

CHO OYU, 1954

BY HERBERT TICHY

Translated by BARBARA TOBIN(By courtesy of the Editor of *The Himalayan Journal*)

AT the beginning of September, 1954, we left Khatmandu, the capital of Nepal, and headed for the distant Cho Oyu, 26,750 ft., in the north-east of the country.

Weeks of walking led us over hot hills and through dripping jungle. Our path, which led east, took us interminably up and down ; we crossed the valleys of many streams leading south, and had to climb one pass of 14,000 ft. Not until we reached the valley of the Dudh Khosi, the 'milk stream', could we turn our steps northwards, towards the great Himalayan Chain.

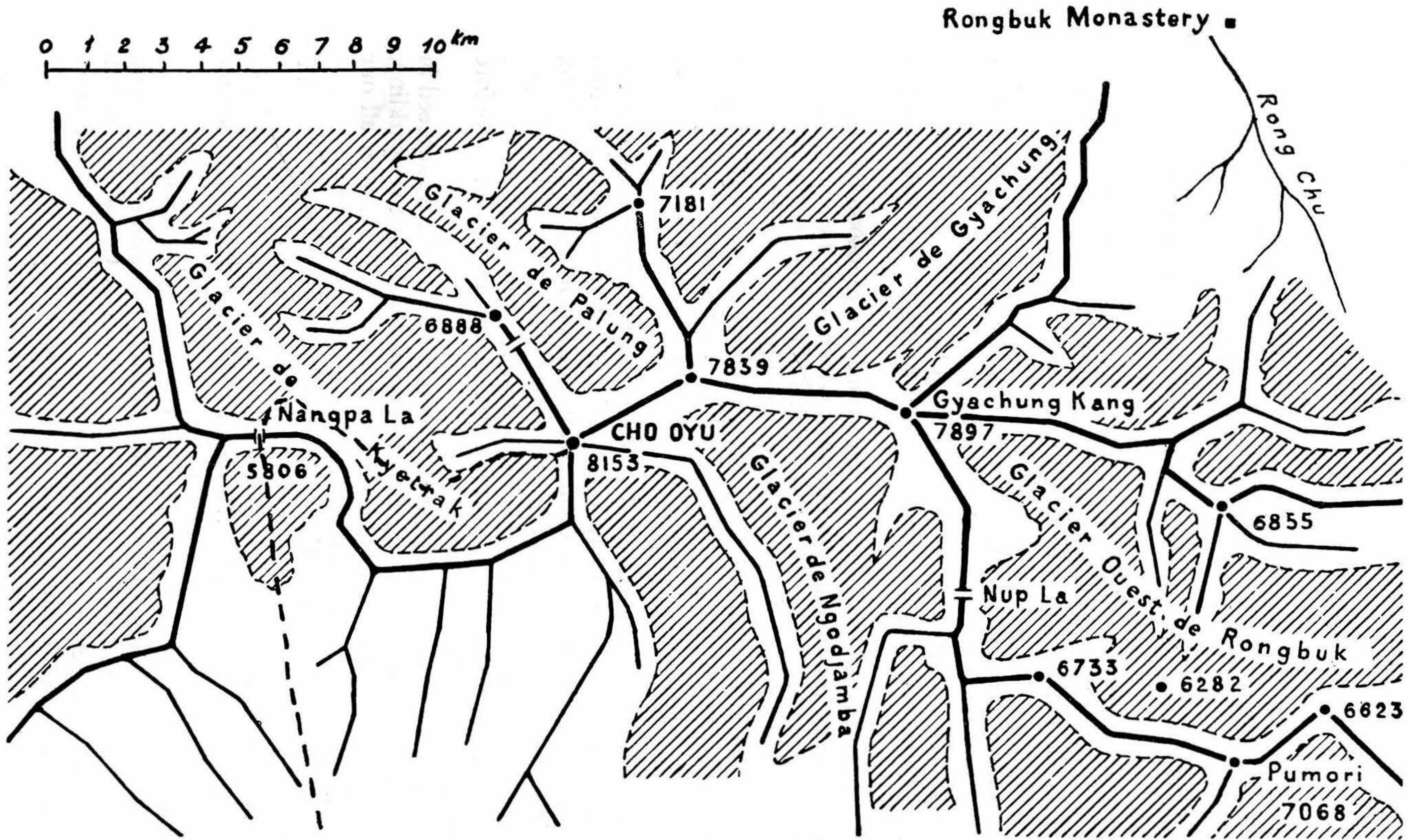
Unfortunately, the weather was not ideal ; the monsoon was not yet over, each day producing rain and mist which, over 13,000 ft., fell as snow. We gradually approached the giants of the main chain, but they were well hidden behind cloud, unveiling only for a few moments at a time. We had not yet seen our objective, although we had had two good views of its neighbour, Everest. We hoped the cloud defences were weakening each day, and that soon the blue sky of Tibet would win through.

On September 19 we reached Namche Bazar, where we made the last of our preparations. Only four days' march now separated us from the foot of Cho Oyu. The countryside got lonelier still, and a long horrible stage over moraines and hard frozen glacier brought us to the Nangpa La, the 18,000-ft. border pass, with its fabulous view of Tibet. We turned east down a side valley, and suddenly Cho Oyu stood before us in silent magnificence.

We still knew very little about the mountain. Would we succeed in finding a practicable route up the ice-bound slopes to the sparkling, untrodden summit ? Or would we have to acknowledge, after all our efforts, that it was beyond our small team to climb to the top ? My two Tirolean companions were Dr. Helmut Heuberger and engineer Sepp Jöchler. We also had seven Sherpas under the faithful Pasang.

The porters and yaks that had carried our loads thus far turned back, happy to leave the icy cold. We pitched our Base Camp at a suitable point : now the attack could begin.

The events of the next days were unexpected and astounding. I had thought that we would have to treat the mountain like a difficult problem, exploring flanks and ridges, and perhaps only after two weeks' search find a route that seemed possible. Privately, of course, I hoped that we would be able to take the mountain unawares.



THE CHO OYU MASSIF.

----- Approximate Route.

In the event, however, Cho Oyu surprised us. From Camp I, pitched at about 19,000 ft., we found a good route to the glacier-covered West flank, and pitched Camp II at 20,200 ft. Sepp here decided that he was not sufficiently acclimatised; as he wasn't feeling at all well, he descended to Camp I. Helmut was provisionally at Base Camp looking after supplies.

From Camp II a steep snow ridge led upwards. I, with four Sherpas, started up it in fine weather, very deep snow making it hard, tiring work. The view to the north was magnificent and encouraged us in our ascent. At three o'clock we reached a wall of ice which was the beginning of a big ice-fall. We already knew that this would be the main problem, and had reckoned on pitching Camp III here. We expected to have to spend many days searching for a way through the ice labyrinth, for we knew that it was here that Shipton's expedition to Cho Oyu in 1952 had been repulsed. He had stated then that it would take fourteen days to find a flaw in the defences of the ice-fall, and had turned his attention to other peaks.

The Sherpas set to work quickly. Two put up the tents, and our cook made tea. We had gained another 1,300 ft. and were now at about 21,500 ft. I was tired and looking forward to a hot drink, but Pasang was so eager, like a dog on a fresh scent, that he wanted to lose no minute in getting on. While I was still panting from our strenuous ascent, he fetched ropes, ice and rock pitons, draped them round himself and Adjiba and looked questioningly at me. I could have waited and postponed the search for a route until the morrow, which would have been reasonable, but I silently roped up and knew that I was really doing the right thing.

It was good to be back on a rope with Pasang and Adjiba again, friends of my previous expedition. Ahead of us the ice towered 200 ft. vertically above us. Were we going to master this pitch, and, if so, what would we find beyond? Pasang led; every one of his movements showed sureness and experience. At the foot of the ice-wall, our tents were now ready, and far below we could see Camp II like a tiny toy, with our tracks like thin threads in the undisturbed snow. A cry from Pasang interrupted my thoughts: 'No way through.' He went round the steep ice-wall to the left, and started to struggle upwards. Again he disappeared from view, and then called, 'Follow!' The sheer ice-face arched back, until we were standing on a flat shelf. Adjiba joined us. The ice-fall no longer appeared impassable, although we were not yet absolutely certain it would go. Another ten minutes of hard effort, and the steep giddy slope that leads up to the summit lay open before us. I could hardly believe our luck. Perhaps we had been fortunate immediately to find the only possible flaw—perhaps the ice had altered since Shipton's attempt. In my wildest hopes I had not thought to pass so quickly and easily.

We fixed ropes to make the difficult passage easier for the following day, and while Pasang and Adjiba finished off I went back to camp. The Sherpas ran towards me asking excitedly if there was a way through.

I nodded happily. I was very tired, so they took my crampons off for me, and pressed a bowl of hot tea into my hands. I photographed our track which led up towards the heavens, and the two Sherpas, as small as ants, still working away. I did not know that it was to be the last photograph I would take for a week, and that, only two days later, with frost-bitten hands, I would struggle past this camp filled only with a wish for warmth and life.

During the night a storm tore at our tents. At daylight it was obvious that we could not go on, but must wait for an improvement in the weather. The following morning dawned cloudless, and the wind and cold were bearable. The steep step which was still in shadow was not pleasant, but we were soon in the sun and slowly gaining height. It was quite a struggle to breathe, but I was not alone in having trouble, for the Sherpas, too, were having difficulty—and in any case they were carrying much heavier loads.

At 4 o'clock we pitched our tents at about 23,000 ft. Two Sherpas went back to Camp III. Pasang, Adjiba and Angnima stayed with me. The evening was not very pleasant, an icy cold wind drove a thick cloud of snow before it. But there are many such evenings at that height, and there were no grounds for worry. While we sipped our hot soup in the tent, we made plans for the following day. 'Tomorrow, without a doubt, we will reach the summit,' beamed Pasang.

I fell asleep without having to take a drug. Waking was an unbelievably bad dream. An invisible force was pressing the wall of the tent into my face, robbing me of air to breathe. A hell of cracking, whistling noises surrounded me. A few seconds passed before I realised that it was in fact no dream, but reality. The storm had broken the tent pole, had torn the pegs out of the ice, and now whipped at the tent as at a loose sail. It was pitch black, so must still be night. Pasang, too, had been awakened. We decided that our rucksacks were heavy enough to hold the tent to the ground and tried to compose ourselves again: it often follows in the Himalaya that a stormy night is succeeded by a clear quiet day. But when daylight filtered through the canvas the storm increased in fury. And it became even harder to hold the tent down.

'Shall we wait? Or shall we go down?' asked Pasang. But first we had to see how things were with the two Sherpas in the other tent, and have a look at the weather. It took a lot of effort to get out of the flapping tent. Pasang got out first, then I managed it, legs first, though I had not noticed that my mittens had come off.

All hell had been let loose outside. The sun had risen perhaps two hours earlier and was shining out of a cloudless sky. A wind of terrible power such as I had never hitherto encountered whipped over the steep snow-face. It was impossible to stand upright and the unprotected parts of our faces hurt as though they were being beaten. 'I've never seen such a storm,' cried Pasang, 'We will all die.'

The other tent, too, was flat; beneath the flapping surface the bent figures of Adjiba and Angnima were discernible. They too, were



CHO OYU FROM BASE CAMP.

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creeping clear. To go, or to stay? We did not know which was the safer course. I secretly agreed with Pasang that we would all perish. Suddenly the wind got under the Sherpas' tent, and filled it like a sail, trying finally to tear it away. I threw myself on to it, to save it. My hands, which I had hitherto kept in my trousers' pockets, sank into the snow.

Events followed like lightning; they cannot have lasted more than two or three minutes. First my hands became white and had no feeling. I looked for my mittens in our tent, but it was flogging about like a wild, unruly animal. I rubbed my hands and clapped them hard together, but the wind blew with unrelenting ferocity on to them. I cried out with pain and faintness, and only now did the Sherpas realise my trouble. Pasang and Angnima, who were also suffering from the cold and wind, unbuttoned their trousers and tried to warm my hands between their thighs. Meanwhile Adjiba found my gloves in the tent. I put them on, but I realised that my hands were frost-bitten. An almost panicky fear took hold of us all. We must get out of this inferno where the cold could kill us in a bare hour. We hurriedly stuffed a few things into our rucksacks; values change, a scarf is worth more than a roll of film. The tents we left behind; perhaps they could be collected later—now it was a question of life and death. A Sherpa put on my crampons for me, then we roped up and the retreat began. The wind howled around us, hurling us flat, and throwing great lumps of snow and ice at us. And all the time the sun shone out of a clear blue sky.

As we got lower, the power of the storm eased; we secured ourselves doubly firmly when we reached the steep step, and came to Camp III. Here we found the Sherpas who were to have brought up the fresh supplies, together with Sepp. He told me later that he had got his good form back and wanted to join in the attack on the summit. During the storm he had spent several hours, without success, trying to master the ice-wall. But the storm had held him back. I showed him my hands, and without pause, we descended to Camp II together with Sepp and the other Sherpas. There the storm was not so bad—the route along the ridge was easier, and without a rope, alone and unhappy, I staggered into camp. My hands had become misshapen and hurt very badly.

Helmut, who had climbed to Camp II, gave me a series of injections—the first of many. Sepp looked after me incredibly patiently, for I could not undo a button, or eat anything even without help. Pasang and the others wanted to leave for the next camp down so as to give us more room. I could not give him my hand in farewell and, when he saw that, he bent down and kissed my cheek. Apart from the torment of the pain and misfortune, I experienced a new feeling during the days that followed: the wordless friendliness and comradeship that united us and never let us feel alone. But during the endless night that followed there seemed to be no hope for me, only the recurring thoughts: my hands are dead; the summit is lost.

When we were all united in Camp I we held a council of war. My hands would need medical attention, but the nearest doctor was in

Khatmandu, over three weeks' march away. Perhaps I would suffer more en route than if I rested and waited where I was. We decided that Pasang, with two or three Sherpas, should descend to collect the rest of our provisions. During this time we would wait on in Camp I. It was idyllically situated, with a lovely view, not only of Cho Oyu, but of other glacier giants. I could devote myself to looking after my hands in the warmth of the tent. Sepp and Helmut would try one or two of the other mountains around us. And each day we could observe Cho Oyu and decide from the length of his snow plume the strength of the wind at the summit. We had always known that our main problem would be weather. The sky was almost always clear blue, but each day the wind got wilder and more terrible. We knew that only an almost windless day would make an ascent possible, for now it was almost as cold as spring. But, gradually, we began to believe in our luck and to hope again, as we awaited Pasang's return with impatience.

Sepp and Helmut had meanwhile climbed a lovely 20,000-ft. peak through a difficult ice-fall, showing me that they were in good form. I could not yet move my hands, but wrapped in fleece and three pairs of gloves I could at least keep the cold out. Time dragged, for each day brought the cold weather nearer, as we made our preparations for another attempt. This time we were not so full of hope and determination—we had experienced too much, and had, besides, felt the killing power of wind at over 20,000 ft. We wanted as much as possible to wipe out the memory of that storm, so we did not pitch tents at Camp III, but built ourselves a hole in the ice instead. The stories I had heard about the warmth and comfort of arctic igloos I had always taken with a pinch of salt, but here we learned to appreciate the Eskimo method of construction. On the first day three sahibs and five Sherpas got into the narrow hole in the ice, together with the cook and soon the temperature inside was really bearable. It was a grand feeling to hear the storm howling outside, and not to have to fear being buried under tents again. Once, Sepp and two Sherpas tried to push on to Camp IV, but they came back half-frozen after barely an hour. We spent a long day in our sleeping-bags and the weather was so bad that we dared not go outside. Finally, we decided we must go on to Camp IV. Our provisions were scarce and our best Sherpa, Pasang, was not yet back with us. But we were determined to go on, for in the interval a Swiss expedition had appeared on the scene, leaving us first shot at the summit, but only one attempt. We were unable to plan a second attempt later, which we would have liked, strengthened by Pasang and the stores. We had to go on.

While we were finishing preparations for the trip to Camp IV we thought we could see two figures on the ridge below us. Our longings had become fact—it was Pasang with the stores. We could wait half an hour together, then we would go on to Camp IV, and the following day push on to the summit. Pasang's was an incredible feat—in the course of three days he went from Marlung, 13,000 ft., over the Nangpa La, and up to the summit of Cho Oyu. He had heard of our meeting with



the Swiss expedition and had declared passionately, 'If the Swiss reach the summit before us I will cut my throat.' We were convinced that these were no idle words, and were spurred on by his fanaticism.

Carefully, we made the necessary arrangements in our narrow ice-house, looking forward unhappily to a tiresome climb through storm and cold. At the steep step I discovered how helpless I was. I could hardly use my ice-axe. Again we had the tiring climb up over the glacier, again the bitter wind and cloudless sky that reminded us of our night of terror. But now the snow, which two weeks before had been deep and unstable, was hard and blown—which made progress much easier.

We based our new Camp IV about 150 ft. higher than our old, unhappy site. We would have liked again to go underground, but it was, unfortunately, impossible to dig a hole in the hard snow. So we had to pitch our tents, anchoring them firmly.

Six men stayed here overnight: Sepp, Helmut and I, Pasang, Adjiba and Gyaljen. Sepp was now in top-notch form, Helmut was perhaps rather slow, and I with my hands was more of a hindrance than a help. So, naturally, the choice fell upon Sepp to accompany Pasang to the summit next day. We lay in our sleeping-bags and waited for night to fall. We were at 23,000 ft. and they would both have about 3,700 ft. to climb next day, a great deal at that altitude, and perhaps weather and snow would not be perfect. We must in any case support the summit party and pitch a camp with sleeping-bags at about 24,500 ft. so that they had shelter on their way back if there was no time to reach Camp IV.

While the wind tore at my tent, I argued with myself; a year earlier Pasang and I, on my last expedition, had first spoken of the plan to climb Cho Oyu. With immense luck I got permission from Nepal, and received the necessary financial backing—and now here I was, lying within a day's march from the summit. And tomorrow I would have to lie inactive, waiting to find out what fate had in store for the two of them. I hated my helplessness. If I wrapped my hands up really warmly and if the summit wasn't too difficult, perhaps I could go too? But two hours of storm and my hands would be irretrievably dead. Dared I take the risk? Thoughts churned endlessly through my head. Then suddenly I knew: we would go without roping up, then I could turn back at any time without hindering the others. If I found I was not fit enough myself to grapple with Lady Luck, I would at any rate still not have cost them the summit. I crept into the other tent and said, 'I am coming with you in the morning.' 'Good,' said Sepp, 'I hoped you would.' Pasang nodded, 'That is good.' I was very grateful to them. We would start by the light of the waning moon, before dawn.

We had a sleepless night, three men are too many in one tent. It was still dark, but I could hear noises in the other tent. Soon I heard Adjiba's voice calling 'Breakfast,' and he gave everybody a cup of cocoa and a bowl of gruel. Outside, it was just beginning to get light. Time to get up, but I lay, full of doubts, until, with great trouble, Gyaljen pulled my frozen boots on to my feet. I crept out of my tent

into the ice-cold day. The sky and the mountains in Tibet were blood red. Sepp and Pasang were silently packing their rucksacks. Pasang threw over my crampons. After the warmth of my sleeping-bag my hands were still movable, and I tried with my right to seize hold of the ice-axe. I knew that soon my hand would grow stiff and hold it like a vice.

From camp our route lay steeply up a snow-field. I took great care to make the first steps slowly, and to breathe cautiously. Pasang led, Sepp followed me. At times we could barely see each other. We were alone, but strengthened by the presence of the other two. It was bitterly cold ; the surrounding mountains sparkled in the sunlight, but we had a long way to go before the first rays reached us.

Hitherto I had given a quite good account of myself, but now we reached a rocky band that ringed the mountain. A few metres of steep rock and ice, a mere trifle that takes but a few minutes to climb over, but in vain did I try to get a hold with my hands, or to pull myself up on my ice-axe ; my hands were useless pieces of flesh that hurt unbearably when they touched the rock. While I was still struggling I heard Pasang's voice above : ' Rope, Sahib.' A minute later I stood beside him as he silently put the rope back in his rucksack. Sepp complained about lack of feeling in his legs. I was hardly suffering from the cold, but next day I noticed that my toes and my nose were lightly frost-bitten.

Always upwards, the angle became steeper, but the crampons held well. We took several breaths at each step, but did not over-exert ourselves. I was surprised how easily I was still going. Slowly the surrounding peaks sank lower, and the blue Tibetan sky became bigger and broader. Thoughts wandered, and memories swept over me regardless of time and space. We reached the shoulder and drank several gulps of hot coffee, while Pasang put some rice in our mouths. Here we left the rope behind us, and pushed on without a rest. The storm we so feared had dropped away, leaving only a wind which pushed and drove us on, up the last stage.

Again each man went at his own pace. We were now in the so-called ' Zone of Death,' the region over 26,000 ft. I knew that some climbers here had helpful visions and heard friendly voices. I stood still, and listened to hear if anyone would speak to me—I hoped to hear the voice of my dead father, but all was quiet. I was not disappointed. The world around me was unbelievably good : snow, sky, wind and I united. I felt close to God and the essentials of the universe—close as I had never felt before. An indescribable impersonal happiness filled me ; and yet I was quite convinced that we would all die that day. We would not, I thought, reach the camp, nor the tent that Adjiba and Helmut were bringing for us. We would have to bivouac and freeze to death. Despite this I could not hurry—I realised that each second I was enjoying an exceptional experience. I felt I had broken through a metaphysical boundary, and reached a new world.

The slope became easier, and the view wider, and suddenly there was



DR. TICHY AND PASANG ON SUMMIT OF CHO OYU ; MT. EVEREST IN LEFT BACKGROUND

nothing ahead to climb, and the view was unbounded. In the middle, in front of us, lay in unrivalled majesty the summit of Mount Everest. Pasang came over to me, his ice-axe was stuck in the snow, flying the flags of Nepal, Austria and India which we had given him that morning. And I, normally no lover of flags, found that the sight of these symbols of my fatherland and the two countries that I think of and love so much, brought tears to my eyes. Pasang hugged me. Beneath his sunglasses I saw that he, too, had tears in his eyes—for more than twenty years he had striven for a 'very high' mountain. Today his wish was granted. Sepp joined us. How happy I was that all three of us stood there together. More hugs, more tears of which none of us was ashamed.

We took summit photographs. Sepp used my camera, for I was almost incapable. I tried to lift high the ice-axe with the flags, but my hand was too weak to hold it up. We ate chocolates and sweets, and Pasang and I buried some of it for the gods. I wanted to dig a small hole in the hard snow with my ice-axe, but my hands were too awkward and I had to kneel to do so. I stayed a few seconds in that attitude—which seemed to me to be the correct one—and Sepp brought out of his pocket a small crucifix that his mother had given him, and put it in the snow. On his ice-axe, he had near the Austrian flag, the Tirolean pennant. I looked at him and could see how happy he was. His had been the hardest decision, for in the difficult moment that his feet had gone numb he knew he had bad frost-bite to fear if he came with us—and yet he had not left us, but taking his fate into his hands had come with us to the top.

At 3 o'clock on October 19, we had reached the summit, half an hour later we were on our way down. Again we went each at our own speed. The sun fell ever lower, but we had time enough in hand to reach Camp IV.

At the rock step, Helmut was waiting with a tent; he knew already from Pasang that we had reached the summit, and beamed all over his face. He had had the hard and thankless task of covering our retreat. His contribution was greater than if he had himself reached the summit.

And now the last steep slope down to the camp. The mood was the same as when we had started off early in the morning—blood-red twilight over Tibet. Each step seemed to me like a farewell, and I lingered to look and imprint that unforgettable picture in my memory.

Further down I reeled at times and fell, but each time was able to break my fall. Shadows were long by the time I reached camp, where Adjiba was crouched before a burning fire. He came to me: 'Sahib,' he said, and hugged me tight. But it would not have been my good Adjiba if he had left it at that. He took a bowl from the fire and gave it to me. I drank in long thirsty gulps—it was boiling-hot schnapps. Sepp and Helmut joined us, and night fell. I lay sleepless in the narrow tent, filled with the joy of success, the beauty of deep experience, and the warmth of friendship.