

A HIGH WALK IN THE CENTRAL HIMALAYA

By A. D. MODDIE

A TIME comes when a man wishes to have his mountains and enjoy them painlessly. Then there are no summit ambitions, and one is content to see 'heaven in a wild flower'. Such a time had come when Gurdial Singh asked me to join him on a high-level crossing from Milam in north Kumaon (or Johār) to Bampa in north Garhwal. We intended to make this journey quite leisurely in a six-week circuit from Nainital to Dehra Dun, crossing six or seven passes on existing or old trade routes with Tibet. Their very names, Kungri Bingri, Unta Dhura and Shalshal La, were like wild mountain music. All we sought was our 'scallop-shell of quiet' and our 'scrip of joy', and we were content only to talk about others' 'gowns of glory' on high mountains.

Setting out from Kapkote we made as quickly as we could for Milam up the Goriganga valley. We wished to avoid both the heat and the rain of early June south of the main Himalayan divide. Gurdial was expecting the monsoon to break around the 24th June. But we had such a wet passage all the way from Kapkote to Bogdiar, which we reached on the 11th June, that his faith in the divide as a barrier was badly shaken. The leeches here had a strong partiality for him. Whether blood or flesh or bone, he had far more to offer, even though, at the time, Gurdial thought I consumed much more than he.

After these early rains the Gori was a torrent of brown fury. This side of the divide it falls several thousand feet in a few miles. In one place the river so forces a mad passage through narrow rock walls barely ten yards apart that it sends up a spray fifty feet high. The Gori has carved fantastic surrealistic shapes out of striated rock. In one place there was a large overhang of moss with water dripping down in perpendicular strings like those of a harp.

At last we crossed the divide after Bogdiar. We seemed to have left monsoonish weather behind, and we now emerged on the Milam side into an Alpine playground with white Anemones thriving in the wind, purple Primula on well-watered slopes, and clusters of Thyme in higher and drier places. There were white and red wild roses too along the way. Milam nestles in a wide valley at the entrance to the Unta Dhura and Kungri Bingri passes. It has

so impressive a background of rock and snow mountains that Gurdial called it a Chamonix or a Zermatt.

We spent three days in Milam, partly in sordid bargaining for pack animals, and partly in the giving of our surplus milk powder to the children of Milam. Of all hill people that either of us had known, the Milamese were the hardest bargainers, and among them we had to do business with the only man who had animals available so early in the season. We at last set out with six animals and two Joharis, Uttam Singh and Manaram. After Milam we would be above 15,000 ft. for three weeks.

Glad to turn our backs on the horse trader, we set off for Dung and the crossing of the Unta Dhura pass (17,640 ft.). We were the first in the season to cross. In fact, the Joharis were a bit amazed at our doing so because the Tibetan *surzi* (revenue official) had not yet come over to extend the customary invitation. As we were not going into Tibet but just up to the frontier, we saw no reason to wait for an invitation. Gurdial and I went ahead. Having passed a deposit of the bones of animal carcasses just below the ascent to the pass, we thought we might wait for the rest of the party. The rest was most welcome. After an hour we decided to climb up slowly over shale. It was heavy going in a rather breathless condition. To our amazement, we saw the rest of the party crossing the pass much ahead of us. They had followed another route. To cap it, Kallam Singh, our cook of 42 from the Doon School, was making the crossing of the Unta Dhura on the skyline above us at terrific speed and in a unique style. He literally went over by horse-power, holding on to the tail of a pony. All he had to do was to put one foot before the other in quick succession. The animal pulled him on. This, incidentally, was also his altitude record up to then.

By the time we reached the top, Uttam Singh and Mana had cut steps in the ice on the far side to enable the animals to descend. They had an anxious time in cold and blowing weather, but now, as always, they did their job competently. Cold winds and sleet drove us down to Topidunga, but we were compensated by an abundance of blue Primulas and yellow Potentillas on lush banks after we got off the snow. On our side there were these lovely little flowers facing the stupendous bare granite features opposite. Seldom is there such a vast contrast in nature in colour, form, size and spirit facing each other across a little nameless stream.

Arriving at the lush green camp site at Topidunga we crawled into our tents cold and wet, with a cheerless clouded prospect outside. And so it remained for the next two idle days. We had

earlier intended to make the Kungri Bingri pass, but in that cheerless mood Kungri Bingri was left behind as an unfulfilled wish, too extended an exercise for pleasure, for we would have had to go back 10 miles and cross another intermediate pass, the Jandi Dhura (18,410 ft.), on the way. So we stayed on to see what joys Topidunga offered, and it had much to offer when the weather would clear.

Next morning we had one delightful hour before being shut in again. We awoke to find a white mantle of new snow all around, but with the sun's first gentle touch it was transformed into green pasture again. Up above, the new snow clothed the austere, rugged rocks of Jandi and Khingur as with a white lace. But the early morning scene westwards down the Girthinganga towards Uja Tirche (20,350 ft.) had the quality of a Japanese painting. Dim snow shapes were delicately visible through thin veils of cloud and mist. There were no sharp lines between white or brown ridge and blue sky. A light brush painted mountain, sky and mist into one exquisite composition on silk. Then, as the sun's strong power rose with the day, Japanese art gave way to clear-cut Swiss scenes of mountain and green alp, and the magic of mist dissolved.

Between the glistening rivulets the blue Primulas smiled and tossed in the wind at the prospect of this cheerful morning hour. As we breakfasted out of bright-coloured polythene cups on the green grass, Gurdial thought 'bliss was it in this dawn to be alive'.

For the rest of the day we were driven into the tent again by bad weather, there to talk of life on Mars and the Chinese across the border. To make the depressing prospect lighter we read verse to each other, and made joyful noises with flute and the rat.

The third day our patience was rewarded. Under the sun and a clear blue sky we roamed the heights around photographing flowers. This may seem like play, but it was a breathless business, running up and down banks finding just the right picture, then waiting for the breathing to slow down and steady the hand before a cloud came over or the wind shook the flower. Meanwhile, one waited long minutes in a cold wind. Altogether it was a day of poetry and pleasure. There were banks of Primulas in profusion, from pale violet to purple in round clusters. But the prize of the day was Gurdial's discovery of four white Primulas, of the species *Primula Schlagentweitiana*. We had not known them in this colour before. All the summits around were fresh and clear in their new mantle of snow; only Uja Tirche was enclouded down the Girthing valley. On such a day there is no envy for summiters. At this elevation of 15,000 ft. we could enjoy this alp, bask in the sun's warmth, and

yet find close companionship with the peaks around—all in long, quiet admiration; no breathless race to the top.

On the 20th June we crossed the Khingur pass (17,270 ft.), the toughest we had yet crossed. The ascent began from the Girthi gorge. Murray once described it as being as impressive as the famous Rishi Ganga. At the point of crossing the gorge was barely ten yards wide, and the scenery around was like that of the Grand Canyon, but here the rock strata was diagonal and diabolically distorted. Ice still filled the gorge and steps had to be cut for the animals. The 2,700 ft. ascent to the top of the pass in two miles was steep and unrelenting, save for the last half mile. These slopes had loose scree at a very steep angle. They could be dangerous after a shower. Uttam Singh told us the pass was no longer used, but the pioneers who made the way must have been ingenious and brave.

After crossing the Khingur we came down to the promised land of Laphthal, a bowl of green grass under a clear blue sky in the warm sun. Turning our heels on the monsoon, we asked ourselves, was this really the high land of escape beyond the Himalayan divide, in the lap of the Zaskar? We were less than four miles from Tibet as the crow flies. If one of the main purposes of the trip was to seek flowers and fossils, the walk to Laphthal provided both. We came up from Chikmagu cautiously, like hunters in hushed expectation, to take a close look at the fleeting 'burhal'. We saw no 'burhal'. Instead, we came upon the ages-pent ammonite fossils. These were only the first in a thirty-mile belt from the source of the Kio Gad to the Tunjan, far above Bara Hoti. Here, as elsewhere along this route, these fossils had us excited and searching. The Geological Survey of India have since confirmed they are ammonites of the Upper Jurassic age. There were the plants too, now mostly of the mountain desert type. The caragana bush was everywhere except on the steepest scree slopes. There were yellow *Corydalis* and blue *Geraniums*. More white *Primulas* and purple *Asters*. But the flower which stole my heart was the tiny white *Androsace* (or so we thought, till Gurdial later discovered they were the hopelessly unpronounceable *Lamium rhomboideum*). They hid in coy clusters on the north-facing slopes of the Khinga in the shelter of rock or caragana bush, and there was nothing prettier here.

At Laphthal and at Sagchatalla we lived the life of Lotus-eaters. So lazy were we that the distance between the two camp sites was only three miles, and we joked about the 'teen mile ka padāv' or the three-mile stage. After we ate we dropped down to sleep in the sun. While all, including the dog, slept, nothing stirred but the

wind in the air and the water in the stream. Even Manaram, our muleteer, snored, and his animals were let loose to graze. Here was delicious peace. We at last found escape from monsoon clouds.

‘And hope revives—the world has changed its face
In that short time, away then to the pasture’,

and that is where we were, where horses graze leisurely, and men and dogs sleep in the warm afternoon at 14,500 ft. Why should we alone toil when nothing else around seemed to toil; only the cloudlets floated on gently.

The next day, June 23, was one of those few glorious God-given days on some high point of peak or ridge or pass. The weather clears, the face of heaven shines, and the prospect around is so sublime that to return is like returning to one's lower nature. To turn back is a wrench; but before one does that one savours every moment of peace, of solitude, of beauty. Sometimes those moments are the reward of toil, sometimes for bearing up with bad weather or danger. To us the reward came cheaply, for bearing up with early monsoon conditions perhaps. For the climb to the Bancha Dhura pass (17,660 ft.) is one of the easiest.

The great expectation we nursed on the way up was to see Kailash on the Tibetan side. As we came over the top of the pass in clear weather under blue skies, all eyes were for the holy mountain, of which Kalidas had once sung. But it was hidden behind a ridge in the near distance. For a few minutes Kailash was forgotten, for there, before us, was a bright carpet of yellow Ranunculus; such an affirmation of life and beauty in this bare brown landscape so high up. They captured our hearts instantly, and stole our thoughts from Kailash.

As we turned, behind us we saw the entire Central Himalaya lifting itself up like a colossal canvas, all but the Panjab-Chuli group. Hardeo and Tirsuli, both near, both over 23,000 ft. commanded the view. The two undisputed sovereigns, Nanda Devi and Kamet, rested in quiet assurance in the background, and all around them lay their famous satellites in clear array, Nandakot, Nanda Devi East, Chaukhamba, Abi Gamin, Mana and Mukut Parbat.

Where was Kailash? We turned our eyes to Tibet again, and moved up the Bancha Dhura ridge to a rock height about 18,200 ft. There Kailash was, fifty miles away, the only white mountain in a brown land. It had the quality of Shangri-La, a remote and heavenly place. We sat and photographed on red rocks covered with a red ochre fungus, like *kum-kum*. The south wind brought little white flakes of snow over the ridge. They flew over like butterflies.

Nothing else stirred, there was no visible life. Kallam Singh, our cook, pressed us with questions about the towns and villages of Tibet—where were they?—and about the origin of the earth. He had achieved three things this day, and this was his reward. He had crossed 18,000 ft. for the first time; he had had the 'darshan' of two holy mountains on one day, Nanda Devi and Kailash; he had gone up 3,000 ft. in 3 hours at 140 heart-beats to the minute, at the age of 42 with a waist-line of 42. All this, he solemnly said, he would record in his 'dairy'. This memorable experience would go down beside the prices of potatoes and onions. It reminded Gurdial too that it was the anniversary of his ascent of Trisul, and it was a fitting day.

When Kallam and Manaram went down, Gurdial and I lay among the yellow flowers to drink our fill of stillness and colour and mystery. We ate and looked over the mysterious plateau before us, so boundless and remote, so unpeopled, and yet also the scene of the latest international crisis. Whilst talking to Kallam a few minutes earlier we had told him that all things change, like the clouds, only some take longer, like rocks and mountains.

I came down from the Bancha Dhura. After this we made our way westwards towards Bara Hoti, stopping at Lake Camp and climbing the col on the Tibetan border at 18,700 ft. On the way we crossed three easy passes in a day, the Chhojan La, the Shalshal La, and a nameless one of about 16,400 ft. Our last stop before Bara Hoti was at the camp site of Atis Sem, where there was another mine of ammonite fossils. Before the sun went down I collected a few more, and here they seemed finer specimens. Then the sun sent its setting rays right through the tent door, and, outside, it made the streams flowing through the green meadow sparkle like quicksilver.

On July 2 we left Bara Hoti to cross the Chor Hoti Dhura (17,900 ft.) and return to Joshimath. By 4 p.m. we arrived at Bamjar below the pass. It was wet and windy on the way up. We debated whether to make it a long day and cross by 7 or 8 p.m., but wisely decided to do so in better weather next morning when we could photograph.

We awoke at 5 and left at 6 a.m. The climb up the Chor Hoti was mostly over scree and rock, but the early morning scene was delightful. On one side were the red-rock Marchok peaks of the Zaskar range. From one angle the 19,450 ft. Marchok peak was like the Mustagh tower. Its twin summits went gold with the touch of the dawn. On the other side, the snow slopes and glaciers were

of the Himalayas proper. It was good to tread on snow after so much scree on the last slope up to the pass.

When we arrived there at 8 a.m. we were just in time. This was another purple day. To the south the Central Himalaya shot up like white swords and black daggers. It was a magnificent view of the fluted ridges, the ice-walls and the challenging white summits of Trisul and Dunagiri, Nanda Devi and Tirsuli, Lampak and Nanda Ghunti. To the west, the white tops of Kamet and Mana were like iced cakes over chocolate ridges. All this was given to us for just half an hour before the clouds rose all around to obscure the view.

At Bampa we spent our last evening around a camp-fire with Uttam and Mana. After so many days of wonderful companionship they now had to return to Milam and to their high passes; we to the lowlands. Mana, the poor shepherd boy who had barely spoken half a dozen sentences in all these weeks, now spoke with emotion: 'Tomorrow where shall we camp apart? The thought makes me sad.' He, at last, was able to speak for all of us. In the morning they left us with their last night's embers still burning behind them.