Peaks and Flowers of the Central Himalayas

by F. S. SMYTHE

While flower-lovers and mountaineers will find special interest in Mr Smythe’s account of his experiences in Garhwal last summer, a far wider circle of readers will appreciate his enthusiasm for what he describes as ‘the most beautiful Himalayan valley I have ever seen’. As he and a gallant company are once again assailing unconquered Everest, we may suppose that his endurance and that of the Bhotia porters who were, and are his companions will be not a little fortified by the spiritual reserves accumulated during those idyllic weeks in the Valley of Flowers.

In 1931 when Kamet, a peak of 25,447 ft. in the Garhwal Himalayas, was climbed by a small party of British mountaineers, the expedition, of which I was a member, descended to the village of Gamsali in the Dhauli Valley, then crossed the Zaskar Range to the south of the mountain by the Bhyundar Pass (16,688 ft.) into the Alaknanda Valley with the intention of exploring the mountainous region at the sources of the Alaknanda and Gangotri rivers, the two principal tributaries of the Ganges.

The monsoon had broken and the day on which we crossed the pass was wet and miserable. Below 16,000 ft. rain was falling, but above that height was sleet or snow. A bitter wind lashed us on the pass, and as quickly as possible we descended into the Bhyundar Valley, which is a tributary of the Alaknanda Valley.

Within a few minutes we were out of the wind and in rain which became gradually warmer as we lost height. Dense mist shrouded the mountain-side and we had paused, uncertain as to the way, when I heard R. L. Holdsworth, who was a botanist as well as a climbing member of the expedition, exclaim, “Look!” I followed the direction of his outstretched hand, but at first could see nothing but rocks; then, suddenly, my gaze was arrested by a splash of blue so intense that it seemed to light the barren hillside. Beyond it were other splashes of blue. The primula (P. nivalis macrophylla), to which this effect was due, was but one of hundreds of varieties of flowers that filled the valley. Round our camps it was impossible to take a step without crushing a flower.

Dr T. G. Longstaff and the late A. L. Mumm had visited the Bhyundar Valley in 1907 and remarked on its great beauty; I have no hesitation in saying that it is the most beautiful Himalayan valley I have ever seen.

After many years in London I went to live in the country and instantaneously became a gardener; this brought a great desire to return to the Bhyundar Valley which I had always remembered as the Valley of Flowers. What better, after four elaborate expeditions which had major peaks as their objectives, than to spend a summer wandering in Garhwal, a country like Switzerland on a grand scale but unsullied by civilization, with fertile valleys and innumerable peaks to climb, a country where you may tread the eternal snows in the morning and spend the afternoon among flowers?

An additional incentive was the small amount of collecting previously accomplished in Garhwal. Sikkim and Kashmir have added many beautiful flowers to British gardens and more recently the Chinese-Burmese end of the Himalayas has become fashionable; yet since the years 1846 to 1849, when Sir Richard Strachey and J. E. Winterbottom made their famous collection of herbarium speci-
Among the Himalayan foothills near Ranikhet, rising ridge after forested ridge towards the eternal snows
Autumn tints in the Bhyundar Valley, showing its wonderful fertility and variety of vegetation.
The upper valleys of Garwhal are rich in flowers: a dense carpet of Impatiens Roylei. This balsam—
—with its bonnet-like pink blooms grows 8 ft. high at 7,500 ft. and as many inches high at 12,000 ft.
A natural Alpine rock garden, containing among other flowers a rosy knot-weed, androsaces and saxifragas.
Rock-plants at 13,000 ft.—the large white Saussurea with the small Anaphalis nubigena (pearly everlasting)
The marigold Caltha palustris growing in a moist place, interspersed with Primula denticulata
The peak of Gauri Parbat, at the head of the Bhyundar Valley, veiled at sunset in monsoon clouds.
mens, little collecting has been done in the upper valleys apart from Holdsworth's work in 1931. Perhaps the district gained a bad reputation among botanists on account of the comparative sterility of the foothills, where plant life is choked by dense carpets of needles deposited by the forests of chir (Pinus Roxburghii); but the upper valleys, which are well watered by glaciers and melting snow, are superlatively rich in flowers.

In 1937 the opportunity came to revisit Garhwal. It was arranged that my collecting should be done for the Edinburgh Botanic Garden and I am indebted to Dr J. Macqueen Cowan, Assistant Keeper, for much valuable assistance and advice. Captain P. R. Oliver was to join me towards the end of July, and prior to this I decided to make the Bhyundar Valley my headquarters, collect flowers and climb mountains. To assist in this work I engaged four Tibetan porters from Darjeeling, all experienced men, the sirdar, Wangdi Nurbu (Ondi), being an old friend of mine who has accompanied all the Himalayan expeditions in which I have taken part. In addition, eleven Dotial porters of a race indigenous to southern Nepal were engaged to carry my heavy luggage.

On June 5 I left Ranikhet and, after a journey by lorry of 55 miles to Garur, marched across the foothills. The route lies at first through forests of chir, then oaks and tree rhododendrons, one of which had a trunk 5 ft. in diameter and must be one of the largest tree rhododendrons ever observed. At Semkharak I saw hundreds of acres of the cream-coloured Paeonia emodi, a few plants of which were still in bloom, and below the 12,000 ft. Kuari Pass the first of a host of dwarf iris (I. kumaonensis).

On June 14 I reached Joshimath at the junction of the Dhauli and Alaknanda rivers, a halting-place for pilgrims en route to the shrine at Badrinath near the source of the latter river.

The Bhyundar Valley bifurcates with the Alaknanda Valley about six miles from Joshimath, and a day later I camped about midway up it at a height of 7500 ft. Here are dense deciduous forests and a tangle of undergrowth compressed between great sheets and curtains of rock on which gauzy waterfalls are suspended. There are two hamlets in the valley populated by hardy Garhwalis who eke out a precarious livelihood from little fields of grain and from flocks of sheep and goats.
In contrast to the park-like character lent by these widely spaced pines to the lower country, the higher foothill ridges are thickly clothed with tall, graceful Himalayan oaks.
Along the Alaknanda gorges runs a route for pilgrims to Badrinath and trade into Tibet.
Much of this Tibetan trade, consisting chiefly in the exchange of grain for salt and borax, is carried through Garhwal on the backs of sheep and goats. (Above) A 'caravan' crossing the Dhaulí river by a typical suspension bridge. (Below) Preparations for threshing in a Garhwali village.
which graze on the high pastures during the summer months. Many of these people are of a pronounced Semitic type, but in the villages on the main trade-routes near the Tibetan frontier dwell a semi-Mongolian people, known as Marcha Bhotias, who are natural mountaineers and become excellent porters with a little training in mountain-craft; it may be that they will one day rival the Sherpas and Bhotias who have done magnificent work on Everest, Kangchenjunga, Nanga Parbat and other great peaks.

Next day I passed the last habitations in the valley and, after mounting through a dense forest, emerged onto a delightful alp, watered by clear running streams, gay with blue and white anemones (A. obtusi-loba). I also found Primula denticulata, which was already in seed at this altitude, a purple-flowered monkshood (Aconitum heterophyllum), and a whole host of rosy rock jasmine (Androsace primuloides) cascading over some boulders. Yet up to this point there is little of floral interest in the Bhyundar Valley and I began to wonder whether memory had tricked me as regards the uppermost meadows. I need not have feared.

Beyond the alp the valley narrows into a gorge with sheer walls of rock rising 2000 ft. on either hand framing a wall of rock peaks against which the valley appears to end. I crossed the glacier torrent by a log bridge and followed a shepherds' track which later emerged from the pine forest onto open slopes. Here I had to cut steps across two snow gullies and presently came to the debris of an immense avalanche which covered the stream for fully a quarter of a mile to a depth of at least 100 ft.

Gradually the valley broadened out and bent round almost at right angles beneath the wall of rock peaks. As I turned a corner I saw out of the tail of my eye a slope mistily blue. It was a fumitory, the rare and beautiful Corydalis cashmeriana, a flower with little pipe-like blooms, dark tipped at the lips. Then, after recrossing the stream by a bridge of avalanche snow, I came to a moist meadow carpeted with marigolds and the first of a stately white anemone, larger by far than the A. narcissiflora of the Alps, later identified as the A. polyanthes which a little later covered the slopes so that they shone white from afar.

The valley swept round to the east and far above a sheet of silver birch forest shone the snows of Rataban (20,231 ft.) with a col to the north, a snowy parabola I had longed to tread in 1931. I had entered the Valley of Flowers and the reality exceeded my rosiest expectations. The base-camp was pitched at about 12,000 ft. at the topmost end of a long sloping shelf some 500 ft. above the valley floor. I cannot picture a more beautiful camping-site. Above and below an

The Garhwal shepherds are natural mountaineers, living simple, happy lives. This man brought the author sheep's milk every day, expecting nothing in return.
almost level sward were forests of silver birch fringed with cream and purple rhododendrons. Opposite, across the valley, stood the wall of rock peaks now revealed in all its magnificence: a wild uprush of giant crags biting into the profound blue sky, and at the head of the valley were the soberer snows of Rataban with a fringe of green-lipped ice-falls. Of the gorge there was no sign; it lay concealed round the bend of the valley so that to all intents we might have been cut off from the outside world in some exitless and inaccessible valley.

Spring had only recently come to the alp but already the moist turf was pulsing with life. Between the lank, dead herbage of the previous summer innumerable shoots were pushing upwards; some fat and stumpy, others thin and spearlike, all growing at that astonishing speed of mountain plants anxious to complete their cycle before winter sets in. A few plants were already in bloom: a minute gentian spread its blue, delicately frilled blooms over the turf; just above the camp were hundreds of *Primula denticulata* and here and there a white allium (*A. humile*) clustered, the bulb of which proved excellent to eat as did also the stems of a rhubarb.

Having dismissed the Dotials, I settled down with my four Darjeeling Bhotias to the happiest and most interesting few weeks of my experience. My time was apportioned fairly equally between flower-collecting and mountaineering. My ignorance as regards the former was lamentable, but I was greatly helped by *Beautiful Flowers of Kashmir*, by Ethelbert Blatter, which had been given to me by that great gardener, Mr G. P. Baker.
Immediately below the camp a rough sheep track descended through the birch forest to the torrent which was conveniently bridged with avalanche debris so that the north side of the valley was easily accessible. Here, on south-facing slopes, I found many plants in bloom. Never shall I forget a little alp, which I called Bear Alp because of a black bear we saw there, where I found the first of innumerable Nomocharis oxypetala, a rare golden lily-like plant which made a golden carpet rippling in the breeze. Later I collected 3000 bulbs from an area of well under one hundred yards square. Then there was a purple orchis (O. latifolia), potentillas, aconitums and rock plants, androsaces, saxifrages and sedums, already in bloom.

The climate resembled that of an English June and a gentle breeze brought an indescribable scent of plant life.

Very soon the alp around my base-camp was carpeted with flowers of which the most prominent to begin with was the Fritillaria Roylei with its delightful fragile green bells, whilst on a bank near the camp grew a charming little cassiope (C. fastigiata) with white pendant bells, and among rocks the white-pink spires of Bergenia Stracheyi. The woods, too, were rich in shade-loving plants including the wood lily (Trillium Gowanianum) and many ferns such as the maidenhair, oak, lady and moon-fern. Then the primulas. The scope of this article does not allow more than mention of a few. I came upon the rare Primula Wigramiana, recently found in Nepal and named in honour of Lord Wigram, a beautiful little ivory-white flower, and the still rarer Primula Heydei, a curious plant which like the P. sertulatum from the Pribilof Islands propagates itself by sending out runners, whilst the P. nivalis macrophylla, in its light blue and dark blue forms, decorated the inhospitable ledges high on the mountain-sides to a height of 16,000 ft.

My first ascent was on a rock-peak of about 17,000 ft. immediately above the base-camp, but in spite of the view, which extended along the Zaskar Range to the snows of Trisul and the peak of Nanda Devi, and a glissade on perfect snow of fully 4500 ft., I did not enjoy it as I was violently mountain-sick. Then we visited the snow col to the north of Rataban and I climbed alone an easy peak of about 19,000 ft. But our attempt on Rataban was beaten by bad weather. I awoke in the night with a feeling as though cobwebs were lying on my face. It was an effect due to electrical tension and a few seconds later there was a violent lightning flash which fortunately missed the camp. This was followed by a severe blizzard and to avoid avalanches we had to pack up camp and descend at five o’clock next morning.
Beyond the gorge it broadens into one of Earth's loveliest spots: the Valley of Flowers
(Above) The site of the first base-camp, fringed with silver birches and rhododendrons, looking towards the snows of Rataban. (Below) The camp to which the author moved during the monsoon, surrounded by flowers—100 different species within a quarter of a mile.
The four Bhotia mountaineers, veterans of several Himalayan expeditions, who shared the author's sojourn in the Valley of Flowers and his ascents of neighbouring peaks.

The camp fire, where, at the close of day and long after the sky is filled with stars, one sits content to do nothing but contemplate the beauty of the surroundings.
During this expedition I was much intrigued by a beautiful snow peak between 19,000 and 20,000 ft. high to the south of the Bhyundar Valley. After a reconnaissance we found a way to it via a branch valley of the main valley and, camping at about 14,500 ft., completed the ascent next day after a splendid snow and ice climb during which Wangdi Nuru and Nuru Bhotia proved that they were competent mountaineers capable of excellent work on Everest in 1938.

After this ascent the monsoon broke—on June 26—and the moisture-laden clouds flooded up the Alaknanda Valley into the Bhyundar Valley. But the monsoon in northern Garhwal is nothing like so heavy as it is in Sikkim, and provided that the mountaineer keeps near the Tibetan frontier he enjoys excellent climbing conditions. In the Bhyundar Valley there was occasionally heavy rain, which occurred mostly at night, and numerous afternoon showers, but these, combined with the warmth, had the effect of bringing the flora to full magnificence and beauty. For convenience’ sake I shifted my base-camp to the floor of the valley and here I was embowered amidst flowers. Among these were campanulas, cyananthus, codonopsis, gentians, pedicularis, cynoglossum, asters, erigerons, polemoniums, delphiniums, violas, cypripediums, geraniums, eritrichiums, saussureas, anaphalis and epilobiums to mention but a few. I should estimate that 100 different species were to be found within a quarter of a mile of the camp.

From this camp I made various expeditions. One was to a side valley leading to the Khanta Khal Pass over which a route lies to Hanuman Chatti in the Alaknanda Valley near Badrinath. This little valley is also rich in flowers and I climbed two minor rock-peaks from it on the top of one about 17,500 ft., finding the beautiful Paraquilegia grandiflora, a true rock-plant which sends out feathery foliage and delicate blue-white blooms from vertical cracks in the rocks. As an alpine gardener, flowers such as this excited my awe and wonder and a single little cushion plant growing on the stern-faced crags meant more than the exotic gardens of a Moghul Emperor. On one occasion I saw a saussurea and an androsace growing at a height of 20,000 ft., which must be one of the greatest heights at which flowering plants have been observed.

Among the plants I collected from high altitudes were, Primula reptans, Primula minutissima, saxifrages of several species including S. Hirculus, Jacquemontiana, cernua and fimbriata; Cremanthodium Decaisnei and C. arnicoides, lovely little plants like miniature sunflowers with drooping heads; Pleurospermum Candollii with white delicately frilled blooms; Allardia glabra and A. tomentosa, which grow among the stones and grit and resemble tiny pink marguerites; and a minute forget-me-not, to mention but a few.

Nor must representative, if more common plants be forgotten. Nothing can appear more beautiful than a slope rosy with millions of the little dwarf Polygonum affine or the creeping Polygonum vaccinifolium which clothes the crags with its close-packed pink blooms.

Lastly, and this is the queen of flowers in the central and western Himalayas, comes the blue poppy (Meconopsis aculeata) which grows, solitary, in the shade of boulders. Holdsworth compared its colour to that of the sky at dawn, and this is no generous comparison for its petals seem imbued with an unearthly, ethereal light.

The wall of peaks immediately to the north of my base-camp provided an incentive for a long and difficult rock-climb which failed, when Wangdi and I were only a few hundred feet short of the summit we were aiming at, owing to dangerous snow in a gully. At least, I estimated that the snow would have become dangerous by the time we returned. Monsoon conditions must be studied before safe mountaineering is possible, and
(Below) A side valley branching from the Bhyundar Valley led to a snow peak about 19,500 ft. high, which was climbed by the author and two of his Bhotia porters.

(Above) On the way up to this unnamed peak the climbers passed below a 3000-ft. rock face, where it was necessary to move quickly for fear stones should fall.
safe snow in the morning may become an avalanche trap by the afternoon.

Another expedition was up a fine rock peak of about 19,000 ft. Here for the first time in my Himalayan experience I found myself on rocks of a difficulty equal to that of the Chamonix Aiguilles. It was during the descent of this peak that Wangdi and I encountered some of the most dangerous climbing I have ever tackled. Being unwilling to traverse an exceptionally difficult rock-tower, we turned off the ridge above it and descended the face in a diagonal line to our ascending route. For about 200 ft. we had to climb down rock slabs set at an angle of over 50°, covered with an inch or two of ice, overlaid in its turn with loose floury snow. It was only possible to cut nicks for the toes in the ice and there were no belays for the rope. Of my companion I can only say that throughout this arduous descent he climbed with the skill and coolness of a Lochmatter. (I refer to the late Franz Lochmatter, one of the greatest of Swiss guides.)

My last and finest ascent was Nilgiri Parbat (21,264 ft.). On the way to this mountain, which was climbed from a valley parallel with and to the north of the Bhundar Valley, Wangdi, Nurbu, Pasang and I crossed a glacier pass of about 17,000 ft. and it was here that we saw tracks believed by my companions to be those of a Mirka or 'Abominable Snowman', about which much correspondence appeared in *The Times*. In the present instance the tracks were undoubtedly made by a bear (*Ursus Arctos Isabellinus*), but the snowman legend persists and I for one hope that there is a snowman, to say nothing of a snow woman and snow baby. In these prosaic days such a possibility is exciting and romantic.

Nilgiri Parbat proved the finest snow
and ice peak I have ever scaled and on the last day Wangdi, Nurbu and I climbed nearly 7000 ft., completing the ascent up a complicated ice-face and along the northeast ridge of the mountain. Never have I trodden a more beautiful snow summit; it formed a point of mathematical exactitude so sharp that there was room for only one man at a time on it.

On July 23, Captain Oliver joined me, and after attempting the ascent of Rataban we left the Bhyundar Valley via the Bhyundar Pass (16,688 ft.), and carried out a climbing programme which included the ascent of four peaks, the finest being the Mana Peak (23,860 ft.), and attempts on Nilkanta (21,640 ft.) and Dunagiri (23,184 ft.). From August 13 to September 16 we enjoyed only one completely fine day, but after the monsoon ended the weather remained perfect.

On September 23 I returned to the Bhyundar Valley to collect botanical specimens. It was a perfect morning as I strolled up the valley; the humid water-charged atmosphere of the past two months had been replaced by an atmosphere of crystal clarity and the air was charged with a new sweetness and strength. The cycle of growth had entered upon a new phase. By the hamlets in the valley millet was ripening to a deep magenta and the hillsides were tinted with brown and gold.

The shepherds and goatherds were driving their flocks down from the upper pastures before the first winter snow should fall. Among them was an old man who had supplied me with sheep's milk during my former stay. He had expected and demanded no payment but I had given him some empty biscuit tins, which are much prized by the simple Garhwalis.

Up to 14,000 feet silver birch, juniper and dwarf rhododendron provide abundant fuel. The last gives off acrid smoke which taints the contents of the pot. It is also difficult to kindle.
June in Garhwal: moisture-laden monsoon clouds flooding up the Alaknanda Valley from the foothills.
Nilgiri Parbat (21,254 ft.) provided the finest snow and ice climb in the author's mountaineering experience.
I would be the last to foist a so-called civilization on these people, for without any economic problems other than those set by Nature they have discovered something that millionaires cannot purchase—peace and happiness.

Having re-pitched my base-camp, I devoted my time to collecting seeds, bulbs, tubers and rhizomes. A late-flowering gentian (G. tenella) was blooming in its millions by the base-camp, so also were lloydias (L. serotina and tibetica), whilst pearly everlastings (Anaphalis) covered the banks like snow-drifts. Day succeeded day of brilliant weather; scarcely a cloud stirred in the profound blue and not a breath of wind rustled the withering herbaceous border: the silence was the silence of a vast ocean utterly calm.

One of the things that impressed me most during my sojourn in this enchanting valley was the cycle of growth. Perhaps in some romantic age when the herbaceous border is a thing of the past and the natural garden has come into its own the study of association and rhythm in plant life will receive the attention it deserves. Unlike the herbaceous border the natural garden has no formal limitations, and to achieve this desirable end we must study plant life in all its aspects and not only copy and emulate Nature but adapt her to our particular needs. In the Bhyundar Valley I saw ground so closely packed with fritillaries that it seemed impossible that other plants could grow; yet when the fritillaries had died down they were succeeded by other plants such as potentillas, which grew equally densely; and this cycle persisted throughout the summer, one plant being replaced by another with perfect precision.

Soil and association is another interesting study. Why is it, for instance, that the Orchis latifolia is to be found in association with thistles? Is there some interacting effect of nourishment, or some rhythmical effect not yet understood?

Rhythm in Nature is an absorbing study—witness the researches of Rudolf Steiner—and a vast subject awaits exploration by the natural gardener; there is no doubt that such gardening brings us in touch with Nature as no ordinary gardening can.

As regards the soil, analysis of some taken from the roots of Nomocharis oxyptela discloses moderate fertility, slight acidity and a large amount (33.8 per cent) of organic matter, i.e. leaf-mould, etc. From this and my own observations it appears that the flowers of Garhwal are most likely to flourish in a light soil with plenty of organic matter present.

It is to be hoped that the seeds and specimens I brought home, several of which have not previously been cultivated in Britain, will enrich many British gardens.

I cannot close this article without reference to the men who contributed so generously to my pleasure. When the final story of Everest comes to be written, the Sherpa and Bhotia porters will take their rightful place among the great adventuring races of the world; on an expedition such as mine it is impossible to regard them merely as porters; they are valued and trusted companions.

There is probably no mountain district in the world where travel and mountain-eering is more enjoyable than Garhwal and Kumaon, for they contain every combination of beauty and grandeur that the heart can desire: mountains innumerable, of all shades of interest and difficulty, and people of varied and delightful characteristics. It seems to me, looking back on the most delightful holiday of my life, that the Valley of Flowers is the summation of all that mountaineers love best; fine peaks to climb, valleys and glaciers to explore, and flowerful meadows to descend into after some splendid scramble above the snow-line. I conclude this account with my imagination centred upon the camp-fire, the flowers around me and the smoke from the birch and juniper standing straight up into the stars.