myself. I did not feel like going on, my calves ached abominably, but I supposed it had to be done, and so heaving myself to my feet, I set off on the wearying task of dragging the expedition boots up the final five hundred feet of ridge to the top.

With a superhuman effort I gained the crest of the hump, wondering vaguely whether it would be practical to take my foot luggage off, and proceed in stockinged feet. Schneider was halted some distance along the ridge, and he called to me urgently. Beyond him the ridge was obviously much more difficult, narrowing to a mere blade of ice, of a type so characteristic of the Himalayas. I gathered that without me he did not like to go on alone.

With an inward, if not outward groan, I galvanised the expedition boots into activity, and together we toiled along the ridge.

There certainly appeared to be one or two distinctly formidable pieces in the ridge. Immediately above Schneider it was split by a curious crevasse, and above the crevasse was a nasty, unstable looking ice flake. Roping on to Schneider, I paid him out while he carefully bestrode the crevasse, and cut steps up and along one side of the flake. After a short upward traverse, he cut up directly to the top of the flake, and commenced to hew its crest away with a cheerful abandon. The flake became thicker, and the work easier. Soon he reached a broader portion of the ridge, and there, comfortably seated in the snow, bade me cheerily to come on. I did so, cautiously propelling the expedition boots upwards from step to step.

To the non-mountaineering public, there are only three kinds of mountaineering difficulties. There is the vertical, or overhanging precipice, the dizzy ledge, and the knife-like ridge. All these figure conspicuously in novels purporting to present the thrills of mountaineering. In actual practice, however, they are seldom met with. The Matterhorn, for instance, can be climbed, and not one of them will be encountered, and it is necessary to go to special districts such as the Aiguilles of Mont Blanc, or the Dolomites to find plumb vertical, or overhanging precipices, and genuine dizzy ledges. The knife-like ice ridge scarcely exists at all in the Alps, and the only examples I can recollect are the ice ridges on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc, and in particular the classic ice ridge of the Col de la Brenva, along which Mr. A. E. W. Mason's heroes and villains

crawled in *Running Water*. But even the Brenva ice ridges, airy though they are, cannot compare to the ice ridges adorning Himalayan peaks. It was with something of satisfaction, therefore, that I found myself on a ridge, the knife-like merits of which not even the most earnest seeker after the sensational could carp at.

On my left the slopes dropped with tremendous steepness towards the Western Tributary Glacier ; on my right, I looked down the most extraordinary precipice I know of. Not extraordinary so much from the point of view of steepness—the Alps can produce a nearly vertical face of 4,000 feet in height—but in its appearance. Great uncouth lumps of ice clung to it, bulging outwards like the primitive sculptures of Mr. Epstein on the " Underground " building at St. James' Park. Leering, gargoyle-like heads suspended from thick, goitrous-like necks of ice peered over into the abyss ; great boiler plates and sheets of black ice coated the smooth granite slabs ; icy stalks, marrows, and pumpkins, grew from every wrinkle, niche and cranny.

How ice could cling to rocks at such an angle passes the comprehension. Such formations are not seen in the Alps. Only once before have I seen anything to approach this precipice, and this was strangely enough on Ben Nevis during an Easter climbing holiday. In that case, however, the ice was due to freezing moisture-charged winds from the Atlantic beating against the sunless northern cliffs of the Ben. In the present instance, it was more likely temperature fluctuation that enabled the ice to stick glue-like to the all but vertical precipice.

Needless to say, I did not think of all these things at the time ; my attention was concentrated on getting over the

narrow bit as quickly as possible to the broader and more comfortable ridge on which Schneider was sitting. The ice was obviously tough, but the crest tended to curl slightly, but unpleasantly outwards over the right-hand precipice. This tendency was perhaps slightly exaggerated in my mind by Schneider's reference to " gefährlichkeiten " and earnest exhortations to me to hurry. In a minute or two it was no longer essential to emulate the stealth of a cat-burglar, and treading more boldly, I rejoined Schneider.

For a short distance the ridge was easier, then once more it narrowed. This time it was not so much a knife-edge as a leaf. The ice was curiously stratified, each stratum indicating a previous snowfall which had gone to help build up the leaf, but the latter was so thin and under-nourished that it needed but a blow to knock a hole through it several feet below its tapering crest. There was no going along that crest, the sole way of negotiating it was to traverse below it on the Kangchenjunga side. It was steep work ; hand-holds were as desirable as foot-holds. The expedition boots did not like it at all, and struggled clumsily to maintain a grip in the steps cut by Schneider. Given one good kick with them, the leaf would most likely have collapsed.

The length of the leaf was quite short, not more than twenty-five feet. It thickened gradually, and presently Schneider was able to cut directly up. He put his head over the top like an evil disposed small boy peeping cautiously over the wall of an orchard. Satisfied that the leaf was thick enough to support him, he hauled himself on to its crest, and advanced a few steps until it widened out considerably, and there was no longer any doubt as to its stability. There

he halted, and shouted back that it was the last difficulty. I followed. Half way along I found myself opposite an awesome hole, a yard in diameter, through which I was able to put my head and shoulders, and gaze down the other side of the ridge. My sensations were no doubt similar to those of one who gazes out for the first time from the attic window of a New York "skyscraper." One glance was sufficient, and I popped my head back again. The downward view from *my* side of the ridge was sufficiently nerve harrowing. Presently, with a tremendous effort, I hauled the expedition boots on to the crest, and a few instants later flopped down thankfully beside Schneider.

The difficulties had been conquered ; snow slopes alone separated us from the summit. We grinned at each other, but my own grin was a trifle wan. Three hundred feet of soft snow slopes to do in the expedition boots at nearly 23,000 feet ! The ascent had taken longer than we had anticipated ; time was getting on, it was well after mid-day, and the afternoon mists were forming, and getting denser every instant. Leaving all our spare kit in our rucksacks, including, I regret to say, my camera, we set off on the last push to the top.

Dense mist concealed the way, and in its enveloping folds the snow slopes seemed to stretch never-endingly upwards. Fortunately, it was remarkably warm and windless.

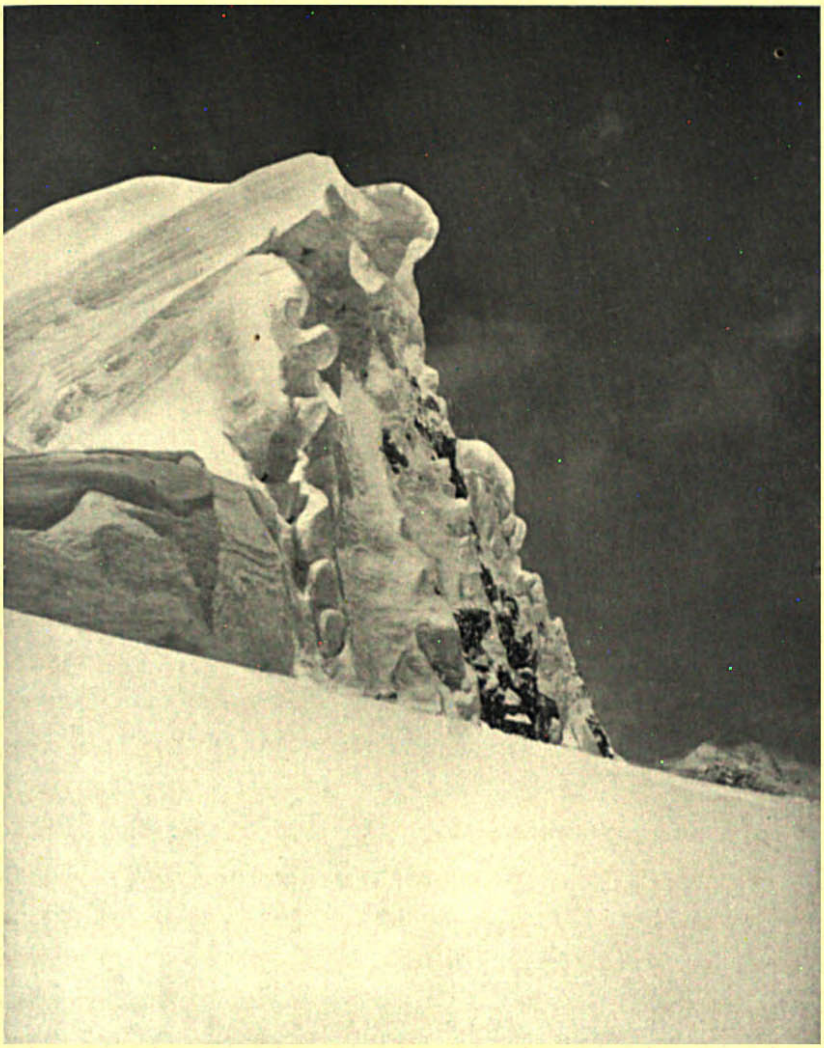
On the way up the snow had been bad, but its vileness had been compensated for to some extent by the interest and excitement of the climbing. Now, with interest and excitement evaporated, and with nothing else to think about save getting to the top, we realised how vile it was,

and what a purgatory we were undergoing. At every step Schneider sunk in well above the boots, but he persisted in leading, and his indomitable energy seemed in no whit abated. I plodded after him, cramp numbing my calves, my knees weak and trembling from the strain of raising the expedition boots.

It was not all plain sailing. At one point a half choked crevasse rifted the slope, and its steep upper lip necessitated a few steps being cut. Above that the slope eased off.

We trudged resolutely, if slowly, upwards. The mist thinned. The sun glared down upon our labours ; its suffocating heat scarcely served to lighten them, rather did it seem to sap all energy, so that despite well acclimatised bodies, every step became a gasping toil. We topped the slope, and found ourselves on an easy snow ridge sloping gently upwards. The summit became dimly visible. Schneider leapt forward ; soon he was fifty yards ahead, plugging with the tireless regularity of a machine through the soft snow. The fitful mists closed in upon us as we trod that last remote ridge-pole of the world.

We stood together on the summit. The mists lifted for a few seconds ; once more sunlight and shadow chased about us. Below steamy clouds eddied and boiled from deep glacier cauldrons. A bitter breath of wind sallied out of the west, causing us to knock gloved hands together, and shuffle chilled feet. The world was not visible ; we felt ourselves to be far removed from it. A picture flashed through my mind of civilisation, its hateful clamour, its sweatful heat. Up here, all was peace. When we had gone, the wind would fill our footsteps with snow, and remodel once more the serene crest of the snow ridge we



THE SUMMIT RIDGE OF THE RAMTHANG PEAK

had trampled under foot. All would be the same, and continue the same. When we die, may our spirits linger on the high places to which we have dedicated our youth.

We turned, and strode downhill. An immense vitalising relief coursed through my tired body. I was no longer lifting the expedition boots, I was simply swinging them forwards, and allowing them to drop. How mercilessly long the ascent had seemed, how mercifully short and easy the descent.

In a few minutes we were sitting in the snow by our rucksacks. For a while we lazed, but time was drawing on, and the descent had perforce to be continued. The flake and the knife-edge were soon traversed. Jumping the crevasse, we threw off the rope, and fairly raced along the ridge. At the end of it we found Professor Dyhrenfurth and Lewa. Though far from well, the Professor had pluckily climbed until he could go no farther. Wieland had ascended to the shoulder, and then turned back. A welcome drink from the Professor's flask, and we were off once more.

Facing inwards, and with picks driven well home, we carefully descended the long line of steps. Half way down, where the snow gave place to ice, and the route traversed across the slope, we found a convenient streak of snow. Stamping our crampons well in, we pelted down to the shoulder.

During the latter part, at least, our haste had been induced not so much by the desire to get down as by the knowledge that a large tin of fruit had been left on the shoulder. We had been the prey to grim forebodings that they might no longer be there, but these proved to be without foundation, and soon parched mouths and throats

were being lubricated by delicious Californian peaches and their accompanying juice.

We did not loiter, for the afternoon wind was increasing in strength every minute, and stinging particles of snow from a greying sky were whipping across the shoulder. With stiff fumbling fingers I pulled off crampons and expedition boots. The latter, with their armoury of nails, seemed to leer at me. I thrust them out of sight into my rucksack, registering at the same time a solemn vow never again to burden myself with them on a mountain. I strapped on ski, swung my heavy load on to my back, and turned downhill for home.

Schneider had decided to descend direct to the Base Camp, and he suggested that I should leave my load at Camp Two for the porters to bring down the following day. This was a first rate idea, for like him, I hungered for the comfort and luxury of the Base Camp. With no boots to change, Schneider was off first. Taking everything straight, he shot skilfully down the snow slopes, and was soon a mere insect on the vast counterpane of the glacier. I followed. For a while, all went well, but then, instead of being sensible, and kick turning at the end of every traverse, I essayed a downhill Christiania swing. Instantly, the expedition boots retaliated ; the heavy rucksack swung me off my balance, and I pitched headfirst down the slope, where my nose, already raw and peeled, clove through the crusted snow like the prow of a ship. For a while I lay too winded even to curse, but then the humour of the situation suddenly dawned on me, and the breath I had regained was lost in an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

Kick turn by kick turn, I descended to Camp Two.

A circle of grinning faces greeted me as I entered the porters' tent, and hurled the expedition boots to the ground. Somewhere in the gloom a Primus stove was roaring ; a dirty hand pressed a large cup of steaming hot tea upon me. The porters were genuinely pleased that we had got to the top, as pleased as small boys would be at the success of their schoolmaster in an International rugger match. What splendid fellows they are ! Their devotion to duty, their uncomplaining fortitude, and unvarying cheerfulness on Kangchenjunga can never be forgotten. The ground is well prepared for the corps of native Himalayan guides that General Bruce and the Himalayan Club are anxious to form.

The light was poor when Schneider and I started off for Camp One. The basin of the Western Tributary Glacier we were leaving seemed sombre and sad, the ice walls of Kangchenjunga shone greenly, malignantly in the fading light, and the jagged rock towers of the North-west ridge stabbed the livid mists like grim watchful sentinels. How long will it be before man again visits this lonely corner of the World ?

We ski-ed in long smooth sweeps down the gentle breast of the glacier. Gradually, the angle steepened, the keen air tightened in nostrils, whooped past Balaclava-covered ears. Swish ! A swing one way, a long sideways skid on the hard frozen surface, snow crystals raised in a scintillating shower. Swish ! A swing the other way. The ski whipped round like live things. Walking up through the soft snow we had been exposed for perhaps half an hour to the risk of ice avalanches from the ice cliffs below the shoulder of the Ramthang Peak. Ski-ing down, we swept across this dangerous area in a few seconds.

Schneider soon disappeared ahead; he had as usual, taken everything straight. My ski-ing is, however, not of the type that allows me to take steep slopes straight without disaster, or at least frequent and unpleasant crashes, and I entered the corridor alone. In it I was forced to tack to either side of Schneider's straight track several times. It was during one of these tacks that I went into a crevasse. In the dull light the slight concavity in the snow-crust concealing it was not visible. I was running moderately fast when the snow beneath me collapsed. There was no time in which to do anything, no fraction of a second in which to make a desperate spring forwards, my legs dropped into nothingness, my body, owing to its forward impetus was flung violently against the opposite lip of the crevasse. There I lay, half in and half out of the crevasse utterly and completely winded. My legs were numbed with the shock, and my back felt as though it were broken, as well as every other bone in my body. I certainly ought to have broken both ski and legs, yet, by some miracle, both were intact. It was a nasty moment that drop into space ; I remember vividly the noise of dislodged fragments of snow and ice as they fell with a sort of shush, shush, shush, into the bowels of the crevasse. Minutes later I was able to make an effort and haul my legs and ski out on to *terra firma*, where for some time I lay, still partially winded and feeling not a little sick. As I lay I remembered the wise words of an American friend of mine who fell into a crevasse the first time he had been escorted on to a glacier. He said : " Never again ! I guess it's *terra firma* for me in future, less terror and more firmer."

Taking off my ski, I walked down the remainder of the

corridor, following the porters' tracks. Dr. Richter was at Camp One. He had some hot tea ready for me and, what was even better, rum. Both served to steady shaken nerves.

The way between the Base Camp and Camp One had been well prepared by Schneider and Duvanel ; it was not only a good route for foot slogging, but first rate for skiing, and soon we had left Camp One far behind.

The angle at which the main ice stream of the Kangchenjunga Glacier rises is deceptive. From the Base Camp the glacier looks practically flat, but actually it slopes downwards at a much steeper angle than at first appears, and we skimmed gaily down it for quite three miles with scarcely a stop.

Dusk was falling as we reached the maze of moraines separating the snowy middle of the glacier from the grassy terraces of Pangperma and the Base Camp. Seated on a boulder, we gazed back towards the scene of the labours, bitternesses, hopes and fears of the past nineteen days. The evening was a still one ; the glacier rivulets were already hushed and awed in the grip of frost ; only the occasional slither and splash of a dislodged stone falling into a glacier pool broke a profound quietude. Through a window, where the mists were melting into the first stars, stood Kangchenjunga, its precipices aflame in the setting sun. Before us curved the great glacier down which we had come, like a ghostly road stretching to the foot of some Goblin fortress. All day long the avalanche juggernauts had roared down upon it ; now they rested cold and silent in the garages of the hills, and " Policeman Day " retired wearily from his long beat.

We turned to go, leaving our ski and sticks on the stones.

Two figures came scrambling over the moraines to meet us, Nemu and Nima with a thermos of hot tea for each of us. It was a kindly thought, something to remember when other and more grandiose events have passed into oblivion.

I had expected to feel very tired. On the Ramthang Peak it had seemed an impossibility to get down to the Base Camp that day, but seven thousand feet of descent had stimulated muscle and will jaded by altitude, and I found myself trudging over the moraine feeling little more tired than at the end of an Alpine day.

Tropical night fell like the lowering of a curtain. As we stumbled over the last stones more figures emerged from the gloom and we clasped hands with our companions.

Though defeat on Kangchenjunga had been our lot, it was a cheery crowd that gathered in the mess tent that evening. What a joy to be able to sit and eat dinner with one's fellows once more, instead of " pigging " it cramped up in one's own tiny tent. Even Tencheddar's " Soup sometime coming," as we sat and waited hungrily for dinner, could not damp the general cheerfulness.

Transport difficulties had been solved, and Wood Johnson and Hannah were back from their arduous tasks, which they had accomplished so successfully. Wieland and Duvanel had come down that day ; the latter was far from well. Only Professor Dyhrenfurth and Dr. Richter remained in the upper camps, and they with the remainder of the porters and equipment would be down next day.

Kangchenjunga had beaten us, and claimed a brave soul in so doing. That the toll was not greater was not due to any skill on our part, it was a Divine Providence.