

## THE AFDIGAR PASS IN HUNZA

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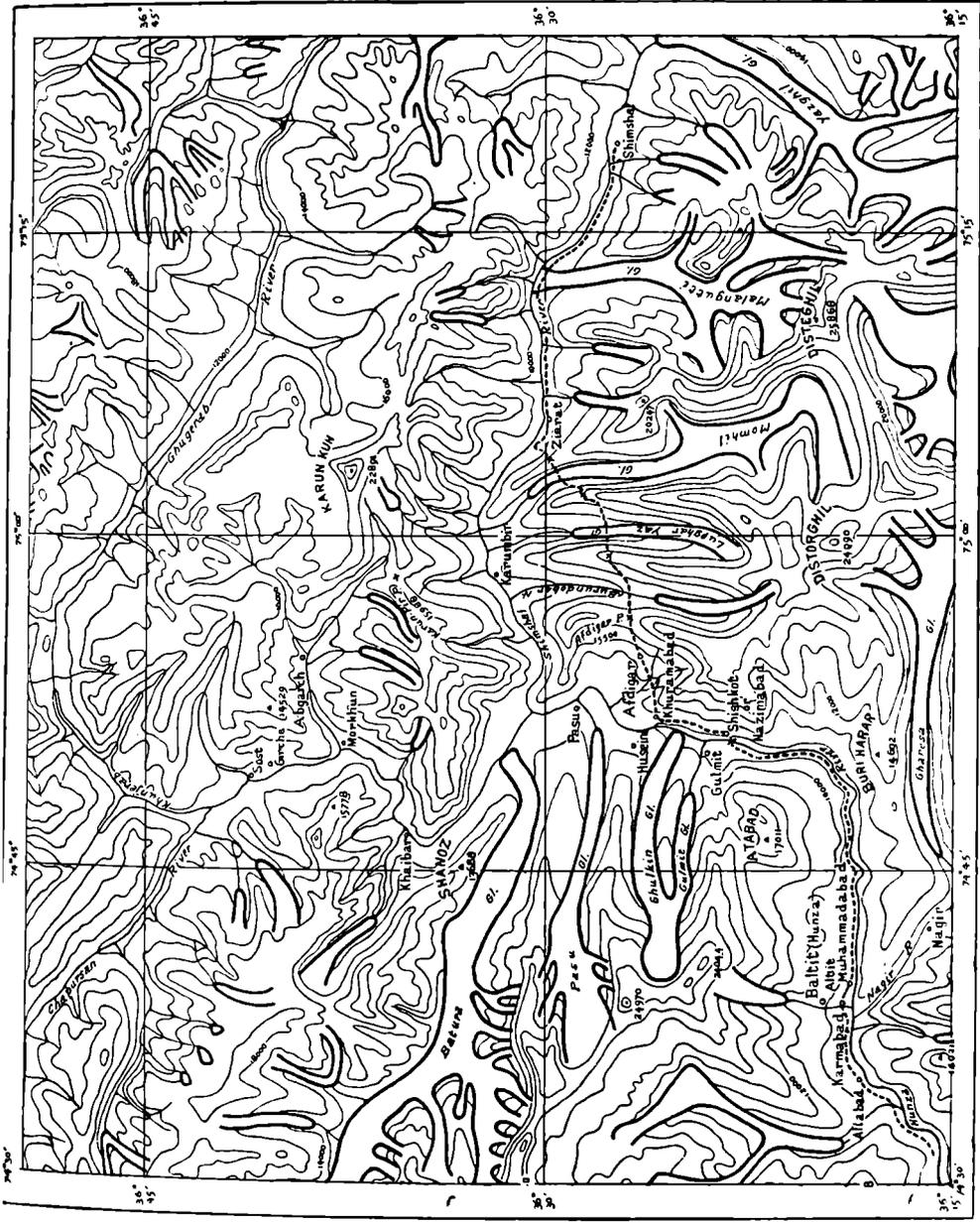
EARLY in the summer of 1945 I arrived in the Gilgit Agency on my way to the Shimshal valley (incidentally the spelling in the maps and elsewhere is Shingshal, which is incorrect) in the eastern part of the Hunza State. I had previously visited this area, and had done so by the Karun Pir pass, 15,988 feet, which is the normal approach to this remote valley during the summer. Having crossed this pass no less than three times, I had no wish to do so for a fourth, as there can be a monotony even in high places, and there is little pleasure in scrambling over a well-known pass.

On our arrival at Karimabad in Hunza, where the Mir resides, I was told that there was another approach to the Shimshal, over the Afdigar pass, and I was assured that this route was quicker, nearer and far less laborious than the Karun Pir. Indeed, I learned that a few years ago, when Mr. Eric Shipton and his party arrived in the Shimshal, as narrated in that jolly book *Blank on the Map*, one of the villagers took this route to inform the authorities of the coming of these strangers, and reached the Mir's palace in twenty-four hours. This is an impossible record even for a stout Shimshali hillman, but it is a good effort as a pleasing piece of mountaineering romance. Mr. Shipton would be shocked to hear that there was a difference of opinion in Shimshal whether his party were Germans or Chinese. Perhaps it was as well that these visitors proved to be neither.

My informant about this new way to the Shimshal area was the arbab or headman of that place, and he had been summoned to Hunza proper by the Mir to make arrangements about my journey. I should like to mention that the Mir, Mohamed Jamal Khan, had just succeeded his father. I had known the new ruler from boyhood, and I cannot speak too highly of his courtesy and help.

The arbab was a pleasant, elderly man who knew no language except his native Wakhi, a Persian dialect, as the people of Shimshal differ in speech and race from their neighbours in Hunza proper. After talking it over, we decided to try this new road; so after bidding farewell to the Mir we set out.

Our route lay up the Hunza valley, on the right of the river, 10 2 miles short of Gulmit. There the river was crossed by a small wire suspension bridge to Shishkut, now renamed Nazimabad, a growing hamlet on the left bank of the river. From there the track, such as it was, followed the left bank of the river to the Afdigar pastures.



Map by G. Whittle.

and the pass itself was immediately above, leading over the watershed on the left of the main Hunza valley into the outlying part of the Shimshal area.

From Shishkut we took supplies for four days, as the arbab, our guide, cicerone and chaperone, had told us a dozen times that we should reach Shimshal village in four marches. His information turned out to be incorrect. We had believed him up to now as he was the only person who had told us of this unknown route, and we were grateful to him for enabling us to traverse a way hitherto unvisited by any paleface and decidedly not on the map.

On starting from Shishkut, we at first followed the edge of the main stream, and were at once entangled in a series of terrific scrambles over rocks, involving in some places real rock climbing. The coolies were wonderful. We shoved, pushed, hung on by our eyebrows and toes, and at last reached a spur opposite the village of Huseini on the right of the valley. This piece of the road explained eloquently and silently why the Afdigar route was not fashionable, even amongst a race of climbers. Incidentally, the whole of this difficult march could be avoided by crossing the Hunza river at Huseini or at Pasu, by raft brought up from Gilgit. This narrative will show that there were other drawbacks to this route.

From the spur aforesaid we left the river, turned inland and moved gently up over a grassy plain, until we came to two large apricot trees, with some huts nearby, which formed the summer settlement of Khoramabad. In spite of the abundance of water, the only irrigated land consisted of a few grassy fields, and the inhabitants said that the water arrived too late in spring, and stopped too soon in summer to be of any use. They had tried, as some empty fields showed, to cultivate barley, but the water difficulty prevented this.

Our camp was under the apricot trees and we could see where the Afdigar pass should be. A glance showed that it would be impossible for laden coolies to cross it in one day from where we were. It meant a stiff ascent of at least 7,000 feet on end, and it was too much to expect from my party, willing and tough though it was.

The next day we left the apricot trees and the chikor, and rose steadily up the face of the hillside. We were in the game preserve of the late Mir of Hunza, Sir Mohamed Nazim Khan, grandfather of the present Mir, and at first we had a well-marked path to follow; the old Mir did not believe in walking, and always rode a yak on his shikar trips.

At 1 p.m., after a steady pull, the coolies said that they had had enough for the day. There was no other camping ground farther on and so we halted for the night at what I was told was Afdigar

itself. There was a ramshackle shepherds' hut, two tiny springs, abundance of wood and a pleasant level patch of ground for the tents. The aridity of the whole area was extraordinary, and I could well understand the failure of water lower down. Even now, early in the year, there was only just enough for us. There were many flowers, primulas and anemones especially. The growth of the juniper was remarkable; really fine trees were everywhere.

By this time, we had, I grieve to say, abandoned all confidence in the arbab, and discounted his remarks so much that conversation between us had degenerated into a few acid comments on his lack of knowledge.

The view from this camp was magnificent. We looked west over the very heart of the Hunza Karakoram. The peaks and glaciers of this wonderful mountain region were unfolded before us, and revealed secrets which anyone following the main route on the right of the valley would never know. The panorama of glistening snow and ice was far more majestic than anything that the Karun Pir had to offer, and amply compensated for any difficulties we had met with. We were exactly at the right height and at the right place to see the beauties of the Hunza mountains.

The following day was our third march from Shishkut, and we had to cross the pass. We were doubtful where it lay, there was no track of any kind, the arbab had no views at all, and we just had to grope our way up. We had sent, the evening before, some of the loads half-way up the hill, a device which saves much trouble on the actual day if the march be a long one. My headman, Daulat Shah of Hunza, long inured to exploring strange by-ways, went ahead and eventually found the pass. The climb to it was stony and slippery, but there was little snow as a rule. From the Afdigar camp we went up a grassy slope for an hour and a half, then over stone, followed by an awkward chimney for 200 yards, next up a very steep hill face for 250 yards and along a narrow ridge. The last 400 yards were very hard, especially on the coolies. In  $4\frac{1}{2}$  hours after leaving camp, we were at the top. Owing to an accident to my hypsometer I was unable to take any altitude, but I estimate the height at about 15,500 feet. Below, on the Hunza side, the whole vast expanse of mountain floated serenely in a cloudless sky. In front and below us, towards Shimshal, we could see the dome-like head of Distorghil, 24,090 feet, and not to be confused with Disteghil. Distorghil is at the head of the Lupghar Yaz valley, which is parallel to and immediately west of the Momhil glacier.

The Afdigar pass was a knife edge, with very little snow. It was not a place to linger on, and at 11.15 a.m. we started to go down. The descent was precipitous, indeed it was a headlong scramble

over shale, and I swore that I would never attempt this pass in the reverse direction. There was no view, except to the north-east, where the great peak of the Karun Kuh of the map, height 22,891 feet, was visible. This was called by the men the Ghamerz-i-Kisht. In about 2½ hours we had reached the foot of the hill, and came to a stop in the narrow nala of Burundobar (the Hunza name) or Shu-gardan-i-zor in Wakhi. This is marked on the maps as the Ghutulji Yaz, but none of my men, either Hunza men or Wakhis, had ever heard of this name. Here we spent the night. The water in the nala was inky black, flowing from a dirty little glacier, but there was a spring of good clear water, and ample firewood; so we were very comfortable. We found that we were wedged in a defile, and that the only exit was up the hillside opposite, a most unpromising route. We attempted to follow the stream down, but it soon entered a precipitous defile, and all progress was impossible. Even if we had gone down to where it joined the Shimshal river in the Pasu defile, it is most unlikely that we should have been able to find a way up that valley. The defile is impassible except for a couple of months in winter, and even then it is necessary to ford the stream a number of times.

Although the crossing of the Afdigar pass had taken us a good deal longer than either we or certainly the arbab had expected, it was comparatively easy in comparison with our next stage in the journey out of the narrow Burundobar nala. We could see from our camp that it was going to be a laborious business, and so it proved, and the ignorance of the arbab was a further and unexpected complication. The poor man had not the remotest idea of the way, and once again my men had to go ahead and find out the route. It was incidentally a curious trick of the coolies that they never followed the exact path which the advanced party marked out for them with stones. It nearly always happened that the coolies, chiefly I fancy to assert their independence, chose some other way, often a mere deviation but enough to show that they had their own ideas. They were usually wrong.

So once again Daulat Shah, with a couple of Shimshalis, led the way, and although he made unavoidably several false casts, did the job very well. The arbab trudged behind and took no part in the proceedings. I felt sorry for him, but as he obviously knew nothing and, when appealed to, had no opinion to offer, our sympathies vanished. I doubt if he had been over this route since the distant glad days of his blythe boyhood, some fifty years ago. No wonder his memory was a little obscured by time.

We left at 6.20 a.m., crossed a snow bridge, went up a narrow cleft in the hillside, and then up the open slope. We then groped

our way through a chimney, under a natural arch or short tunnel, and emerged on the stone and shale slopes high above the floor of the nala. Our main problem was to strike the right place over the watershed between the Burundobar nala, in which we were, and the Lupghar Yaz Nala, which adjoined. It would not do to reach the crest at any place, because we should not be able to descend on the other side. As a matter of fact, this is exactly what happened, as when we did reach the top, we found there was no way down, and had to scramble along the watershed searching for the proper place which led down. For a party with no loads, it was not so bad; but for our men, all carrying an average weight of kit, it was a very arduous business. The men had already climbed a good height, and every unnecessary yard they went was a real infliction. Even for unladen men a false cast was tiring enough.

It took us a long time to reach the top of the watershed. We had to use the ice-axe, man-handle loads, shove, push, use the rope and indulge in every device until after over nine hours' hard work, we found ourselves at the top. Indeed the Afdigar pass was a parody of a pass compared with this wearisome climb. The poor arbab came in for torrents of abuse. The coolies, tired, hungry and cross, naturally reviled him, and after all he had brought us here. If we had known that he had forgotten the way, we should have made different arrangements, economizing loads, and easing the men. I think perhaps that abusing the poor old boy rather relieved the coolies and took their minds off the fatigue and annoyance of the march.

It was a great relief to me when we arrived at the crest and found that we were again on another knife edge. There was a good deal of snow about, which was providential, as it meant that there was water for the men. Later in the year this would have disappeared, and the climb would have been much more tiring.

On the far side there was no water at all. The descent was even steeper than from the Afdigar, and although we passed many excellent sites for a camp, with abundant wood, we had to push on, as there was no water to be met with. At last we reached the rather rimy glacier that occupies every nala in this area. Here we found that we had water but no wood, the usual predicament in these parts where the one or the other of these requirements of a camp was always missing. On the far side of the glacier, a good way off, I proved, we could see the summer quarters of the arbab, and even one or two persons moving about. We knew, and the coolies knew even better, that by pushing on we should have all we needed, for our wants were few and easily satisfied. So we plodded over the glacier, and camped just short of the huts and sheep fold of our

friend. We were thankful to camp on a piece of level ground, after having been over twelve hours on the way.

As we had been told in Hunza that we should arrive at Shimshal village in four marches, we had only taken supplies for that time. We had now not enough to carry us to our destination. Fortunately, the arbab was able to sell us 20 lb. of flour, which would just last us, but if we had been able to procure more I should have halted a day in the Lupghar Yaz valley, as the whole party needed a rest. The food question, always the one anxiety on these journeys, obliged us to go on. Some of the men were anxious to be off: those that came from Hunza wished to go home, back over the Afdigar pass, as they were afraid of the rope bridge across the Shimshal river if they took the usual route via the Karun Pir. It is curious how all these hillmen detest the local bridges. They are fond of laughing at the sahibs, the Kashmiris and the like, for being nervous when going over a rope bridge, or one of their 'duts', a contraption not unlike a 'flying fox' type of bridge; but in fact the local hillmen dislike these methods quite as much as any outsider. Indeed, I have known Shimshalis ford a stream, with difficulty and danger, sooner than tackle a bridge. We saw six men leave early for Shishkut, which they said that they would reach the following day. Even so, that meant longer than the arbab's estimate. It shows, however, how indifferent the hillman is to an ascent. I doubt if it makes much difference to him if he goes up hill or down hill, and I have often been amazed at the extraordinary short cuts that he takes. These oblige him to struggle up some cliff or down a precipice just to save a few yards of easy road.

We could well spare the men who left, as we had eaten their loads of flour, and we picked up one or two men at the arbab's steading.

On leaving this camp in the Lupghar Yaz valley, we went over open grassy downs for a few miles. We had not gone far before the arbab, his son and two other men arrived with food for the party. The feast consisted of great pots of 'dao-dao', a soup or mixture of sour milk and flour, highly esteemed and very filling. It was alarming to look at, but every one fell to, and devoured the mess with avidity. I saw my Hunza boy, Mahbub Ali, a sophisticated youth whom I had left in Calcutta when I was in China, tucking into the mess with gusto. It was wholesome, filling and free. For me, the arbab produced a venerable billy-goat, father no doubt of many kids, but long past parenthood, and also a sheep. We thanked him warmly, excused ourselves from taking the beasts, but accepted some of the local bread, called 'khish', made with butter and very palatable.

With our bellies bursting with food, we plodded on, little realizing how far we had to go. The track soon left the easy downlike pasture (for there was a path) and then grew stonier, rising steadily to the watershed on the right of the valley, between the Lupghar Yaz and the Momhil. We descended from the crest into the Momhil valley, which seemed entirely occupied by its glacier. There was no grass, except at the extreme top of the valley, on the left: juniper and brushwood were scanty, and the surging glacier monopolized the entire valley, bursting out of its trough. At the head of the valley, the snows were superb, the highest point being 24,860 feet. The dome of Distorghil (24,090 feet) was almost wholly within the Lupghar Yaz, but we could see some of its snow overflowing into the Momhil.

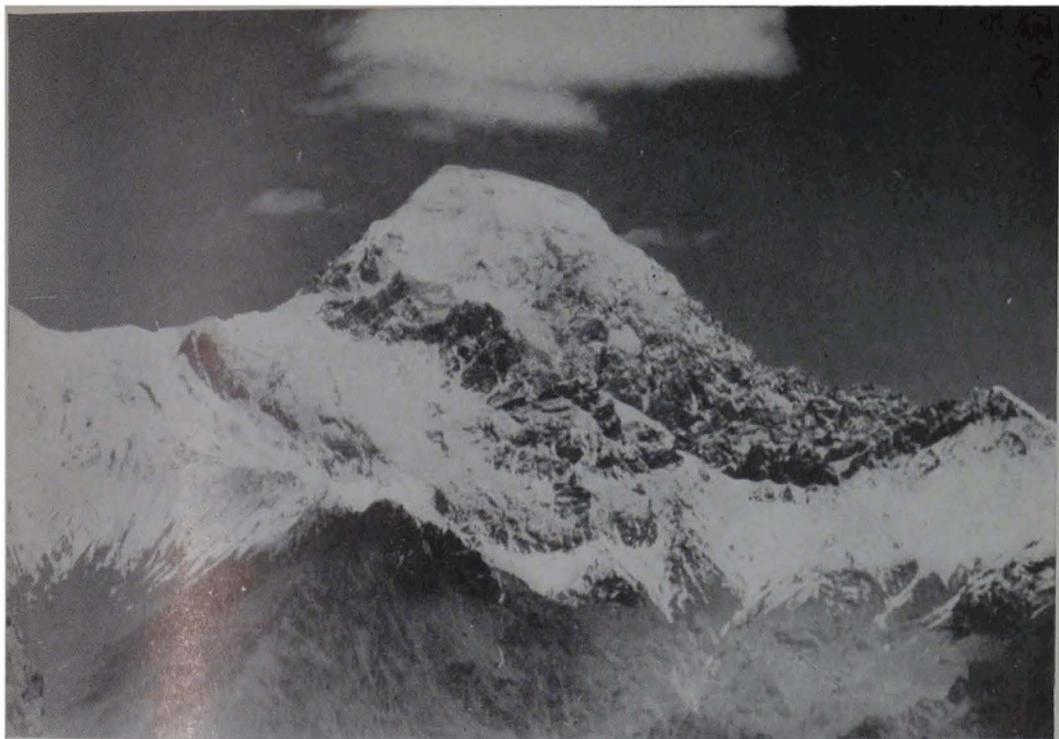
Although the moraine was not difficult, it took us nearly an hour to cross the glacier, and even to get on to the ice itself was an awkward business, as the clay sides of the trough offered no foothold. There were beautiful little lakelets of blue water dotted about the glacier.

We had to leave the Momhil by toiling up the right side of the valley, to a regular pass, and from there we went steeply down, at first over a rough rock trail, then down a soft shale slope, with clouds of dust rising high above us. We should, of course, have halted somewhere in the Momhil valley, but we all pushed on, for no particular reason. Perhaps we failed to realize how far camp was away. After this long steep drop from the crest of the watershed we arrived at the Shimshal river, but it was impossible to camp, as we had hoped. For one thing, it was not safe, and the danger from falling stones and earth was considerable. So on we went, shuffling in the heavy sand, or cursing over the stones. It was not until we had been thirteen hours on the road that we were able to reach camp, and by that time our thoughts were fixed solely on tea, food, and changing our feet, as the soldier would say. Jorums of hot tea soon dissipated the peevishness which possessed us all.

We had now joined the customary route from Hunza via the Karun Pir. The next day we reached Shimshal village, after six days of steady marching and without any loafing on the way. It was a saving of perhaps two days, but I doubt if the exertion made it worth while. Even the last march from the camp by the Shimshal river to the village itself was a long and boring one. The river had cut away the old road, we had to make considerable detours and it was an unexpected fatigue. It took us eleven hours to reach the hamlet. We should have halted half way, though as we were likely to spend several days in Shimshal itself, it did not matter very much. Generally speaking these long marches are a false economy, and it is always wise to make shorter ones, especially for the sake of the coolies.

It will be understood that we were glad when we arrived at the village. I think that if we had known the difficulties of the new route, we should have thought twice about taking it. One thing I certainly should have done, and that was to send all the extra loads via the Karun Pir, and take merely bare necessities over the Afdigar pass. The conspicuously bad march from the Burundobar to the Lupghar Yaz, as trying a piece of hill travel as one could find, did not justify carrying a single extra pound of kit. The gradient is most severe, and the mere difficulty of the terrain was a serious problem. The coolies did wonders, and I cannot speak too highly of them. There is one point in favour of the Afdigar route, and that lies in its being inconspicuous.

I think baiting the poor arbab relieved the men of much of the tedium of the journey. It was nice to have an Aunt Sally always present.



*Photo by R. C. F. Schomberg*

1. *Ghamerz-I-Kisht Peak in Shimshal from just below crest of Afdigar Pass on Shimshal side, looking north*



*Photo by R. C. F. Schomberg*

3. *Headman of Shimshal and son*



*Photo by C. W. F. Noyes*

1. *Ladakh peaks, from Glacier Three*



*Photo by C. W. F. Noyes*

2. *Above Glacier Three of Thajiwas Valley: Valehead Peak on the left*