Mountains and a Monastery

by

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'He who goes to the Hills goes to his Mother'

HINDU PROVERB

TO

P. N.

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P. H.

CHAPTERS

ILLUSTRATIONS

MAPS

MOUNTAINS AND A MONASTERY

CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings

IT WAS ALL THE GENERAL'S FAULT. WE NEVER MEANT TO GO BACK. Judy and I were married while I was still at Cambridge, and for our honeymoon, delayed until after my finals, we embarked on our first Himalayan Expedition. The venture had been fairly successful—four peaks, three of them virgin, were climbed, and a lot of new ground was seen—and I was satisfied. We returned to England intending to settle down and find some sort of permanent job.

The General had been to an adjoining area in the Himalayas. His area, like ours, was inadequately mapped, and being an enthusiastic cartographer he had combined peak-bagging and map-making. I had unwittingly touched on the fringes of his domain. Worse, I had inadvertently taken photographs of some of his peaks.

The General was merciless. He began with a softening-up campaign, sending a reprint of an article which he had published in the *Alpine Journal*.

Next came the direct assault. Judy and I were invited to supper. While she was being won over with subtle flattery my glass was surreptitiously filled again and again. In my fuddled condition I found myself agreeing how important it was that a proper map should be made which covered both his area and ours. I made extravagant promises about the help I would give, I even invited the General down to our home in the country for the week-end. By the close of the evening I was committed irrevocably.

All winter we worked together at our map. At last we finished; we had done as much as we could. There were still many question marks and blank spaces, but we had exhausted our knowledge of the area. Every photograph had been scrutinised, every angle checked. That, I thought, was that.

But no, the General was not satisfied. "There is only one thing to be done," he said. "Someone must go back and fill in the blanks on our map."

I could see what he was hinting at. That 'someone' was meant to be me. I protested, pointing out the impossibility of his suggestion. I had to find a job. My mother in America and my parents-in-law closer at hand were clamouring for a sign that I would at least realise my responsibilities and settle down. They could not be fobbed off with vague promises much longer. Further, Judy and I were not only broke, we were still in debt from our first expedition. I explained all this to the General.

He nodded. "Of course, of course." Then he went on to enumerate in detail the tasks that must be done, the peaks that should be climbed, the bearings that must be especially carefully noted. Still referring to a 'someone' who would go back.

A week later Judy and I happily set about organising an expedition for our return.

Our first problem was money. Unless one intends to climb an Everest, funds are not easy to come by. The cost of the first expedition, when six of us went, had been in the region of £2,500.

Fortunately for the intending expeditioner there are a number of august institutions which can be prevailed upon to help. The only drawback is the interview which invariably precedes such assistance. But the ordeals were worth while, for the Everest Foundation (for the mountaineering), the Royal Geographical Society (for the exploration) and an Eminent Geologist at Cambridge (for a certain species of fossil we were to collect) between them provided a third of our financial requirements. To them grateful thanks.

To cut costs we applied to a number of manufacturers for free goods or discounts—in return I offered them photographs of their goods in use at high altitudes. The response was overwhelmingly generous. I would pay tribute to this benevolent attitude of so many manufacturers.

We even tried advertising, but our campaign was as brief as it

was unspectacular. *The Times* hedged a little, but at last they agreed to print the following in their agony column:—

'*Young Explorer, desperate to finish work begun in hitherto unexplored Himalayan area, seeks Patron. Write Box No.* ——'

The response was not everything we could have hoped for. A London typist, a Surrey octogenarian and a New Zealand schoolmaster all wrote to say that they had no money and no experience, but they would like to visit the Himalayas. We had looked for an over-rich duchess seeking immortality with a mountain named after her—alas, we were disappointed.

We found it was easier to ignore our second problem, the pacification of our parents.

A third problem was the choice of companions. The best intentioned expeditions have 'personality problems', as the briefest glance at expeditionary literature will show. When living together in difficult conditions tempers are certain to become frayed in time. It is not a question of whether or not there will be quarrels, it is a question of how serious they will become.

The General was of course the instigator of our whole ghastly predicament. But he was much too clever for us. He assisted, he advised, he abetted, but somehow whenever the question of his coming arose the topic was circumvented. I felt like a young subaltern being sent by his colonel to attempt a hazardous assault. The colonel does not order, but the subaltern cannot refuse. The colonel advises and instructs, but it is clearly understood that he will not be coming. Rather he will watch with interest from a safe distance. The subaltern goes into the breach feeling that an injustice has been done, but he is not quite sure how.

After the General, Trevor Braham was our first choice. He had been my climbing partner the previous year and we had got on famously. Moreover with eight Himalayan seasons behind him he would be a valuable addition to any expedition. Alas, he could only answer 'perhaps', and in the event he could not get leave from his firm in Calcutta for the right time.

I was looking for only one other member, a climber. But he

must be able to contribute £350 to our funds and this, understandably, was beyond the means of most of my climbing friends. Others were doing National Service, or were involved in a job which allowed them a paltry two weeks' holiday a year, or were caught up in the tangles of impending matrimony.

The solution was found close at hand when Garry, Judy's brother, offered to join us. He could find the money, and better still, his prowess was guaranteed by the fact that he had just failed his National Service Medical. Best of all, I knew him to be even-tempered and not too argumentative.

Surprisingly no book has been published which tells you how to organise an expedition. But it has been written: 'If there are a few things to be done, then it is a good plan to make a list of them; if there are many things then that list should be made longer; but if those things are seemingly endless, then no list will even be made, for the threshold of the fantastic has been reached; any attempt by anyone is met with his own hollow laughter.'

We made no lists.

The day of sailing approached rapidly and much still remained to be done. But the General was firm. Giving us a sheaf of final instructions he wished us luck and pushed us off to Wales for a fortnight's recuperation and climbing. The weather was good and the rock dry, and we managed a gentle walk or two.

Thence to Liverpool and our boat. A telegram awaited us. It was from the Indian authorities. Our itinerary was sanctioned but a Security Officer would be sent with us at our own expense. We were dumbfounded. We had no extra funds. He might cost us a hundred pounds or more. I at once began to think in terms of drowning him in one of those swift mountain nullahs[1] if all else failed. Easy to stage an accident. Garry and I worked out the details on our way to Bombay.

Perhaps before I go any further I should explain a little about Spiti. Properly pronounced 'Piti (so it is not rude to call the locals

[1] Torrential streams.

Spitoons, for it sounds like 'Pitoons), Spiti can be translated as 'The Middle Country'. Which is sensible enough; for centuries it was a sovereign buffer state between the kingdoms of Tibet, Ladakh and the Punjab.

Lying entirely to the north of the Great Himalayan Divide (it is about 250 miles due north of Delhi on the map), Spiti enjoys a truly Tibetan climate; cold dry winters, hot summers, above all no monsoon, indeed little or no rainfall. The barrier of the massive Himalayan Divide effectively shuts out the moisture of the southern plains. With no monsoon one can climb and trek there in comfort throughout the summer months, June through September. During the other eight months of the year the province is completely snowbound. Trade, communications, agriculture, almost life itself come, to a standstill.

Altogether there are four approaches to Spiti; but the two from Tibet can be discounted for all practical purposes so long as the Bamboo Curtain remains firmly in place. Of the other two routes, the easier but longer starts near Simla, following the Sutlej River to reach the mouth of the Spiti River, a tributary of the former. This route is the famous Hindustan-Tibet Trade Route of old. The shorter and more difficult route starts at Manali in the Kulu Valley, pushes its way over the 13,000-foot Rohtang La, up the Chandra River, over the 15,000-foot Kunzum La, and so into Spiti. The former route involves a trek of perhaps a hundred miles, the latter sixty miles.

So Spiti does not exactly force itself into one's itinerary in the normal course of events. Nevertheless a number of English travellers, Government officials on tour or Army officers on leave, visited the province during the last century, after it was annexed in 1846. The spies in Kipling's *Kim* also travelled through Spiti. And with the publication of the official Gazetteers its inhabitants, customs, agriculture, indeed whole way of life was systematically written up.

Only the mountains remained untouched. One would have thought that in a province with a mean height of 15,000 feet, and with more than two hundred peaks, the mountains would

have received attention. But the Victorian travellers dismissed them with a descriptive sentence or two. Mountaineering was then in its infancy (or, according to mountain historians like Sir Arnold Lunn, its 'Golden Age') and mountaineers were the eccentric few.

So the peaks of Spiti remained relatively untouched. And apart from the main valley, where the entire population, all 2450 of them, live, Spiti remained unmapped. The surveyors of the 1850's and 1860's had made faint sketches on their maps to indicate where they thought the tributary nullahs might run, and they had triangulated a few of the major peaks. Nothing more.

When we first went in 1955, five peaks had been climbed (three of them, on the borders of Spiti, from other provinces; the two others, especially easy, by early surveyors in the course of their work), and a quarter of the province had been accurately mapped. There seemed lots of scope for us. But we were not particularly hopeful. Politics, in the form of a tightened frontier policy, had intervened. More than half the province, all that lying to the north of the Spiti River, had been declared out of bounds by the Indian Government. Along the whole of the Indian-Tibetan frontier an imaginary line had been drawn, 'The Inner Line'. As a rule it ran ten to twenty miles inside the frontier. No foreigner was allowed across this without special permission, not available to exploratory or scientific expeditions.

North of the river was out-of-bounds. South of the river did not offer much chance of success. Three parallel gorges ran north-westwards from the Main Divide and during the summer months while the waters ran high with the melting snow these were thought to be impenetrable.

Last year Trevor Braham and I had, with the help of our three stalwart Ladakhi porters, penetrated one of these three gorges, climbed four peaks and seen a panorama of unclimbed and uncharted mountains—a whole new world to be explored. From the photographs and bearings we had taken from these four peaks we had been able to add to the General's map. Now we were returning to fill in the very considerable blanks which still existed.

CHAPTER TWO

Approach to Spiti

THE KULU VALLEY, AND MANALI IN PARTICULAR, IS FAMOUS throughout India for its superb fruit. Alas, we arrived too late for the cherries and too early for the pears.

Nevertheless it was wonderful to be back in Manali. We met many old friends. And best of all, two of the three Ladakhi porters we had had with us the year before were there to welcome us and to volunteer for another expedition. Both come from Ladakh, a mountainous province to the north, part of the ancient Kingdom of Western Tibet. Both had proved themselves excellent companions, willing workers and fine friends; we were overjoyed to see them again. Rikzen, who for simplicity's sake we called Rinsing, was the climber of the two. He had come with Trevor and me to all four summits the year before, and I knew him to be a very promising mountaineer. Small, wiry and strong, he had proved himself immensely capable on difficult ground; he was the natural leader of the other Ladakhs. Sunom was a philosopher-clown. The oldest of all of us—he was twenty-six—he combined a sophisticated intelligence with a wonderful sense of humour. With his gift for mimic he often had us helpless with laughter. At our request they brought two friends with them, also Ladakhis. They both had Rinsing's recommendation, and that was enough for us. Their names were Jolsun and Angrup, but the former we called Washing, for he was Rinsing's friend.

We also met our Security Officer, Pran Nath. For brevity we called him P. N. I was heartened to learn that not only had he found his way to Manali at his own expense, but he had also brought with him his own equipment, thereby saving us a considerable outlay. Indeed his equipment was, except for the boots, much better than ours. But his boots were monstrosities —heavy armour-plated ski-ing boots in which he could hardly

move. Perhaps he would not cost us so much after all. That did not mean that I had relented. He had a week to prove his worth, before we came to the first nullah suitable for his grave. But when that evening he secured for us the twelve ponies we needed, and at a reasonable rate, I began to wonder if we were mistaken. Perhaps he might be allowed to live after all.

For hiring ponies is a difficult business at the best of times, and it involves a considerable loss of time. Ponies are always in demand, so their owner is in no particular hurry to hire them out. It is up to you to convince him that he is missing a golden opportunity if he does not hire his ponies to you, even though you are only giving him the normal return. The bargaining revolves around pony-days, so much for each pony per day; the pony-wallahs who come to look after the ponies (or ghoras) are no responsibility of yours. They feed themselves and they are paid by the owner, for whom they work. The pony-owner starts high, you start low, and with luck a price is agreed upon. The essence of a really successful agreement is that both sides go away feeling they have got the better of the other.

But the actual bargaining is only half the battle, as we discovered the morning we were due to leave. We had ordered twelve ponies, and at the appointed hour twelve arrived. Rinsing had sorted out our boxes into twelve fairly equal loads, but when the ponies had been loaded, and two boxes still remained, it was apparent that something was amiss. Our ghora-wallah was quick to point out that we would need thirteen ponies.

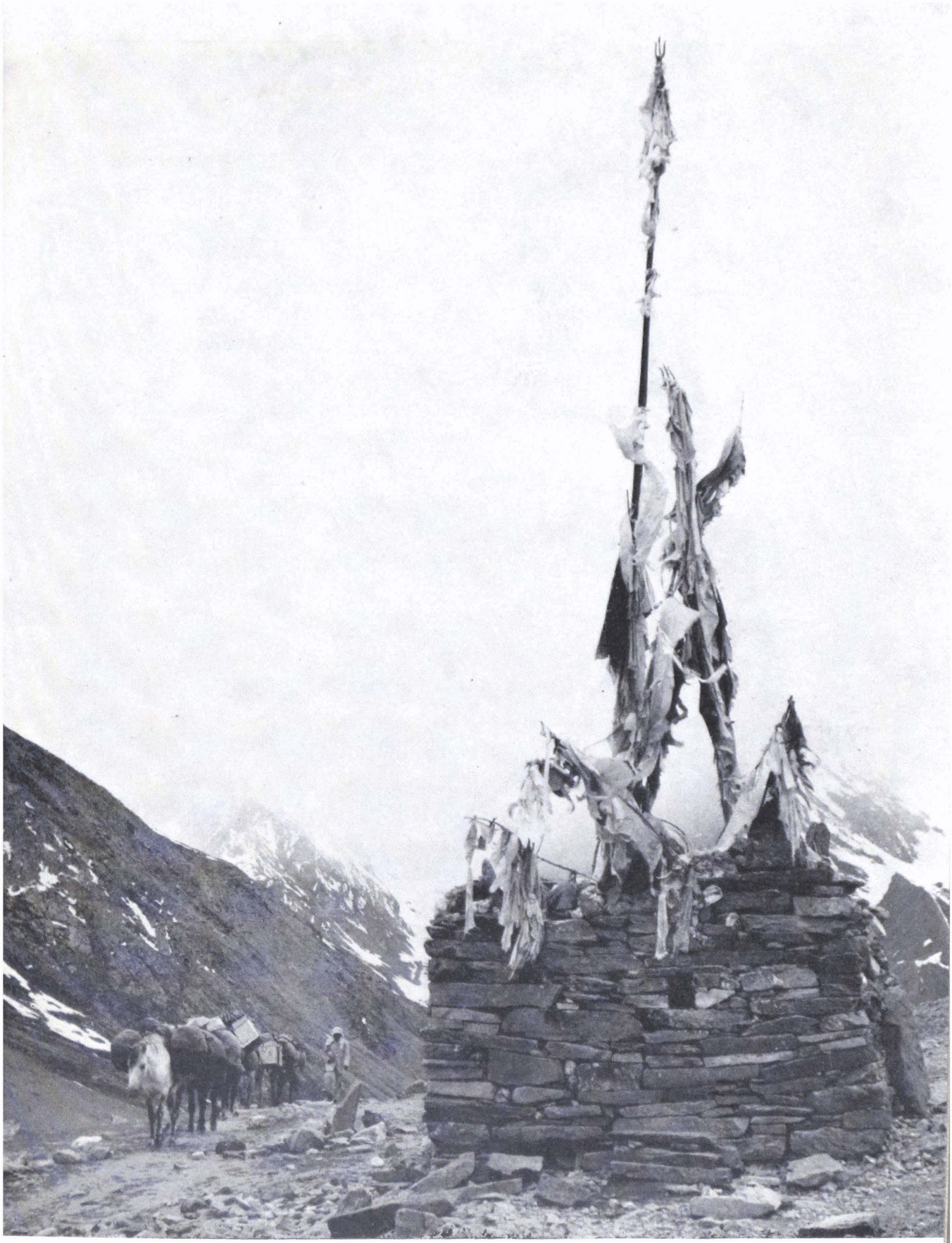
"All right, go get the thirteenth pony. Quickly!"

"But sahib, it is impossible. It will be two days before another pony can be got down from the hills."

P. N. took over. "Don't be silly," he said to the ghora-wallah. "Those strong ponies of yours have hardly half loads on them yet. They are supposed to carry two maunds[1] each, and they are carrying nothing like that."

"Sahib, they are weak animals yet, they have not recovered from the difficulties of the winter. Besides, the passes we must

[1] A maund is 82 lb. approximately.



PRAYER FLAGS AT THE SUMMIT OF THE KUNZUM LA (14,931 ft.)
Our ponies passing the La-tso

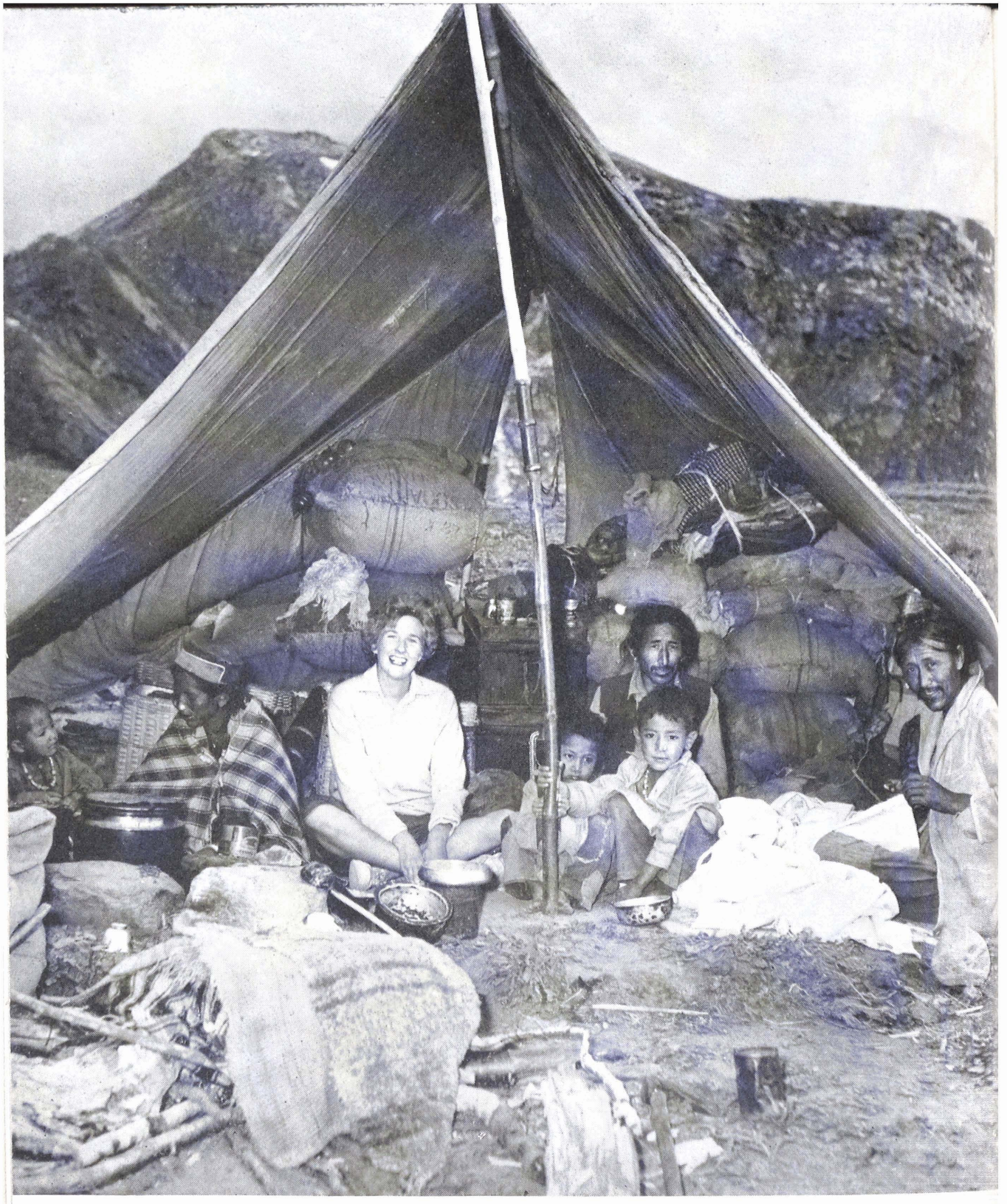
TIBETAN NOMAD MOTHER AND CHILD

A PITI WOMAN WEARING HER JEWELLERY

The key and safety-pins are highly prized

SUNOM

RINSING



JUDY WITH A KULU TRADING FAMILY AT MURREE

cross are exceedingly high and difficult, there will be much snow on them still, and the ghoras will have troubles. Also the nullahs we must ford are swift and very deep." He dramatically put his hand above his head to indicate the depth of these terrible nullahs.

P. N. shifted his tactics. "Look. I can pick this box up easily." (But he did not try.) "It weighs nothing, merely a token."

"Sahib, it is impossible."

"I have special information that the passes are bereft of snow and that there is a scarcity of water, the nullahs are so low."

"Sahib, you joke with me."

"We could make it worth your while."

The ghora-wallah was interested. "It is impossible, sahib."

P. N. came and conferred with me. "If we offer him pay for thirteen ponies then they will take everything on twelve. Otherwise we may have to wait a day or two."

I knew this to be true. The ghora-wallah was effectively blackmailing us, he held us in the cup of his hand. His master, the owner of the ponies, would never see the extra fee, but if we went to him and denounced his servant he would laugh and the ghora-wallah would deny everything. Anyhow, such is not the way of the hills.

"All right," I said, "we will pay for thirteen ponies. But only until the food in the two extra boxes remains. Then we will pay for twelve."

This compromise was acceptable all round and what had been declared flatly impossible a few minutes before—the loading of the extra boxes—was now found to be well within the bounds of possibility. Indeed one pony had been kept back with a large but especially light load for just this purpose.

P. N. summed the whole episode up nicely with his awkward homely English: "I understand that in England also the workers are loco." I was liking him more every minute.

We were off into the hills at last. The caravan stretched out. All twenty of us. Two climbers, one wife, one security officer,

four porters, two ghora-wallahs and twelve ghoras, carrying their thirteen loads.

Manali is famous not only for its fruit. Throughout the mountain provinces to the north—throughout Ladakh, Lahul, Spiti and even Western Tibet, that is—it is known as a centre of civilisation and trading. For the road from the Plains ends there. It is the northernmost bazaar easily accessible to the people of these provinces. Goods of every description can be bought there. And so each year hundreds upon hundreds of mountain people come to Manali to trade and to buy.

Besides this surge down from the north, over the Bara Lacha La, the Kunzum La and finally over the Rohtang La, there is also a move up from the south during the summer months. Migrants, who have spent the winter in the Plains, return to the north to help with the summer harvests; Kulu traders, loaded down with paraffin, matches, sugar, tobacco and a multitude of manufactured trinkets push boldly into the mountains; and guddee shepherds, with their flocks of sheep and goats, tens of thousands of them, travel north over the Himalayan Divide to escape the damp wetness of the monsoon season which attacks their animals' feet with crippling foot-rot.

For the Himalayan Divide, traversed hereabouts by the Rohtang La (and also by the higher and less often frequented Hampta La), is more than a convenient barrier to serve as a boundary on the map between two provinces. It demarcates two totally different climates. To the south, in Kulu, there is the monsoon; fertility, greenness, a land of fields and vegetation and forests. To the north, an arid desiccated mountain desert, without even shrubs, and a negligible annual rainfall. The Himalayas effectively hem the monsoon in to the south. Only occasional showers penetrate into Lahul and the north. The actual divide between monsoon greenery and mountain desert occurs within fifty yards on the Rohtang La. On one side are blues and greens and rich purples, on the other yellows and dusty browns. It is a startling contrast.

But this gateway, the 13,000-foot Rohtang La, is snowed up and impassable seven or eight months of the year. So all the traffic to, from and through Manali is telescoped into the five months which between them make up spring, summer and autumn. Towards the end of May and the beginning of June Manali is crowded with caravans and flocks awaiting the opening of the pass. First a trickle of the most hardy travellers cross, then as the snows melt further a surge, from north to south and from south to north, engulfs the pass. We were caught up in this mass movement to the north. For the pass had opened only the day before. The path was crowded with a splendid hybrid of humanity. Tibetan nomads, Ladakhi travellers, Kulu traders, Spiti people, provinceless guddees, even three Chinese and two Nepalese, the former looking suspiciously like spies, the latter monks on a lengthy roundabout pilgrimage to Lhasa.

We found ourselves on the path behind a guddee shepherd. His name was Gergin. He gave an impression of sincere honesty, and he possessed the natural dignity which one can only be born to. Gergin had with him his grandson and perhaps two hundred sheep. The animals were mangy and bedraggled now, but when they emerged again from the mountains after their summer grazing they would be magnificent long-haired specimens, tough to eat but giving a wondrous quality of wool.

For their three-month sojourn in the mountains Gergin and his boy carried two bowls, a pipe, a knife, a flint, a little tobacco and two heavy blankets. This was all. Conveniently overhung boulders would give them such protection as they needed from the elements. Their woollen homespun suits and their water-buffalo hide shoes were their only clothing. The rope around their waists, for use in emergencies or for nullah-crossing, was hand-made from goats' hair. For food they would kill an occasional sheep, and the sheep themselves carried enough grains and salt to last them through the summer. A sheep's load is 12 lb., and this is split between two bundles, one hanging down on either side; a load is called a kaal. Watching Gergin's flock moving like liquid mercury across the slopes, each with their own little bundle,

was strangely moving. Gergin's simple equipment contrasted vividly with the piles of expensive and complicated gear which we were taking with us. And we had thought we were travelling light!

Gergin told us that he had spent the winter in Kangra, with his family clan and their several thousand sheep and goats. Now it was spring the clan had split up into smaller units and took their flocks to the hills for grazing. It was difficult to gather exactly how many animals Gergin's family owned. I doubt if even he knew how many there were, but say, tending towards under-estimation, there were a thousand in all. Each sheep is worth fifteen to twenty rupees, just over a pound sterling. That is a great deal of capital for a family of hill-folk who are self-sufficient for clothing and housing, and require only tobacco, salt, cheap grain and an occasional bowl.

Indeed we had heard in Manali that the guddees' wealth was one of the besetting problems of the district. Some of them were worth lakhs of rupees, but they spent almost nothing. The money they have accumulated over the years was in coin, not notes, and most of it was buried in family hiding places. As fast as money came into Kulu it went into the guddees' hands and so into the ground. The result was a permanent and dangerous shortage of currency, and especially of coin.

These guddees live an extremely simple, and, if your mind is attuned that way, an idyllic life. They travel at the pace of their flock, three to four miles a day when there is grazing, ten over the passes where there is none. A journey of two hundred and fifty miles from the winter grazing ground to the summer pastures is considered a mere bagatelle, and I suppose it is, when it is compared with the two thousand plus miles a Tibetan trader may cover in a short summer. But I can hardly imagine an English sheep farmer thinking nothing of a cross-country journey from say Hampshire to the north of Scotland twice a year.

Each flock returns to the same pasture in the mountains. A certain high pasture may have been grazed upon by the same family of guddees for generations. The going to and from this

grazing place may take as long as eight weeks each way, with only four there. Some are as high as 15,000 feet. A nominal rental fee is usually paid to the nearest village, though this may be as much as thirty miles away.

I wondered what Gergin thought about as he walked with his flock day after day, month after month. It was difficult to phrase the question so that it had any real meaning, but I tried. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What do nullahs think of as they tumble down the mountains? What does a cloud consider as it pauses in the sky?"

Together with several other caravans we camped on a grassy plateau called Murree, a few miles below the pass. There was a little brushwood around the camp site, though we were high above the tree line, so in the evening we gathered around the warmth of an open fire as it became dark and cold. A few other travellers, mostly guddees and Kulu men, joined us. A pipe was passed from mouth to mouth as Gergin told us legends perhaps centuries old, about the country we were entering tomorrow.

"Many ages ago, when men were godly and crops were good and there was peace, the pass that we will, the gods being willing, cross tomorrow, was not a pass at all. There was a great mountain barrier right across the land, running from where the sun rises to where the sun sets. This barrier was high and cold and icebound, and no man knew a way across it. Some tried to find a way, but these either died from the cold and airlessness or else they gave up and returned to their homes.

"The people who lived to the north of this barrier, in what is now called Lahul, were exceedingly sad at this barrier, for the winds and certain birds had told them of another world on the other side, where good things could be traded for. But what could they do? They had tried to discover a way, and there was none. Perhaps, they thought, the Lord of Creation does not wish us to venture beyond the mountains. But then they remembered what the winds and the birds had told them, of how there were many good things to be traded for in the south. So they said

among themselves, let us ask our Lord Shiva if indeed he does not wish us to go out of our valley beyond the barrier.

"So they sacrificed a young virgin, for in those days it was considered an honorable and good thing to sacrifice, and even to be sacrificed, and it was the only way to get in direct touch with Lord Shiva. Then the Priest left his body, and went in his soul to speak to Lord Shiva. And he asked if the people of Lahul might be allowed to cross the barrier. But in spite of the sacrifice Lord Shiva was angry, for had not the people tried to find a way first, and only after they had failed turned to him? So he said nothing.

"The Priest was greatly disturbed, and lamented, for it was not good that Lord Shiva should be angry, and men in those days were pious. A young boy and another virgin were sacrificed, and the Priest asked again, begging for an answer. For if no answer was given the second time then the Priest would be discredited and in disgrace, for such was the custom.

"Lord Shiva put aside his anger when he saw these good men so earnestly entreating his help, and he said, 'Yes, you and your people may go beyond the barrier if you wish.'

"And the Priest said, 'O Lord, there is no way. For we have been wrong and we have searched, and found none. How shall we go?'

"Lord Shiva answered, 'Indeed you have been wicked to look for a way. But nevertheless I will give you a way, a path to the plains.'

"And the Priest prostrated himself a fiftieth time, and gave thanks.

" 'But beware,' Lord Shiva said, 'of the winds which my whip will make when I strike down the barrier. These winds will be sudden and great, and will last for all time. Beware lest you get caught up in these winds.'

"The Priest thanked Lord Shiva, and his spirit returned to his mortal body, and he told the people all that had been told him. And Lord Shiva sent messengers to warn the people to the south, and everyone, both in Kulu and Lahul, hid, lest they should see

the awful might and majesty of Lord Shiva and be withered as they stood.

"Lord Shiva took his whip, and smote the mountains, again and again. There was a rushing and a terrible crashing, and storms, and winds so strong that mountains swayed before them, and many rocks fell from the mountains. Then there was a great silence over the land, and with it a great darkness. For everything, even the nullahs and the sun and the birds stopped and stood still before the majesty of Lord Shiva.

"When life became normal again, and the people had sufficiently recovered their courage, they came out, and behold, there was the Rohtang La. Only in those days it was called by another name. The people of Lahul rushed to the top to look over, but when they got there they were afraid to go down, for there was no path, and they did not know where or how to go. So Lord Shiva, to show them the way, stood on the Rohtang La and gave a mighty leap, telling them to watch where he went. For he was disguised as a mortal man, lest people should be blinded by his magnificence. And as he went through the air a path sprang up below him on the ground, and this path led to Manali. But he miscalculated his spring—even a God may make a mistake! —and he landed head first a little way from Manali village. The earth has a bruise there to this day, a swelling, where he fell, and that is the hillock above Manali, and there is a rock there to commemorate where he landed. And the people of Manali built a temple around the rock in praise of Lord Shiva. For they got much new trade from Lahul. But Lord Shiva went away with a bad headache.

"Many people hurried over the new pass, in both directions. But some were foolish in their haste, and forgot Lord Shiva's warning about the winds made by the whip. For the pass seemed so safe and easy. And many died, being frozen and burnt by the wind. And even to this day many die for their foolishness. Within my father's lifetime more than seventy men died on the pass in a single day. They were not careful. They did not heed the signs in the skies. Such is the folly of man."

There was a stirring around the fire. Some recounted other fatalities they had heard about on this pass, perhaps exaggerating a little. But I know Gergin's figures to be roughly accurate, for in 1862 seventy-two coolies were caught in a sudden storm and annihilated in a few minutes. Various other travellers have died since on the pass, most recently a European doctor in the winter of 1955–56,[1] who had also been caught in a storm when he least expected it. Also we had visited the temple on the strange hillock outside Manali.

But I was interested most of all in his allusions to human sacrifices. Who or what had decided who was to be sacrificed? And when? I asked him these questions. He did not seem to know the exact answers. But he went on to tell another story, and everyone hushed to hear him.

"At one of the chief villages in Lahul it was the custom to kill a boy each spring to ensure that the crops were good. Now this was much later than the time of the previous story I told you, and people were no longer so godly, perhaps because they had traded with the robbers of Manali and Kulu. (This was worth a laugh.) So instead of sacrificing a boy worthy of the honour it had become the custom to kill a slave-boy. The burden of providing the sacrifice went in rotation throughout the village, among the poorer families.

"Now one year it was the turn of an exceedingly poor widow to provide the sacrifice. She was so poor that she owned no slaves. She had only her son. But tradition and the God of the Fields must be satisfied, so she knew that her son would have to be killed. This made her sad, for she loved her son, her only child. Now one day, a few days before the ritual of sacrifice, while she was weeping outside her house, a poor beggar came up to her. He was a very holy man, a famous hermit, but she did not know this, for he was in disguise.

"He offered to present himself as the sacrifice in the place of her son on the condition that she would keep him and feed him

[1] Since I began writing another two, Indian policemen, have perished in a summer storm.

well until the appointed day. Naturally she was overjoyed, and she fulfilled the condition, feasting him with more than he could ever require.

"When the day for sacrifice came, the hermit in disguise went with his executioner to the shrine. As the executioner was about to cleave him with an axe he told him to stop a minute. Seizing the axe, he stood before the shrine and shouted to the God of the Fields, 'If you wish me to die then kill me yourself. Otherwise I will destroy you.' The God heard, but could do nothing for he too, with the people whose God he was, had become corrupted, and he was no longer as godly a God as he had once been. Moreover he knew that the hermit was a very holy man, under divine protection, who had been sent to destroy him, so that ritual sacrifices which no longer held any significance would come to an end.

"Receiving no answer the hermit raised up the axe and destroyed the shrine, which was anyway no longer very holy. And henceforth there have been no more sacrifices. For the God of the Fields, or at least the former God, was so frightened by the mere mention of the hermit's name that he never dared reassert himself."

There was a hush, and again I had questions to ask; and again Gergin went on, with a story this time of how the mountains were made, before time. It was late before we got to bed.

Starting early the next day we reached the crest of the Rohtang La before noon. The winds from Lord Shiva's whip were temporarily in abeyance, for the sky was clear and there was hardly a breath of air. A cluster of multicoloured prayer-flags indicated that at least some men were still 'godly'. Beyond, across the Chandra Valley, we could see right into the heart of the mountains of the Lahul Triangle. This had been described as 'one great ice-bed, broken here and there by lofty heights of impassable snow and rock'. This was in 1917. Recent expeditions have shown that though there are still lofty heights they are seldom impassable.

It was a remarkable sight. Glistening snow and ice peaks, red and green and orange prayer-flags, and a blue, blue sky. We humans were the only drab things in all creation.

The descent into the Chandra Valley was quickly over, and we were saying farewell to Gergin. He turned left and we right, for the pasture he was making for was above Kyelang. We had known him but two days, and already it was difficult to say goodbye. Before he went he gave Judy a bunch of wild flowers he had picked on the way down. We wished each other well and turned away.

The Chandra Gorge is a nasty noisy place. High walls on either side of the river shut in the booming of the torrent as it hurls itself down the valley. These same walls also shut out any view which might be obtained of the peaks behind, apart from an occasional glimpse up a corrie. The river itself is a terrible thing. A foot in and you would be irretrievably lost, pummelled and broken and drowned.

Above Koksar the valley is uninhabited and treeless. Place names on the map are no more than camping grounds. Nullahs, swift and icy cold, strive to sweep you away. There are no paths, only chaotic boulder fields. Through all this our caravan picked its way.

Quickly we settled into the daily routine that goes with trekking. Starting early, we could make the days seem pleasantly short. We would be up by five, with the sun as our alarm clock. Breakfast, usually porridge or custard, with scones and tea, and then the bustle of packing up the camp and loading the ponies. By seven we were on our way, winding through the boulder fields, stumbling across the sliding screes, slogging across the soft snow. The porters, Garry, P. N. and I only had token loads, mostly cameras, flashbulbs and precious instruments. All morning we walked. The sun got higher, hotter and thirstier, we thought of nothing but the next stream. We wore handkerchiefs Arab-style to save our necks and noses. Lunch was no more than a bar of chocolate, or some mint cake.

The day's march would be over by one or two. Garry and I

would site where the tents should go, the ponymen would untie the straps and let the boxes fall off the ghoras with a thud, and in a few minutes our home for the next sixteen hours would be erected. Sunom made tea, and Judy rationed out the biscuits. The afternoon would be spent writing up diaries, reading or just lazing. By now we all liked P. N. too much to go through with our original plans. Only his consistent ability to beat us at cards kept the desire for murder alive. Supper—soup, sheep and sweet—and then to bed by seven as the light faded. It was a pleasant life.

And it was the boys who made it pleasant for us. They worked tirelessly. Each had his self-appointed tasks. Rinsing put up the tents, inflated the air mattresses and looked after my tripod; Sunom was cook and court jester; Angrup was his understudy in the kitchen. Only Washing idled. He seemed content to sleep last and work least.

It took us six days to reach the Kunzum La, gateway to Spiti. There was still much snow about and this proved tricky once the sun was up. In places the snow-fields were twenty and thirty feet deep, but near the edge they were soft and treacherous. The ponies in particular found these places difficult. As often as not the snow was steeply inclined, and a slip would mean sliding into the river and annihilation. Only the week before a Spiti woman had been drowned this way.

One pony in particular always insisted on picking a route different from that chosen by the ghora-wallahs and his obstinacy landed him in trouble time and time again. He would sink into the snow up to his belly; over would go the load, and minutes would be wasted while he was freed and reloaded. Once he became frightened when the snow collapsed under him. He threw his load for the umpteenth time. Included in it was one precious tin of paraffin. This skidded away down the slope, heading for the water. I glissaded after it as fast as I could. We were very near the edge when I caught the handle with a toe and braked to a stop with my ice-axe. A few more feet and we would have both been in.

The first nullah we came to was the Chatru, where Judy had all but drowned the year before, and here we found a wobbly-looking snow-bridge. I tip-toed across it, testing every foot with my ice-axe. It seemed safe, and we were across quickly and safely without even getting our feet wet. Soon after we crossed a flock of sheep walked straight over without giving it a second sniff. But my caution was not entirely misplaced. A few days later the bridge collapsed while some traders were on it. Two ponies and one little boy went down into the nullah. The boy was miraculously saved, but both ponies were lost.

On the sixth day out of Manali we were approaching our immediate goal, the Kunzum La. The last nullah to bar our way, which issued from the Bara Shigri, proved quite unfordable. The long wearisome detour around the glacier was our only alternative. As Judy wrote in her diary, 'It was a long, long day. I had no idea how awful it would be or I would never have started.' We slithered and slipped over the glacier. It took hours. At noon we had been only half a mile from a meadow, but the detour took so long that it was dark before we camped.

The view, it must be admitted, was impressive. A traveller who passed through this area in 1873 described it in the best heroic style. 'Looking down the valley, immense glaciers were seen flowing down the clefts . . . extending from the great beds of the snow above and down to, and even into the river. This was the Abode of Snow, and no mistake, for nothing else but great snow glaciers and rock were to be seen, and the great ice serpents crept into this dread valley as if they were living monsters.'

Yes, the view was impressive.

CHAPTER THREE

The Kunzum La

THE YEAR BEFORE WE HAD FOUND THE KUNZUM LA MOST EXTRAordinarily beautiful. With a blue sky, fluttering multi-coloured prayer-flags, a carpet of virile grass and wild flowers, and a clear stream tumbling down beside, the scene had engraved itself on my memory. Now the sky was dismally overcast; the ground was barren and brown, for the snow had only just melted from it; even the stream was muddy, carrying away silt and dirty snow. Only the prayer-flags remained. Of these there were more than ever. The pass had opened for the first time in six months only ten days before, and the ensuing surge of Spiti travellers had left many tokens of their dedication and thanks.

These flags originate in Tibet, where they are block printed on dyed or plain cloth. The blocks are of laboriously carved wood, the process is centuries old. The traveller purchases a supply of prayer-flags from his local monastery (coloured ones are more expensive) before setting off on his journey. His requirements are decided by the length of his proposed journey and the number of high passes he must cross.

On the way up a pass he is protected from such devils as might molest him by the kindly influence of the local deity of the pass, who observes that he is carrying flags. When he reaches the top he must tie at least one prayer-flag to the Deity's monument or la-tso which he will find there, in thanksgiving for his safe arrival. Having made his offering the Deity will see him safely down the other side. Should the traveller decide to economise on his prayer-flags by neglecting to make the prescribed offering, or worse still, should he have no flags at all without a reasonable excuse, the Deity may roll a boulder down to crush this negligent and wicked traveller. Or perhaps It will call up a storm to annihilate him. The sudden vicious storms to which these high passes

are prone testify to the immense power possessed by these Deities. It pays to be careful.

There were many prayer-flags on the la-tso now, and according to reports Lady Kunzum (for such is the Deity's name who guards the pass) had looked kindly upon recent travellers. But she was in a threatening mood today. Judy and Sunom affixed some coloured cloth to one of the poles and the rest of us each laid a stone on the cairn. All was well. We reached our camping-site a mile away without the weather breaking.

Lady Kunzum had not been so kind the winter before. In early November four policemen from the Kaja frontier post in Spiti had decided to make one last journey to Manali before the winter set in. They had been many times before and knew the way well. The Spiti Valley was still free of snow and they reached the top of the Kunzum La without difficulty. Down they started, into the Chandra Valley. Here it was a very different story. This valley gets the winter much earlier than Spiti, and already there was deep snow. Still, it was probably only a drift, they thought, around the next corner things would ease up. But around the next corner the snow became deeper and more difficult than ever. It was up to their waists now. None of them had any previous experience of heavy snow (they were all from the Punjab plains) and even their clothing was pitifully inadequate.

Suddenly their leader slipped off the path into a snow-drift ten feet below. The drift was perhaps twenty feet deep. He struggled and struggled. But the more he struggled the further in he fell, the worse he became entangled. His three comrades tried hard to release him, but it was difficult to reach him without falling themselves. At last, after several hours of continuous and desperate labour, they freed him. Somehow they pushed on all night, reaching a hut near the Rohtang La early the next morning. It was deserted. There was no food and no help at hand. The leader's feet and hands were badly frost-bitten. Help must be got.

The largest and strongest of the three men set off alone. In one fantastic day he waded through waist-deep snow, crossed the Rohtang La, and having covered twenty-five miles he arrived at

Manali in the last stages of exhaustion. It was an incredible feat of endurance and courage. Only his formidable strength and will-power kept him going.

Word was got to the authorities at Pathankot by wireless and supplies were dropped by air to the stranded men. A well-equipped rescue party forced its way with great difficulty to the hut. The three policemen were carried out on stretchers. The unfortunate leader had to have both arms and both legs amputated because of the severity of his frostbite.

The walk from the Kunzum Meadow to Hansa Village is the longest single stage on the trek into Spiti. Down the Taktsi Valley to broad and tiresome shingle flats, and then a long trudge make up the day's stage—sixteen miles in all. The region is almost a desert area, and apart from the Spiti River itself, which is silted and unpleasant, there is no drinking water during the stage. At best the path is uneven and boulder-strewn, at worst there is no path at all. It is a tiring day. Garry described the last five miles thus (he worked out the true distances later):

5 miles to go: Ask Rinsing how far to go as am feeling very thirsty. He waves two fingers at me. I stride ahead confidently. Feel weary but self-satisfied at having covered 14 miles with no trouble, for Peter said this morning it was 16 miles to Hansa.

4 miles to go: Pace slows a bit. Camp-site must be beyond the next ridge. Ask pony-wallah how far to go. He waves a fistful of fingers at me. Peter and Judy two hundred yards behind.

3 miles to go: Ponies specks in distance. Peter on my heels. Convinced I am dying of thirst. Rinsing estimates $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles to go. Seeds of doubt and despair. Concerned lest whole expedition is plot to eliminate me.

2 miles to go: Getting frantic. Judy and I look for Peter against horizon. Trudge blindly on. Feel like Slavomir Rawicz must have felt on his 'Long Walk'.

1 mile to go: Hardly able to put one foot in front of the other. Camp a mirage? Stumble into mess tent and collapse.

> Sunom brings lemonade. Slow recovery. One hour later feel very tough and rugged. What fun to explore. Agreement with Rinsing. One Rinsing Mile equals Two Spiti Miles equals Three English Miles.

The expected invasion by the Hansians did not materialise that evening, and we went to bed a little disturbed. Sure enough, they came for their tour of inspection well before dawn the next morning. The visitors were mainly children and their curiosity knew no bounds. They poked their heads into our tents, they fidgeted and fingered everything they could lay their hands on. There were constant exclamations of surprise, wonder and excitement. In self-defence we had to get up.

The Hansa children were a ragamuffin lot. Long-haired little boys, eldest sons, proudly swaggered about secure in the knowledge that one day they would become important landowners—well, landowners. The shaven-headed boys, younger sons, would all become monks, and they were a little shy, as became their future vocation; though their reserve was probably the result of being the less-favoured child at home. The girls had long hair and tiny turquoise beads in the middle of their foreheads to show that they were unmarried; though one seven-year old had no bead. The girls were no less boisterous than their brothers. All the children were sturdy, tough, attractive mischief-makers.

They have to be tough. For the Spiti way of life is probably as hard as any in the world. They barely scrape a living out of the mountain desert they live in. The seasons are extreme; summer is hot and dry, winter long and hard. They are snowed under seven months of the year, so in the remaining five they must grow enough to support themselves the whole year round. Infant mortality is naturally high in Spiti; only the strongest survive.

The Pitoons are an extraordinary people. In some ways they are incredibly backward. They have made virtually no progress in the material things of life for over a thousand years. Give them a wheelbarrow and they would carry it on their backs. Return in another thousand years and it is certain you would find things

unchanged. But in other ways they have unwittingly achieved a state of civilisation beyond what the West can ever hope to achieve. For example in a famous battle between the Pitoons and the neighbouring Lahulis, fought near the Kunzum La a century and more ago, the fighting ceased as soon as the first man was killed. A peace was negotiated forthwith and both 'armies' retired, honour satisfied.

The Kunzum La is the boundary between Hinduism and Buddhism. The prayer-flags above the houses, the long mani-walls on either side of the villages, with their carved prayers to Buddha, the hand prayer-wheels which the travellers invariably carry, these testify to the change. An atmosphere of worship pervades the valley. It is an unconscious atmosphere, the result of centuries of tradition, the result of constantly living at a level which, by being simple and yet sufficient seems, at least to an intruder, to be very near to God.

A single analogy will suffice. Suppose every advertisement, in the newspapers, on the screen, on the billboards, indeed everywhere advertised a single product. Wherever you went, no matter what you did, you constantly heard and read of the advantages of this product. In time it would penetrate, it would almost become a way of life; the only way of life.

So it is with the Buddhist prayer 'Om mani pad-me hum'. It flutters forever in the wind on a prayer-flag. It withstands the assault of the elements on a million carved stones. It is inscribed on every prayer-wheel which every house possesses. It is constantly intoned in the house, in the field, in the monastery. It pervades life itself.

We found ourselves unknowingly absorbing the atmosphere which the prayer generates. Without thinking we passed the mani-walls on the left, invariably each of us placed a stone on the frequent holy cairns. If we did not intone the prayer at least we were caught up in its influence.

We moved on down the valley, reaching Ranrik, our

immediate goal, two days later. Below Hansa the Spiti Valley assumes a sensational form. On both sides are the lower ridges of hidden peaks behind. Down the valley one can see some of the peaks themselves, aloof and beautiful. It was hard to remember that we were still at 13,000 feet, in the valley, as high as many European mountains. The valley itself is a mile to a mile and a half wide. High plateaux, on which the villages are perched, stand on either side of the river bed, which is anything from fifty to a thousand yards across. Once it flowed at the level of the villages, but with time it has eaten away at its bed, transporting Spiti soil to the Sutlej, one of the great Punjabi rivers, and thence to the Arabian Sea. On either side it has left the plateaux high and dry, several hundred feet above. The crumbling mud and debris cliffs have been shaped by the severe frosts and the annually melting snows into a series of tremendous organ-pipes.

The villages are built around occasional springs or streams on these plateaux. The river and the main nullah levels are too variable to be safe to live near. The villages, often no more than three or four houses, are anything from two to six miles apart. The houses are two-storeyed, of mud and stone; animals, sheep and goats and yaks, occupy the ground floor, the family the top floor. The houses are built just anywhere in a village, so it is often difficult to find a path between them. Drainage is unknown: dung, animal and human, is collected for fuel. The watery refuse collects in a pond whose stench must be experienced to be believed.

There are virtually no trees in Spiti, so fuel is at a premium. Sparse undergrowth, collected in the summer and piled high on the roofs to dry out, provides some of the fuel, but mainly dung is used. The valley, apart from a few fields around the villages, is brown and dry and barren. Only the sky, the snow, the people, and the prayer-flags lend colour to the scene.

We planned to stay at Ranrik for only a few days, collecting fossils and renewing old friendships. But then we met Shiring Dawa.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Spiti Valley

WHEN ONE THINKS OF THE HIMALAYAS ONE IS APT TO VISUALISE the Alps enlarged to twice their size: flowered foothills rising out of green valleys to a picturesque world of snow and ice above, all visible in a glance from the hotel window. Parts of the Himalayas undoubtedly answer to this description exactly: the view of Kanchanjunga from Darjeeling, for instance. Not so Spiti. To all intents and purposes it is a mountain desert. Bare brown foothills rise out of an even drier valley to sparsely snowed peaks. The world of perpetual snow and ice is seldom visible and never picturesque; it is hidden behind a formidable barrier of gorge and ridge, in places thirty miles deep.

True, in winter the snowfall is prodigious: drifts are thirty and forty feet deep. But with the coming of the spring-summer sun in May the snow in the valley and on the lower slopes has no chance, it is so hot. The snow lies under boulders, in shadows of houses, it takes refuge in drifts and crevasses, but it is hopeless, the sun is everywhere. In less than a month bitter winter is transformed into torrid summer. For no more than a week the ground is sodden, then it becomes dusty-dry. One would have thought that the very considerable amounts of water coming down all summer long from the glaciers and winter snows high above would serve to irrigate the Spiti Valley. But the beds of the tributary nullahs and the main river which carry down these vast quantities of water are too far depressed from the village levels for the water to be utilised. Once, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years ago, the streams were at much the same height as the villages are today. But with the course of time they have eroded the soil, eating deeper and deeper into the earth. The plateau where the villages were to be built was left high and dry.

There is no help from the skies, the rainfall is negligible during the summer months. Even the monsoon, which waters the greater part of India, cannot penetrate to Spiti, it is so effectively barred by the Himalayan Divide. The water-laden clouds beat against the great mountains, blindly dissipating their strength in vain attempts to find a path to the north. The moisture which could make Spiti a green paradise is lost as snow where it is needed least. Dry hot days with cloudless skies are the rule, days when the valley is an airless oven, when the sun's heat rebounds from side to side in an effort to overcome humanity.

The villages cannot be moved down to the streams' level because of the latters' irresponsibility. These streams twist hither and thither, sometimes in a single gushing torrent, sometimes in a myriad of separate channels, never the same for long, flooding and altering course, always changing their minds. In addition their depths vary enormously depending on the season. In December, when an icy frost almost stops the waters altogether, the Spiti River is barely three feet deep and at its widest only a stone's throw across: little more indeed than a slowly moving puddle. In July it is a powerful swirling torrent of immense strength, often a mile wide, seeking to overwhelm you as you attempt to ford at a treacherous shallows. With so much activity and change it would be courting disaster to build near its banks.

Instead the villages cluster around such minor rivulets and springs as there are on the plateau a hundred feet above the main river. For every acre that is cultivated must be irrigated artificially. The soil is too dry and too barren to support plant life on its own. But only these smallest rivulets can be harnessed: any larger stream has eroded the soil away until its bed is too deep to be of use. Thus about 1 per cent of the water in Spiti is utilised. The other 99 per cent, at least as far as the crops are concerned, might as well not exist.

The figures are startling. There are just under 3000 square miles in Spiti, 2931 to be exact. 2372 acres are under cultivation. In other words about one acre in a thousand (0·126 per cent of the land) is cultivated. This is as much as can be efficiently

irrigated with present methods, and the figure has probably remained fairly constant for many centuries.

With a fixed acreage there is obviously a fairly steady production. It may vary from year to year, dependent on such factors as freak weather, disease and so on, but by and large the annual crop would have been much the same five hundred or even a thousand years ago as it is today.

Food production is not governed by the number of irrigatable fields alone. The soil is so sterile and the climate is so extreme that only the toughest vegetables and grains can survive. The crops in Spiti are limited to two kinds of barley, one of wheat, peas and mustard from which mustard oil is made. Hardly a comprehensive list. No fruit, no greens, no root vegetable can survive the hot dry stony ground.

The only other food is meat. The Pitoons would be great meat-eaters if they were able, but the flocks must be kept small because pasturage is so scarce. Yaks, chorus,[1] dogs, sheep and goats comprise the entire domestic livestock of Spiti. All have been eaten in times of dire need, but sheep and goats are more normal. These too are limited by the critical shortage of rainfall during the summer, which in turn limits the grass available. Breeding and feeding have varied not at all through the centuries, as the number of animals in Spiti is probably more or less constant.

Now Spiti is too poor a country to do much importing. It produces small surpluses of pottery and wool and these are exchanged for tea-bricks, tobacco and sometimes salt. Beyond these there is hardly any trade with outside provinces. Certainly the inhabitants could never afford to import large quantities of food. They must of necessity be self-sufficient as far as the basic foods are concerned.

This lengthy preamble serves to show why it is essential that the number of Pitoons should remain fairly constant. Life has always been dangerously near the minimum subsistence level. Were the population to rise, even slightly, there would be more mouths to feed with the same amount of food, and somebody

[1] A choru is half yak, half cow.

would have to go hungry. Faced with the prospect of starvation if the population grows beyond certain bounds, Pitoons have, from time immemorial, adhered to a social tradition which virtually amounts to birth control. A high rate of infant mortality, a short expectation of life, and occasional outbreaks of disease which have wiped out whole villages have helped keep the population down; but alone these are not enough. Therefore a rigid social pattern has been evolved.

This lays down that only the eldest son in each generation of each family may marry and raise a family. All his younger brothers must, without exception, enter a monastery and become monks, or lamas, for life. At the age of eight or nine the younger sons are sent to the nearest monastery—there are five in Spiti—where they become neophytes or apprentice-monks. With time and training they may become full lamas. They remain such until they die. They may not marry and they must remain celibate. They are maintained in the monastery by their lay relatives, and they only emerge from it for a month or so each summer to help with the harvest.

The only exception to this, the only time when a lama may set aside his monastic vows and return to a layman's life, is when his eldest brother dies without male issue. Then the next eldest brother leaves the monastery for good and takes his dead brother's place as the head of the family. He takes his dead brother's place even to the extent of automatically marrying the widow; though if she has proved herself barren over a number of years he may take a second bride of his own choice to provide children.

The result of only allowing one male per family to marry and raise a family is obvious. The population is certain to remain more or less steady, barring some unforeseen disaster. In point of fact the population has declined in the last half century, from about 3500 to 2500. But were the figures available it is a fairly safe bet that they would show that within the bounds of perhaps a thousand either way the population has remained at 3000 for at least the last millennium. So the system works.

All this makes Spiti a wonderful place for eldest brothers. There is a large surplus of eligible girls from whom the elder brother may pick his bride, and moreover the women, married and unmarried, will do nearly all the work for him. They tend the fields, build the new houses, make the clothes, cook the food, collect the fuel and carry the loads. Wives work just as hard as spinsters. Children tend the flocks of sheep and goats and also look after the babies. The head of the family, the landowner, drinks chang (barley beer), discusses politics and the weather, smokes his pipe and ensures the procreation of more children. The only time when he bestirs himself to labour is during the two or three weeks of harvest, when everyone, landowners and monks included, turn out to help gather the crops safely in.

But you must not get the idea that the Head of the Family's life is an entirely idle one. Far from it. Discussing politics is a serious business, not to be undertaken lightly in a village where there may be as many as a hundred souls. The schisms, alliances, lobbying, jobbery and duplicity which goes on in a village council of say twelve would do justice to a European Parliament. Politics are a full-time job in Spiti.

And when he is resting from this exacting duty there is the smoking, the gossip and the chang-drinking, all of which are virtually forced on him in his responsible position as a landowner. Chang is made as follows: take a lot of parched barley and add about double the weight of water; put in a pinch of a kind of dried yeast called 'phav', about one dram to ten pounds of malt, and leave it to ferment for two or three days. When sufficiently fermented pour off the water, and this is your 'xxx' for festive occasions. Add more water, and leave as before, and you get beer or chang. As changs go Spiti chang is poor stuff. But it suits the Pitoons and they consume vast quantities, especially in winter when they are house-bound for six months at a time.

Tobacco of a kind is grown in small quantities in Spiti, but its taste is quite unlike that of any other tobacco I have tasted. Dried tea leaves are a common substitute, and most usual of all is grass. Lately an additional source of supply has been a trickle of

'Tiger' brand cigarettes from Manali. Anyone who knows the northern Punjab will recognise them, and shudder.

The gossip which a score or so adult males who have nothing to say are capable of, that I will leave to your imagination.

Fortunately custom does not expect the elder brother to be too faithful to his wife. It would be such a pity to let go waste the huge surplus of willing virgins. Unmarried girls always wear a small turquoise bead in the middle of their foreheads, perhaps to announce to such bachelors as are left that they are still available. As one early Victorian traveller puts it, 'chastity, if regarded as a virtue at all, is neither usual nor, it seems, desired'. This might seem to be a negation of any attempt at birth control but in practice, though illegitimate babies are not unknown, they are not as common as one might expect.

Although it is allowed for a man to have two wives, it is rare. A man will only marry a second time if his first wife proves sterile. And even if he does marry twice the first wife will always take precedence. Infidelity by the wife is rare—she has too much to lose—but should one leave the husband for another the latter is usually glad to get rid of her for a small monetary compensation. He can always find another.

Spiti, it may be deduced, is an elder brother's paradise.

His younger brothers do not fare so well. A younger son is packed off to the monastery when he is still quite a small boy, eight or nine years old, and there he stays until he dies. Of course, beyond the daily recitation of lengthy formalised prayers, he will do little or no work, except at harvest time—that is for women! He and the monastery in which he lives will be kept by the nearest village (which is unmercifully plundered by the lamas), and also partly by his own lay relatives, who will set aside a field or two for his keep. Besides this he will receive fees from time to time for holy functions which he can perform when he is a full lama: these include the sale of prayer-flags imported from Tibet and also the sale of stones which he may be able to carve for village mani-walls. He can expect, if he is of average

intelligence and family, to become a lama after a few years' training. Only if he is exceptionally bright and well endowed (and this almost always means he has come from one of the wealthier influential families) can he hope to rise above ordinary lamahood to become a senior monk, or, in very exceptional cases, an Abbot of a Monastery. Should he be destined to rise to such a high level he will first, in middle age, make a pilgrimage to the Holy City of Lhasa where he will study for three to six years for a special degree.

Assuming he is a Pitoon of fairly average ability the prospect of a monastic life cannot be too unpleasant. He will do little and think less. But as a Piti male he is already a past master of the art of procrastination. If he is fortunate he has the prospect of an exciting trip to Lhasa. Whoever he is he has years of prayers, ritual and training ahead of him.

No doubt there are monasteries in Tibet, especially eastern Tibet, around Lhasa, which are thriving with intellectual and religious usefulness. And I expect there are monasteries in Ladakh, of 'Little Tibet', of which the same can be said. Marco Pallis, author of *Peaks and Lamas*, quotes several he visited in 1936 which excited his admiration. Spituk, near Leh, was one of these. The monastery was flourishing and of its Bursar the author could write, 'he was not only a well-informed exponent of the Doctrine, but he was the very thing itself'. He quotes other monasteries, however, even near Lhasa itself, where the purpose and reason and force of the monastic life have been forgotten: where sloth, indolence and ignorance reign supreme.

Now with the best will in the world no one can seriously maintain that the monastery we visited falls into any category but the last. The monks were hospitable, friendly, kind and extremely pleasant. Among them were several men of ability. But the great mass of Spiti monkdom—and there are some four hundred in all—is illiterate and unintelligent. Their ceremonies and prayers are mere ritual, and I doubt if one in ten understands the meaning of what he chants. Ability to read is exceptional. The vast majority of the lamas have been taught certain recitations,

and those they know by heart. They take part in the services, they chant at the appropriate times—have they not chanted the same refrain at the same cue a thousand times before—and they understand about as much of it as the stuffed snow-leopard which stands guard at the topmost entrance to the monastery. As they chant their prayers and turn the prayer-wheels their minds are one great big blank.

This is not an attack on the Lamadom of Spiti, or even an attempt to suggest that reform is necessary—though it certainly would not do any harm. We were treated hospitably and kindly at the one monastery we visited, and it would ill become a guest to abuse his hosts. Indeed I should say that our particular host, the acting Abbot of Kee Monastery, was as generous and as wise and as benevolent a host and Abbot as one should hope to meet anywhere. He exuded intelligent curiosity and tolerance.

Rather I am attempting to draw the background to the story of an exceptional little boy and his fight for freedom from, for all its graces, an essentially autocratic and wasteful system. He was, and perhaps still is, destined for this dull lamastic world. I made several real friends among the monks of Kee Monastery, and to them I give my thanks. But I would be failing in my duty to this boy if I did not describe accurately the life from which he is struggling to escape.

CHAPTER FIVE

Shiring Dawa

WE ARRIVED AT RANRIK IN THE AFTERNOON. THE INEVITABLE gaggle of wide-eyed Piti children gathered round to look over our possessions. As with the Hansa children two days before, their curiosity quickly overcame their shyness. They were friendly, good-natured and extremely dirty. But it was impossible not to notice one boy, larger than the rest, loud-mouthed and boastful, surely the village bully. He had one long fat pigtail, and this, with his unbearable air of superiority, confirmed him as an eldest son, a potential landowner. Enquiry proved that he was about fifteen or sixteen, and that he had recently been betrothed; he was expecting to marry and take over his family's Number One House (incidentally ousting his parents) in two years' time. I don't suppose I have ever seen a young man so completely arrogant. He pushed, he bullied, he shouted and ordered the other children about as if they were serfs. Keeping a respectful distance from him to avoid a casual cuffing, they all did exactly as he said. All except one, that is.

He arrived after the others, and at first sight he was no different from them. Barefoot, dirty, and dressed in patched-together rags, he seemed just another Piti child. Yet almost as soon as he arrived he said something in Tibetan to the bully, who was making a deal too much noise, which sounded from the tone it was said in to be the equivalent of 'shut up'. The swaggerer lapsed into a sulky silence. The other children were uneasy, smothering nervous giggles. I was certain the bully would explode in physical wrath, for he was a head taller than the newcomer, who seemed almost frail in comparison. He did nothing of the kind. After a few minutes he slunk off alone.

The other children relaxed and came to life, watching and examining and generally getting in the way. But this one boy

continued to dominate the proceedings, though he said little and was certainly in no position to bully. The others held him in awe, yet they were not afraid of him.

Then he surprised us all by starting to help Rinsing put up the next tent. No one was more surprised than Rinsing. I expected him to tell the boy to clear out of the way: but it was apparent that the boy was really helping. He knew where each guy-line should go, he angled the metal pegs exactly, he slipped the difficult cross-section poles into place with the precision of an expert. Yet he could never have seen a tent like ours before.

When the tent was up he turned to Rinsing and said, "I hope you don't mind me helping you." He spoke not in Tibetan but in fluent Hindi. He was the first Pitoon of any age we had found who spoke this completely foreign language. Who was this boy? How did he speak Hindi so well? How was it he seemed to know all about intricate tents?

"My name is Shiring Dawa," he replied in answer to our questions. "I speak Hindi because the schoolmaster has taught me. I know how to put up the tent because I watched you put up the first one." Then he bubbled away with all kinds of questions. He wanted to know who we were, what we were going to do, where we had come from and what it was like there. Most of all he wanted to know about "the place beyond the mountains", as he picturesquely put it.

So Judy offered him some tea and we talked late into the evening. Mostly we answered his questions, but bit by bit his own remarkable story emerged.

Shiring was probably born in the year of the Wood Ape,[1] so that would make him twelve years old. ('Probably born' because there are no calendars in a village and Pitoons' ideas of dates and years are extremely hazy. A birth would far more likely be remembered as having happened the year there was a disastrous winter or a bumper crop.) While he was a baby he was looked

[1] For an explanation of the Tibetan Year Cycle, see Appendix A.

after by his elder brother and sister, who are roughly six and four years older than he is. Almost as soon as he could walk he in turn was looking after the flocks of sheep and goats, acting as a young shepherd. He grew up as any other normal Piti child.

It was not until he was five that he began to understand the implications of being a younger son. His head was shaved for the first time, and the draught, if nothing else, made him realise that somehow he was different from his elder brother, who still had long hair.

As he grew up he and his father came to have a very special relationship. Perhaps the father had the glimmering of some unusual ability himself, and recognised Shiring's gift when no one else dreamt that he was different from the common run of Spiti boys. No matter the reason, there was a remarkably close bond between father and son. Shiring's mother told us later of the long hours the two had spent together, perhaps tending the animals far up on the mountainside, perhaps collecting fuel. All day they would talk. Such an understanding was truly exceptional, especially as Shiring was not the eldest son. The father treated his eldest son and daughter like any Piti father would: he was friendly and kind and loving if a little aloof. With Shiring it was quite different.

Shiring was seven when his father died. He was heart-broken. It seemed to him as if the one real friend he possessed had left him. The body-disposers came from the Monastery and took away his father's corpse to cut it up before it was exposed on a mountain-side for the birds and wild animals to dispose of. Shiring was horrified and upset that the one person in the world he truly loved should be treated in this way. He could not understand why it was necessary, or why indeed his father had left him. It was a thing he could not forgive.

A year later, when he was eight, the time came for him to be bundled off to the Monastery at Kee. Preparations were made—his few belongings, mainly a bowl and a cup, were tied into a small bundle—and then the day came for his entrance into the

Monastery. A lama[1] made the six-mile journey to collect him, arriving soon after dawn—but where was Shiring?

He was not in the house, waiting, as he should have been. He was not in the village. He was not in the fields. He was nowhere to be seen. His mother and more particularly his elder brother, now the Head of the Family, were mortified. What a disgrace! The Village Elders had to be informed, and they fretted and fumed at the dishonour done to the village. All the Ranrik-ers were turned out to look for Shiring, and they hunted all day, everywhere, but he was nowhere to be found.

By noon the lama was becoming ill-tempered, making caustic remarks about the kind of discipline there was for children in Ranrik Village. "If a boy could simply disappear, and on the day he was due to enter the Monastery—well, really!" he huffed. Yet still no Shiring.

The lama returned to his Monastery late in the afternoon, irritable and alone.

The search parties combed the mountain-side above the village, they went several miles up the Gorge, they searched everywhere, but there was no sign of Shiring. His mother wrung her hands in anxiety. It was impossible that he would be so naughty, something dreadful must have happened to him—had he drowned in the nullah? Had he fallen down a cliff face? Oh, where was he? His elder brother was just as desperate, for although only fourteen he was, as head of the family, directly responsible for Shiring's misbehaviour, if such it was. The Village Elders raged and ranted, threatening all kinds of retribution on poor little Shiring.

Shiring sneaked back into his home late that night, hoping to get in unseen. He found a grim assembly of village notables, as well as his brother, stern-faced, and his mother, quietly sobbing. He had planned on a simple announcement that he was not going to the Monastery, no matter what, but he was never given a chance to say anything. Grasped firmly by the collar by two young men from the village he was whisked off through the

[1] A lama is a senior monk.

night to the Monastery. Grimly they marched; not a word was said. Shiring was frightened. He had hidden away up on the mountain-side all day acting more on an impulse than on any thought-out plan; he had chortled to see the village in uproar with everyone scurrying about looking for him; but now he worried. Perhaps he would be given an awful beating. Only one thing he was sure of. He wouldn't stay in the Monastery one minute longer than he could help. He wouldn't, he wouldn't, he wouldn't. He clenched his fists in determination. Anything would be better than living with and conniving at the same people that had treated his father's body so badly.

They arrived at the Monastery just before dawn, and Shiring was handed over to a monk. The two Ranrik-ers reported back to their Elders that Shiring was now safely at the Monastery and the village's honour was restored. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. That was over, thank goodness. What a naughty mischievous boy! But what a prank! Not a few of the men thought it was really quite a good joke on the rather pompous monk who had come and gone empty-handed.

They thought quite differently when it was discovered next day that Shiring had run away from the Monastery and was back in the village. What a cheek! This was beyond a joke. Younger sons just had to go to the Monastery. They always had done. Who was he to disobey the customs of their fathers, and their fathers, as long as anyone could remember?

A Council Meeting was hurriedly called, and Shiring was brought before the assembled Elders. They were cross, but interested too. Why was he behaving in this unseemly manner? Did he realise that he was causing much distress and embarrassment by his strange antics? His good mother was dismayed, his brother shocked, and indeed the whole Council was extremely upset. Could he explain himself?

This was the first time Shiring had been asked for his views or motives, and he made the most of his opportunity. He was not going back to the Monastery, he said, he was determined to lead a free unfettered life. The interview started with a paternal

see-here-now-my-boy atmosphere, and it ended in uproar, with Shiring openly contradicting the Headman, an unheard-of affront!

He was dragged out of the house, thrashed soundly with a knotted yak's hair rope, and sent back to the Monastery with a severe injunction to behave himself, or else. That night he escaped a second time. He was caught, thrashed and returned.

The Abbot of Kee Monastery was a kindly man, but his tolerance did not extend to a truculent boy who was with his escapes and rebelliousness threatening the peaceful atmosphere at the Monastery. This time Shiring was shut in a small room for two days with no food to contemplate his bad behaviour. He emerged hungry but unpenitent, and at the first opportunity he escaped a third time. It did not occur to him not to go back to his home, so he was easily caught.

He was then given the worst thrashing he had received yet, one which left him faint from pain. But he did not cry out, for that would have been a kind of defeat. He was marched back to the Monastery yet again with the same two men, who by now were growing tired of the journey. The Abbot refused to admit Shiring. The escort were dumbfounded; their instructions from the Elders did not remotely cover this contingency. But the Abbot was adamant. Until such time as Shiring had recovered his senses—how else could his rash obstinacy be explained, but by temporary insanity—and agreed to enter the Monastery peaceably and quietly he would have to remain without. He was causing more trouble than he was worth, and the lamas' lives were being seriously disturbed by Shiring's escapades. Moreover the serene existence of the Monastery, so essential to contemplation, could not continue while Shiring made trouble.

The Village Elders felt that Shiring was heaping a disgrace and dishonour on the village. They decided that the only course open to them was to make life so unpleasant for him that he would choose to go to the Monastery, if only to survive. For the next few months his life was indeed a misery. He was given the worst possible tasks, the dirtiest, most menial and most

arduous. He was ostracised by all the other villagers, and even his own mother only spoke kindly to him in private. The other children, encouraged by their parents, teased and tormented him.

He made no show of caring, keeping an expressionless face no matter how difficult the task in hand or how painful the thrashing being administered. He bit his lip and somehow endured. He was desperately lonely, and at times he could not help crying inwardly. But on the surface he bottled up his emotions, seeming indifferent to everything. He was determined that he would not go to that Monastery.

Time was on his side. Piti people are inherently lazy and also inherently tolerant. It went against the grain to keep up a war of attrition against an eight-year-old boy who did not bother to answer back. Tempers cooled, the disgrace of the village was found to be more in their minds than anywhere else, and the problem of what to do with Shiring became less important. He still got the worst and dirtiest jobs, but that was just routine.

As summer turned to winter the Village Council met in one last attempt to get Shiring to the Monastery peaceably. But he was firmer than ever in his determination. They tried to argue him round; but with his keen intelligence he could answer all their arguments and make them look silly at the same time. The interview ended as all Shiring's interviews with the Council had ended. In uproar. He had inadvertently insulted the Headman once again. Very well, they agreed, if this boy was immovable there was only one thing to do.

"Henceforth," the Headman said angrily, "you will be known as and considered to be a Moslem." And he spat on the floor to clean his mouth from uttering such a dirty word.

Shiring was delighted. His mother and his brother would of course be hurt, at least for a few days, but being a 'Moslem' meant that he could never be sent to the Monastery. The Council were glad too. Shiring had been quite a problem over the last few months, and now it was settled. Face was saved all round, yet the bother of disciplining him could be forgotten.

A winter passed, and then with the new summer there came

someone new, and, for most Pitoons, completely unexciting. The first permanent resident from the outside world came to settle in Spiti. He was sent at the express orders of the Great Government in far off Delhi. He was the Schoolmaster.

The Schoolmaster was sent into Spiti as the vanguard of a movement to 'Indianise' the people of Piti; a year or two after police and an itinerant doctor would follow, he was told. In the meantime he must begin the education of the Piti children. He did not much like the idea of being sent to Spiti, for he was an educated and cultured man. But he possessed a schoolmaster's true missionary zeal, and this made up a little for the shortcomings of his new home.

His was an unhappy life. The Pitoons were suspicious and unfriendly, suspecting (rightly) an encroachment of their former state of semi-independence. For since 1846, when the British took over the whole of the Punjab kingdoms, they had, apart from occasional visits by officials, more often on leave than on duty, been left strictly alone. Now here was an outsider who was actually sent to live with them. There was no open resistance. But nor was there any co-operation. The Village Council did its best to ignore him. They allocated him and his wife a tiny room in an old tumble-down house. This was to be both their home and their classroom. Then they forgot about him.

Worse still, the Piti children were lazy and indifferent. They only came to classes irregularly, when they felt like it. Sometimes he and his wife would wait for the class to arrive in the mornings, and only three or four of the thirty-five who were supposed to come would turn up. And when they did come he found them to be backward beyond his most pessimistic fears. They were not prejudiced against what he was trying to do. They were just stupid. Stupid to the point of being unteachable.

It was inevitable that he should quickly notice the one child who came to classes regularly every morning, and who really showed interest in what he was teaching. One day he asked the boy to stay behind after the class was dismissed.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Shiring Dawa."

"Why do you keep away from the others?"

"I don't. They keep away from me."

"But why?"

So Shiring told the Schoolmaster and his wife his whole story, of how his father had died, how he had refused to stay at the Monastery, and how he had been branded a 'Moslem'.

"Now everyone keeps away from me. But I don't care. It's not as bad as it was. And at least I will never have to go to the Monastery."

"But what are you going to do later on?" the Schoolmaster's wife asked. "Surely you don't want to be everyone's enemy always?"

Shiring had never thought of the future. Up to then he had been too busy avoiding the Monastery.

"I really don't know," he said. "But I would like to learn to speak Hindi. Then perhaps one day I can leave this valley where everybody is against me and start afresh. I'm not really a 'Moslem' you know. They just call me that."

"Yes I know. And even if you were, Moslems are not bad people. I knew many where I came from. But if you want to learn we can certainly teach you."

In the days that followed Shiring became happy for the first time since his father died. For he had found two real friends. The Schoolmaster and his wife were glad for their part to befriend Shiring. Not only did they have a mutual enemy in the Village Council, but the Schoolmaster, to his delight, quickly discovered that Shiring was remarkably intelligent. Not only that, but he was interested in everything. He never stopped asking questions. His curiosity was insatiable.

Shiring spent every spare minute with the Schoolmaster. With more and more lessons he began to make startling progress. While the other children were still struggling with their ABCs, he was already learning to read and write, and to speak Hindi. In less than three months he had mastered the rudiments, in six he was becoming fluent. The speed with which he learnt this new language, so very different from his own, was astounding.

Throughout the long winter Shiring and the Schoolmaster worked together. Hindi, writing and reading, they were all so new for Shiring. He loved to learn, and of course the Schoolmaster loved teaching him. It was not long before the Schoolmaster realised that he had a very exceptional little boy on his hands.

Arithmetic and geography came next. Of all the subjects Shiring liked geography best. The Schoolmaster's wife taught him this. She was tender and very beautiful, and she treated him as if he were her own son. They would sit together for hours at a time during the winter, he asking all kinds of questions, she telling him the most exciting things about far-off places (most of which she had heard from her husband; for coming from Manali, she had never been out of the Kulu Valley).

He could scarcely believe some of the stories she told him. Were there really seas so wide that it was impossible to see the other side? He had never seen anything bigger than the Spiti River. Was it truly possible to talk into a machine and be heard a hundred marches away? To travel faster than a galloping pony? To ride on the winds? There were so many things to learn. And the wonder of it was that Shiring always wanted to know more.

When the Schoolmaster had first arrived Shiring had shown great powers of obstinacy and stubborn endurance. But little else. Yet the way in which he had picked up so much in one year was little short of genius. The Schoolmaster was awed by his pupil, he was so bright. He could not help congratulating himself on his good fortune in finding Shiring, for all the other children were as dull as ever.

In the year that Shiring had done so well the Schoolmaster had got nowhere with the Village Council. They still regarded him suspiciously as an intruder into the privacy of their village life. And though they did nothing to hinder his work, at the same time they did nothing to help him. He was outside their way of life, and it seemed to him that he would never be accepted by the Pitoons as a friend. Had it not been for Shiring he might have given up. He realised that the education and 'Indianisation' of the Pitoons would take years, perhaps generations. Equally

he saw that an outsider could never start the process. Shiring seemed his only hope.

In their very first talk Shiring had mentioned the idea of leaving Spiti. His only reason for going would be to get away from the hostile atmosphere of Ranrik. Now the Schoolmaster put this to him as a definite plan.

"Would you like to help the people of Spiti become educated and more modern?" he asked Shiring one day. "Help them forget the old customs and learn new ways?"

Shiring thought for a moment. Then he answered. "If it would mean that other younger sons could choose whether they went to the Monastery or not, then, yes, I would."

"It would mean that, and much more too. It would mean better crops and less disease, it would mean more food and warmer clothes and more things being traded with Kulu. It would mean useful and fuller lives for everyone in Spiti."

So Shiring and the Schoolmaster began dreaming of the day when Shiring might go to the Kulu High School, a hundred and fifty miles away, where he could learn to be a teacher. For Shiring it meant a new purpose to his revolt against the Village Elders; he would go away to learn and to see for himself the many things he had been told about, and then one day he would return to teach his own people. The Schoolmaster for his part saw Shiring as the key to the future of Spiti. Already it was apparent that the villagers, even the Elders, respected Shiring, for his ability was becoming more obvious every day, and to speak Hindi was a very great accomplishment indeed. Only three other Pitoons, all adults in high positions, spoke Hindi, and then only falteringly. For a boy to speak it so well—it was almost a matter of pride in the village. The Schoolmaster realised that Shiring would be accepted by the Pitoons as a foreigner could never be. They might even be willing to be taught by him one day.

The Schoolmaster and his wife taught Shiring through summer and winter. Now books were sent for, even though they were expensive and the Schoolmaster's wages a pittance. Shiring spent

every minute he could with his friends. During the winter, when the snow was over the roofs and everyone was housebound, there was plenty of time, but during the summers he had to work like every one else, so there was much less time. Always he made startling progress.

Now, three years after the Schoolmaster came to Spiti, Shiring can read and write and speak Hindi as if he were born to it. His arithmetic is good and his geography is fair, and he has an excellent grasp of many things he has never seen. By the standards of a Western child he knows much less than other twelve-year-olds, though he has a very adult mind. But it must be remembered that he had a late start, and while he has been learning he has had to work full time in the fields. His life is very different from that of a Western schoolboy who has nothing but school and holidays. Shiring works all day, and school is his holiday. That he can learn at all is remarkable. That he can learn so quickly and so well is astonishing. By any standards his intelligence is exceptional.

In the days that followed our first meeting with Shiring we became good friends. At our special request—buttressed with a gift of tins—the Headman excused him work so he could act as our guide. We wanted to know all we could about his remarkable story and about him. His original refusal to go to the Monastery had been based on his horror of how his father's body was treated by the lamas, and then his attitude had been given new direction with the coming of the Schoolmaster and the hope of a proper education. I could understand his horror of the body-disposers.

Shiring himself explained the custom. "I know now why it is necessary. The ground is very hard and stony, you see, so a hole cannot be dug for the body. And you can't just leave them lying about. Nor can you dump them in the river. Custom and common sense forbid it; villages lower downstream depend on the river for their water supply. So there is nothing else to do but feed the dead to wild animals. Of course I didn't know all this when I was a little boy."

"Would you still hate to go to the Monastery?" Judy asked.

"Goodness yes. It would be terrible if I had to go now."

"But why? The monks are good men, aren't they?"

"Most of them are. But it's such a waste of time. They sit around droning the same old prayers day after day, year after year. Hardly any of them even know what the prayers mean. It's the same with their holy books. You think they are reading, and in fact they're just reciting from memory. Often they are pages out. The life's all right, I suppose, if you don't mind doing nothing. But I have so much to do."

He sat silent for a moment. "But I'll tell you what," he continued. "I'll take you over the Monastery, if you would like. Then you can see for yourself."

"But are you willing to go there? Surely they might try to keep you?"

"No, I'm quite free. Don't forget I'm a Moslem!"

"Well, will they have you in the Monastery then?"

"Yes, they don't mind."

So we jumped at the chance. We had intended to visit Kee Monastery anyway. Now Shiring could explain things to us in a language we could understand. It was decided that we could go in two days' time.

CHAPTER SIX

Mrs. Shiring

SHIRING ARRIVED BEFORE DAWN THE NEXT MORNING. WE GOT UP while the first rays of the new day were pushing aside the gloom, and already Shiring and another Ranrik boy were bustling around camp; they had fetched the morning supply of water from the nullah, they had swept out the sand and dust from the Mess Tent (incidentally disturbing a very grumpy Sunom from his sleep), and now they were noisily rearranging Sunom's kitchen on his instructions.

Shiring's friend, a year or so younger, was an elder son. He had the face of an elf and the clothes of a king. His father was very rich, he told us, for he owned one of the biggest holdings of land in Ranrik Village, and in addition he bred the rare and much prized Spiti ponies which sold for such very high prices. In spite of the huge wealth he would inherit one day he was never pompous or difficult as that lesser landowner-to-be had been the day before. His mischievousness was never off-hand, his curiosity was restrained, and it seemed as if Shiring had at least one devoted friend among the Ranrik children.

As we sat down to breakfast Shiring went over to his basket and brought out a bowl of yak's curd. This was a present from his mother he said. Would we like some every morning while we were at Ranrik? Here indeed was a magnificent present, for yak's milk is very limited and very precious. Anyone who has lived high up will know what heaven it is to start the day with a delicious fresh curd.

Shiring always carried this basket wherever he went. And we soon realised that no Pitoon was to be seen as much as a few yards away from his village without a similar basket. Into these baskets go anything that can remotely be called fuel. Dung is the most common and the most prized find, so villagers were

delighted when we camped near them; our ponies were a steady source of easily collected fuel. We gave Shiring monopoly rights on our ponies' dung, for no one would be cross with him for spending all his time with us if he went home every evening with a full basket of dung.

While we sat over breakfast Shiring and his friend and one or two others who had joined them played games. Children are the same the world over. Spiti games are aggressive and very like the games Western children play. There are 'crazes' for such and such a game, then it will be forgotten and another will come into vogue. 'Lepers and Jackals', an old standby, was the favourite that morning, and it was just the same as 'Cops and Robbers', an advanced form of 'tag'. 'Kabadi', the same as our 'Tom Tiddler's Ground', is another game. For adults there is, according to Shiring, throwing stones, competing in accuracy and distance, though I must say I never saw a Piti man doing anything so energetic.

We watched the young Ranrik-ers chase each other over the hillside. We could have been in England, though the trimmings were different. No neat shorts and muddy knees: full-length robes flapped in the wind as they rushed pell-mell after each other. Speeds were faster over difficult ground, for the Pitoon knows instinctively how to move across steep slopes, though there were the same falls and bruises and bravely suppressed tears among the younger children, the same wild exuberance among the leaders. But the result was the same. Breathless cherry faces with shining eyes, never surrendering but nevertheless ready for a rest.

When the others drifted off Shiring rejoined us. He was hot and happy and excited, for no amount of intelligence will smother a child's love of the chase. But though he was hot he seemed to be scratching his head rather too much. Judy asked what the trouble was. It always bothered him, he said, only more so when he was hot. Judy looked and to her horror she found that the whole of the back of his head was covered with a skin rot into which lice were burrowing.

I had wondered how Shiring, still but a little boy, had borne all the beatings and hardships which had resulted from his rebellion. Now I saw for myself just how much pain he could stand without fussing. He was brave indeed. For three hours Judy worked at his scalp, cutting away hair and dead skin, clearing the infected area and removing the animals which were boring their way deeper and deeper into his head. It was ghastly to watch, and the pain must have been terrible. Yet Shiring never murmured. He never asked for a rest. Sunom fed him, and himself, with barley sugar. P. N. told stories, Judy worked on, Shiring suffered in silence.

But it was worth while. The parasites removed, Shiring's head quickly healed up. When we left we gave supplies to the Schoolmaster so that the treatment could be continued. In thanks to Judy Shiring gave her his only ring. It was a four-anna piece melted onto a rough strip of silver. Judy wears it to this day.

While Shiring was being doctored his friend devoured the magazines we had brought for the policemen at Kaja. The advertisements gave them a good idea of many of the things we had told them of. Here was a city, here the inside of the kind of house we lived in. Aeroplanes were obviously some kind of large bird; cars were just explainable, and so were boats, but the sea remained a mystery. It seemed impossible in this land of river, rock and snow that there could be waters so vast that they could not be bridged, so wide that no one, not even from a mountain top, could see across. They were also a little sceptical of some of the foods advertised, but then we had some pretty strange foods with us. The people in the pictures fascinated them both. Those skinny girls with almost no clothes on. Were they so poor that they could not get enough to eat or to wear? They must be horribly cold in winter. Colour impressed Shiring most. Were things really so bright, so colourful, he asked at nearly every page. Beside them Spiti did seem a little drab.

While Shiring was interested in anything we could tell him of the outside world, it was difficult to get much out of him concerning the everyday stories and traditions of Spiti. His head was

so full of the things the Schoolmaster was teaching him of the great world beyond the mountains that he dismissed Spiti ways and habits as uninteresting and unworthy of notice, they were so commonplace to him. His favourite stories were not of the folklore of Spiti nor of Tibet, but rather the stories the Schoolmaster had told him. These were for the most part from Aesop's Fables, translated to fit an Indian's mind and then retranslated for a Piti boy. The story of the Fox and the Crow was his favourite, and he begged me to tell him others. So I introduced him to Brer Rabbit, and Mowgli of *The Jungle Books*. Of the stories based on Lady Kunzum and the mountain deities he would have nothing.

The next day was a rest day, deserved I felt, and much needed. So I had no qualms as we sat round talking and doing nothing. Shiring had invited us to his house for tea that afternoon, and it was decided that we would spend all afternoon there in an attempt to get to know 'Mrs. Shiring' his mother and to learn something of a Piti woman's views on life. Before we went two incidents forcibly brought home to us Spiti's extreme isolation.

The first incident concerned Shiring. There were many empty flashbulb cartons lying in the mess tent. Rinsing and Sunom began to play an ingenious game of trains. The boxes were ideal. They had a number of flaps which could be tucked into each other, so Rinsing was able to make a long red and blue train. Sunom made bridges and tunnels for the train to go through. Shiring wanted to play too, but Rinsing was having much too good a time to allow a mere child to interfere. Shiring was told to go away.

Judy helped Shiring make his own train. Who would have guessed that this little boy was leading all alone a one-man revolt against entrenched tradition in Spiti. Sitting there with a frown of concentration on his face as he put the boxes together he looked like nothing else but a twelve-year-old with a new toy.

At last his train was completed. Judy gave him some string for locomotion, Sunom generously allowed passage through his tunnels so long as the other train was not in the way, and Shiring was off. But Shiring had never seen a train. Uncertain of what to

do next, he made a kind of horsey noise, a cross between a bray and a squeak, to indicate motion, and then subsided into a shy silence as Rinsing unkindly hooted at him. Judy patiently took Shiring aside and taught him an engine's complete repertoire, from whistles to puffs to braking and starting off. In a few minutes Rinsing was copying Shiring; for all his sophistication he had only seen a train once, briefly and in the distance.

The second incident concerned one of our ponies which had badly sprained its leg. As there was no break a simple cold compress tightly bound round the swelling would have put the matter right in a few days. The ponymen, however, preferred to call in the local Vet.

He arrived in the middle of the morning accompanied by his assistants and several jars of chang. He punctured the poor beast's leg with a blunt and rusty knife, expressed satisfaction at the trickle of blood which appeared, and then settled down to the chang and bargaining for his payment.

Each major village has both a Doctor and a Vet. The Doctor is a wealthy much respected villager and a prosperous landowner. The secrets of his skill are kept in the family, being passed from father to elder son. These include a fair knowledge of herbal medicine (the herbs being found high on the hillsides), how to set bones, and, surprisingly enough, how to take a pulse. The stomach is considered to be the root of all ailments and all patients therefore readily admit to stomach pains. In severe cases, however, when the patient is beyond the help of soothing herbs, the method of contra-irritation is resorted to. The patient is branded on some healthy part of the body with a red-hot poker.

The Vet on the other hand owns no property but is kept by the village in return for his services. He combines the offices of Vet with those of the odd-job man. He has no secret skill: his victims are invariably bled.

One might think that the half-starved animals, the saddle sores one sees on ponies, the bleeding and the general insensitivity add up to cruelty. Yet the Pitoon is not unkind to animals. For instance he never kills an animal unless meat is needed or in

self-defence. And a Piti traveller would always unload and unsaddle his ponies before thinking of his own comforts. His religion enjoins him to regard all creatures as possessing equal souls, and his common sense forbids the squandering of one of his few valuable assets. Bleeding is ignorance, not maltreatment. Half-starved animals are the result of an unkind nature which severely limits the pasture available. The sores seem to heal with the attention they always get once a journey is over. The general insensitivity applies not only to animals but to himself as well; it is a protective armour against the extremely hard life he leads. Compare the life of a Piti animal with an English animal on the basis of comparative human standards of living, and it will be seen that the Pitoons do far more for their animals, even to the extent of sharing their houses with them!

Shiring's house was tucked away at the far end of the village. Clearly everyone knew of our visit, for as we walked between the houses curious giggling faces watched us from upper courtyards.

"This is our second house," Shiring announced as we came to the last house in the village.

"What do you mean by 'second house' ?"

"When my elder brother married he inherited the 'first' family house and became head of the family," Shiring explained. "He would have become head of our family even if my father had been still alive. For that is the custom. The parents are automatically dispossessed when their eldest son marries."

"What happens to them then?" Judy asked.

"They do just what my mother did. They move in to the 'second house', which is a little smaller. You see they don't need such a big house then, for by that time their children are usually grown up—at least ten years old—and of course the younger sons have gone off to the Monastery."

"Well then, what happens if your mother and father were still alive when your brother's eldest son married?"

"Then they'd move into the 'third house', which isn't really a house at all, but only a shack. Not many people live that long."

It was a typical Spiti house. White-washed walls (the white-wash is gypsum, extracted from the hills locally), two storeys, with brushwood piled high on the flat roof, drying to be used as fuel during the long winter ahead. The windows were tiny, no more than peep-holes really, heavily reinforced with wood all round, so that they could be tightly barred in winter. There was no glass of course. There is not a single pane in the whole of Ranrik, the richest and largest village in Spiti. Only Monasteries, with their accumulated wealth, and the Nono, easily the richest man in the province, can afford such extravagance. For a pane must be brought from the plains, over pass, through nullah, up valley, a hundred miles and more, all the way on a man's back.

We entered the house through the low narrow door, bending carefully to avoid a bang on the head. (Pitoons average a head shorter than us.) In a step we passed from the bright enervating glare to a dark if somewhat smelly coolness. Smelly because in all Spiti houses the ground floor is given over to the animals. During the summer goats, sheep and chorus are stabled there at night, in winter they live in the same room for five or six months on end. Thus the animals are protected from the rigorous winter, at the same time provide a continual supply of that essential commodity—fuel. So precious is any kind of fuel that the latrine of each house is situated in the middle of the upstairs courtyard. It is no more than a hole into the room below where the animals live. The Pitoons are not in the least perturbed if they are interrupted in the midst of their daily functions.

The smell of burning dung pervaded the house. It pervades Spiti. It seeps into your clothes, into your hair, your food, it enters your nostrils, and you smell it long after such fires have been left behind.

Yet in spite of this apparent lack of hygienic living conditions it would be quite misleading if you were to think of the Spiti house as dirty and unkept. Quite the reverse is true. The house is invariably swept clean each day, and even the most fastidious hostess would not be disgraced by a Spiti kitchen. Only the smell reminds one that conditions are different here. Yet we tolerate

street pavements fouled by meat-eating dogs. The Pitoon, more reasonably, puts his dung to good use.

We climbed a narrow stone staircase, hollowed with age, and emerged into the sun again on the top courtyard. Mrs. Shiring was waiting there to greet us, smiling shyly in welcome. She was tiny, dwarfed beside Judy, weighed down by her mass of hair and jewellery. She seemed frail and nervous, quite unlike the majority of buxom Piti women. Perhaps Shiring is too much for her, I thought, and sure enough, it was easy to see who ran the household. Shiring bustled about, seeing that everything was in order and that proper refreshment had been prepared. Mrs. Shiring clucked around him rather ineffectually, and I could feel her apprehension lest we were displeased with anything. But courtesy is invariable in Spiti, and this house was no exception. The best rugs had been brought from the first house for our benefit, and gleaming silver cups, thin with age, were set before us.

While the final touches were added to the food we were introduced to Shiring's elder brother and uncle (mother's brother). His brother obviously did not share even the beginnings of Shiring's gift. It was strange to see two grown men, responsible members of the Village Council, so obviously impressed with a boy of twelve. He treated them as equals (which they clearly were not), and they meekly did as Shiring told them.

We began the meal. First Tibetan tea was made. Part of an imported brick of tea was dissolved in boiling water: then the tea was poured into a long waist-high wooden tube, and yak butter and salt were added in liberal doses. Finally Shiring churned the mixture up with a plunger. The finished product is obviously an acquired taste. Judy could barely swallow it. She took a sip and her cup was promptly refilled. She bravely gulped the lot and indicated that she had had enough, and again it was refilled. At last, in desperation, she hid her cup behind her. Only later did we discover that Judy had hit upon usual Tibetan custom. A good hostess will refill her guests' cups at every sip, and a polite show of refusal merely indicates that more is wanted.

When you have really had enough you hide your cup, either behind you or under a cushion.

Then came the food. First, yak's curd mixed with barley flour, it tasted like ground popcorn and sour yoghurt. More usual Spiti foods followed, boiled mustard leaves, tasting like spinach, very good, and roasted kernels of barley. There were no utensils. We ate from the little wooden bowls with our fingers. The cups were of beaten silver, which is common enough in Tibet for most Spiti houses to have silver cups for special occasions.

The kitchen where the food was coming from was a long narrow room with an open fire at one end. So open that there was not even a hole in the ceiling for the smoke to escape through. Smarting eyes are preferred to a daily deposit of snow in winter, and during the coldest months everyone huddles in the kitchen. One could not help being struck by the cleanliness. The mud-floor was spotless; a little yak's-tail brush was propped up in the corner. The pots and kettles and other cooking utensils were arranged tidily on narrow shelves behind the fireplace. Each pot bore the scratches of many mud scourings. There was an assortment of silver cups and wooden bowls beside them. One shelf was devoted to Buddha. On it were several butter-lamps (these are about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches high) and an old sardine tin, scavanged from our camp the previous year. This too was a butter lamp now. One immense pot on the floor held the family's water supply for that day. The water was ladled into the cooking pots by a jug fashioned from the horn of a yak.

Small talk over tea with Shiring's mother was a little limited because of language difficulties, but nevertheless she and Judy managed to gossip.

"How is it that your hair is so short?" Shiring's mother wanted to know. Her own was more than three feet long, hanging down her back to below her waist. Near the bottom it was plaited together with an intricate design of yaks' hair and turquoise beads. Judy's jeans were very like her own trousers, so that was all right. "But what about jewellery?" she asked. "Surely you are not as poor as you look?"

Shiring had to explain that in Spiti wealth was judged by the amount of jewellery the women of the family wore, not just on special occasions, but during their ordinary working day as well. His mother was wearing her usual mass of workaday jewellery, turquoise and coral and coins strung together, and some safety-pins as well.

Then Shiring showed us over the house. Like all Spiti houses it is built on three sides round an open courtyard. In the middle of the courtyard, for everyone to see, there is a small hole—the toilet. On the far side there is a large storeroom. In it were some jars, made locally from Langja clay and shaped without the aid of a wheel. For all that they were amazingly symmetrical. They were filled with chang and arak (even a boy needs alcoholic sustenance in winter!). On the floor mustard leaves were drying, and cheese also, broken into tiny hard pieces. There was an empty space where the barley, not yet harvested, would go. Judy poked her nose into everything. "Do you have to go to all this trouble too," asked Mrs. Shiring in a tone which rather assumed she did. How could one explain that winter or summer all Judy had to do was to walk to a shop to buy almost any food in the world?

The other rooms are a smaller general purpose storeroom, and the bedroom. Pitoons have no bedding or beds, they just curl up on the floor and go to sleep. Huge balls of wool hung down from the ceiling, spun and ready for the winter's weaving. Shiring beckoned us to a corner. There was a small wooden box. He opened it proudly and showed us his treasures. A stub of a pencil, some exercise books, two coloured pictures from a book, a pair of worn-out shoelaces, an empty rusty tin and an empty ink-bottle.

Shiring, Garry and I went off to take some photographs. Judy stayed with Mrs. Shiring, with Sunom and P. N. interpreting. Judy found to her delight that Mrs. Shiring was longing to unburden herself of her worries over Shiring. Once begun she needed no encouraging, and Judy merely helped with a question here and there.

She had always been worried, she said. She had known that there was something strange about her husband when she had married him years before, but they had loved each other and had got on well together. Their first son had always been a good boy. He did what he was told, he worked hard in the fields as a child, he always showed proper respect to the Elders, indeed he was an exemplary Piti child. Shiring had been quite different. True, his manners were good and he was obedient in small things; but he would leave the work he was supposed to be doing to go off with his father on day-long excursions on the mountain-side. Such behaviour was allowable if strange in the father, who after all, was a Landlord; if he chose to wander round the hills rather than attend Council Meetings, that was his affair. But for a younger son—it simply was not done. Several times Counsellors had complained about these absences of Shiring's, but he only smiled and looked at his father and said nothing. Sometimes the Elders would get quite angry, she added, and still Shiring would pay no heed. And what had they done on these walks? Talked, they had told her, and she said it even now with disbelief.

Her husband had died, and that had been a difficult time for everyone. Shiring had not helped by being so grief-stricken, but it was understandable. Indeed the whole tone of her conversation was not one of anger or petulance, but rather of bewilderment. She loved her younger son as any good mother would. But he did cause her so very much worry.

Then the time had come for him to go to the Monastery. No one had suspected that he was being naughty that day when he could not be found. She had been beside herself with anxiety, for she was certain he must have drowned in the nullah. Then he had been so difficult, not staying at the Monastery, insulting the Elders, refusing to be reasonable. Her elder boy had been too young to assume full responsibility for the family though he was technically head of it, and she had felt that everyone was blaming her for Shiring's obstinacy.

The Elders had been at her, fiercely demanding her to do

what she could not; the monks had been at her, and they had terrified her with their dire threats of celestial retribution. The Schoolmaster had been at her too, persuading and encouraging and demanding. It was all so confusing. She was a timid soul, quiet and weak-willed, and here she had been thrown into the midst of scandal and trouble. If only Shiring could have been more ordinary, she sighed.

She admitted that there could be no doubting that Shiring was not an ordinary boy. The Schoolmaster repeatedly told her this and the boy's fluent Hindi was proof enough. He obviously inherited his ability from his father, she said accusingly. But what was all this learning about? Shiring was spending all his time with the Schoolmaster now. And he had this wild idea of going to Kulu and the lands beyond. What did Judy think of it all?

Judy did her best to reassure her.

"But he is so very wicked, you know. He still regularly disobeys the Council."

Just then Shiring came in. He laughed. "She's always worrying," he said. "She wouldn't be happy if she didn't have something to worry about. And sometimes I think she's really glad I didn't go to the Monastery."

A Piti woman certainly leads a hard life. She works in the fields and she collects the fuel with only the most occasional help from the men, and on top of that she runs her house and, if she is lucky enough to be married, she bears her children. During the winter there is cooking and clothes-making to be done. In spite of this hard work she is as gay and cheerful as can be. She giggles just as women do everywhere, and she is very friendly.

She is not so fashion conscious—Piti fashions have not changed in a thousand years—but nevertheless every month or so she spends hours rearranging her intricate hair. She also has her jewellery, masses of it, for only the poorest have none, and it must go a long way towards making up for the drabness of her life. Certainly the blues and silvers and yellows blend beautifully

with the deep maroon of her clothes. Make-up is unknown, unless you count the mud you sometimes see on her cheeks. In theory this is to ward off any God with a wandering eye who might take a fancy to her, for those the Gods love die young. But it is difficult to believe she has much to worry about in that direction. Her flat weather-beaten Mongol face has little attraction, and if the Gods but cast their eyes a little beyond the mountains they will find some of the most beautiful women in the world. But to every Jill her Jack. No doubt the Piti male finds her strikingly beautiful. Certainly she has the gaiety and character that many women from other lands lack. And I suspect that the mud is really protection against wind or sun burn.

One cannot but admire the Piti people. The isolation they take for granted is almost over-powering. To us Manali had been an extremely isolated mountain village, difficult of access, the end of the world. To the Pitoons, to Shiring (and increasingly to us), Manali was the centre of civilisation. There one found shops, buses (of a kind), education (and fresh food and a clean bed), whichever you thought of first. Spiti's isolation is best shown by the fact that there is not a single shop in the whole province, not even a house which sells goods on the side. Manali is the nearest, indeed the only place to buy with money. And it cannot be otherwise. Supplies would be difficult, transportation costs prohibitively expensive to lay in a stock, the market too uncertain, with no sales at all during the winter, more than half the year. Yet Manali is two passes and innumerable nullahs away.

While I was thinking about these things the house was invaded by Ranrik-ers. Apparently they had felt they were missing something, so in they poured, women and men and children. Shiring must have foreseen the possibility of an invasion, for with them came the dancers to entertain us. These dancers are really wandering minstrels, poor people, without land, who go from village to village dancing and singing and playing music, and living off the villagers' alms. They are in great demand, especially at weddings and harvest festivals.

Their instruments consist of a pipe something like an oboe, a

tambourine, and bells (and sometimes a horn, which we did not see). A young girl danced and chanted to the music, shuffling and bending in slow time. She was a pretty young thing, her voice was good and she obviously had rhythm. But the whole affair was very dull, for the basis of the performance was constant repetition. Once, twice, even three times the movements were interesting, for they were graceful and well timed, but then one would think of other things. The Piti audience was obviously just as bored. Shiring told me that the dancing was quite different when every one had had a little chang. Alas, there was none to be had.

There was more laughter and talk, which got a little out of hand with most of the village trying to join in, and then we took our leave. Shiring escorted us to the edge of the village. He talked to us of Babu-ji, his pet name for P. N., with P. N. listening to every word.

"Babu-ji is too fat for the mountains," he said. "He will fall, he has no breath."

It was all too easy to see what Shiring was getting at. P. N. should leave us to go up into the mountains while he took Shiring to the High School at Kulu. It could only be a dream, for P. N. had his instructions from the Government, and these did not include Shiring.

To change the subject Judy asked him why he was wearing so many garments—he was literally festooned in clothes.

"Because they have so many holes—together they fill up all the gaps and make one garment."

Shiring has many remarkable abilities not at first sight so obvious as his intelligence. One is his politeness—he never took a discarded tin from our camp site without asking first, and then he insisted on repaying us with yak's curd each morning. He is a natural leader, so much so that even adults do as he says—yet he is not bossy or swollen-headed. And finally there is his determination, so powerful a force that it seems too much for the frail little body that houses it.

Shiring has come a long way since the days of his stubborn

intransigence. He has the respect of nearly every person in Spiti, if not their approval. He is still very fierce when he discusses how he was supposed to be made a monk, for the memories of that struggle are all too recent. But he can talk quite dispassionately about lamas and monasteries when he is not involved.

The next day we were to go to the scene of his rebellion, Kee Monastery. That he had volunteered to act as our guide showed how much he had changed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kee Monastery

KEE MONASTERY WAS PROBABLY BUILT IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH century, to replace a monastery at Ranrik which had been founded in the eleventh century and then destroyed six hundred years later by invaders from Ladakh. Most nineteenth-century writers assume they are one and the same, but a few broken walls and relics on an isolated hill above Ranrik testify to the existence of the older monastery.[1]

It is a great pity that so many monasteries, not only in Spiti but in Western Tibet and Ladakh as well, have been built as castles on strategic vantage points; for though their situations are often picturesque they have ensured that the monasteries so built have been ravaged each time an invader came near—which often meant twice in a single century. It is no accident that the oldest monastery in Spiti[2] surviving in something approaching its original state was built in the middle of the plateau, easily accessible to all.

Spiti has always been a weak buffer state between powerful and ambitious neighbours; the rulers of Ladakh, Western Tibet and the Punjab Kingdoms all invaded Spiti at one time or another in their wars. Kee Monastery withstood the invasions of the eighteenth century well, for the monks took the most precious hangings and ornaments and fled to the hills. But during the Dogra invasion of 1834, when Mohammedan iconoclasts devastated much of the Valley, Kee suffered grievously from fire; though once again the movables were saved by the timely flight of the monks.

[1] The first great Tibetan scholar, the Hungarian Csoma de Köros, quotes a sixteenth-century passage which speaks of a Monastery already existing near Ranrik in the mid-eleventh century.

[2] Tabo, lower down the Valley, which is known to have existed as a Buddhist place of worship since the early eleventh century, possibly the year 1004 or even 996.

It is easy to see why one invader after another has deemed it necessary to destroy or at least to neutralise Kee. For the Monastery,[1] perched atop a rocky spire, presents the formidable front of a castle standing guard. Moreover it offers a wonderful field of view both up and down the valley, which would give the soldier ample warning of an intended surprise attack.

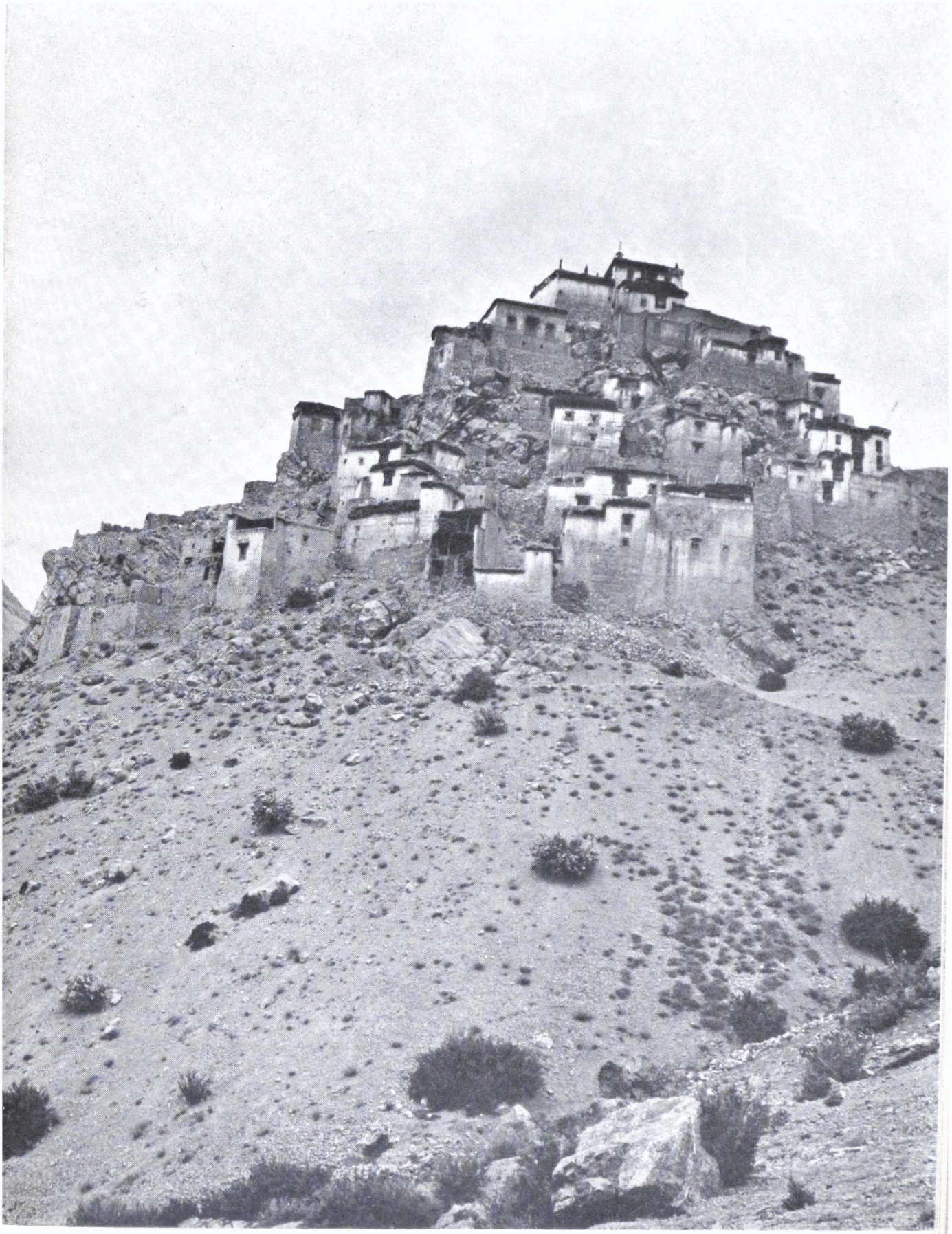
In the sixteenth century the Ge-luk-pa or 'Virtuous' Order of Monks, the Yellow-Hats,[2] began to gain influence in Western Tibet and Ladakh. The Yellow-Hats were founded in the fourteenth century,[3] and eventually they became the most powerful Order in Tibet, including among their members both the Dalai and the Panchen Lamas. The object of the new Order was to re-establish the monastic rule, which in many monasteries had become rather lax. The Red-Hats, for example, often allowed drinking, meat-eating and marriage, all in theory forbidden to the monastic orders. A statute of two hundred and fifty-three clauses was drawn up, by which the Yellow-Hats were to regulate their conduct. These clauses did not include innovations, however; the Order's aim was rather to tighten up on existing practice. Of the five monasteries in Spiti, the most important three, Kee among them, belong to this Ge-luk-pa Order. But as we were to discover during our visit to Kee, the Spiti exponents of the Virtuous Order are no longer so virtuous.

There is no uniformity or order in the layout of Kee Gompa. Monk's cells huddle together haphazardly on such ledges as the pinnacle offers. Winding steps, so hollowed out with constant use that they are barely manageable, lead up to the topmost buildings. The airiness of these highest roofs, the isolation from the hugger-mugger villages below, the black yaks' tails and the bronze statues and the extravagant prayer-flags, all these make

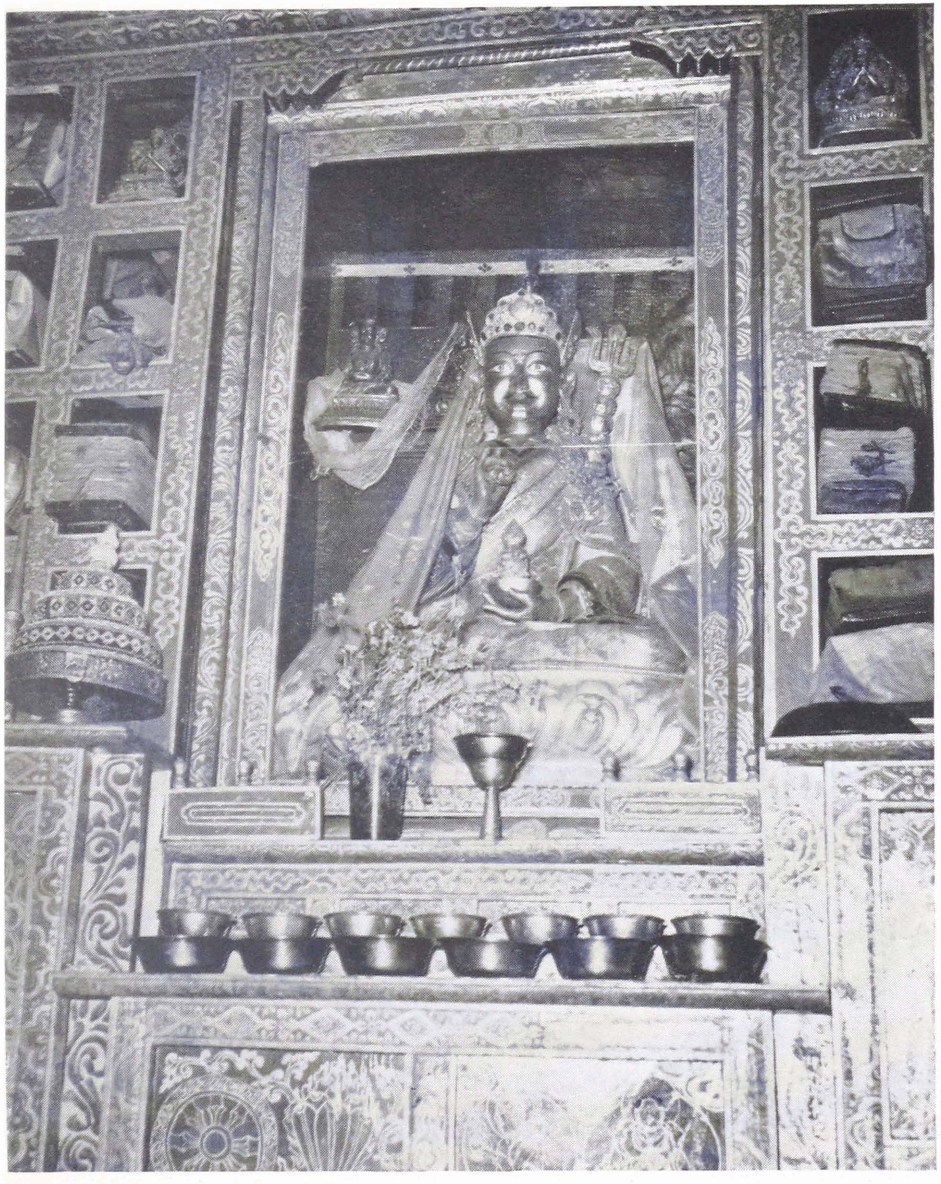
[1] Monastery or Gompa. The Tibetan word 'gompa' can mean either a monastery or a temple. A rough but fairly accurate translation would be 'place of worship'.

[2] 'Yellow' to distinguish them from the 'red-hatted' lamas of the other Orders.

[3] They were founded by that most virtuous Lama, Tsong-kha-pa, 'the man from the Onion Land', born in the Chinese province of Kansu.



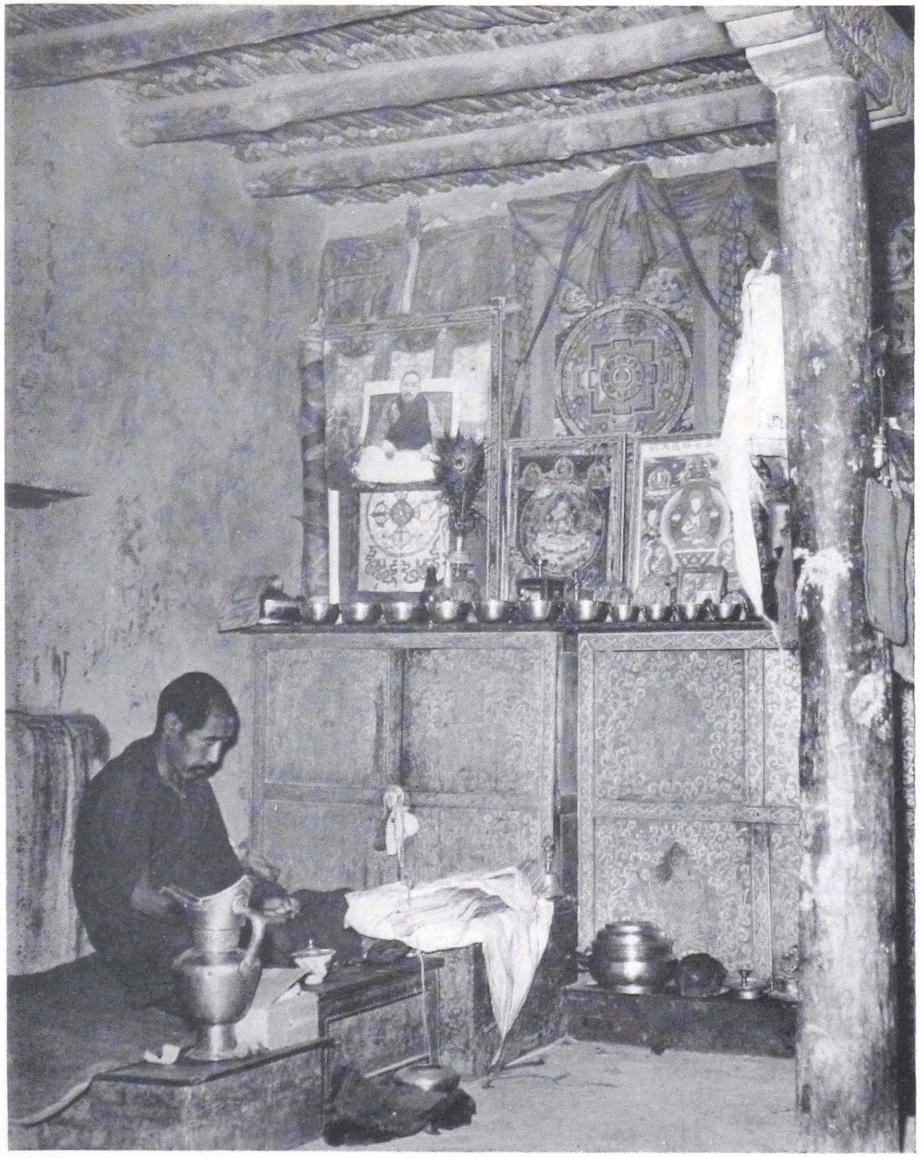
KEE MONASTERY



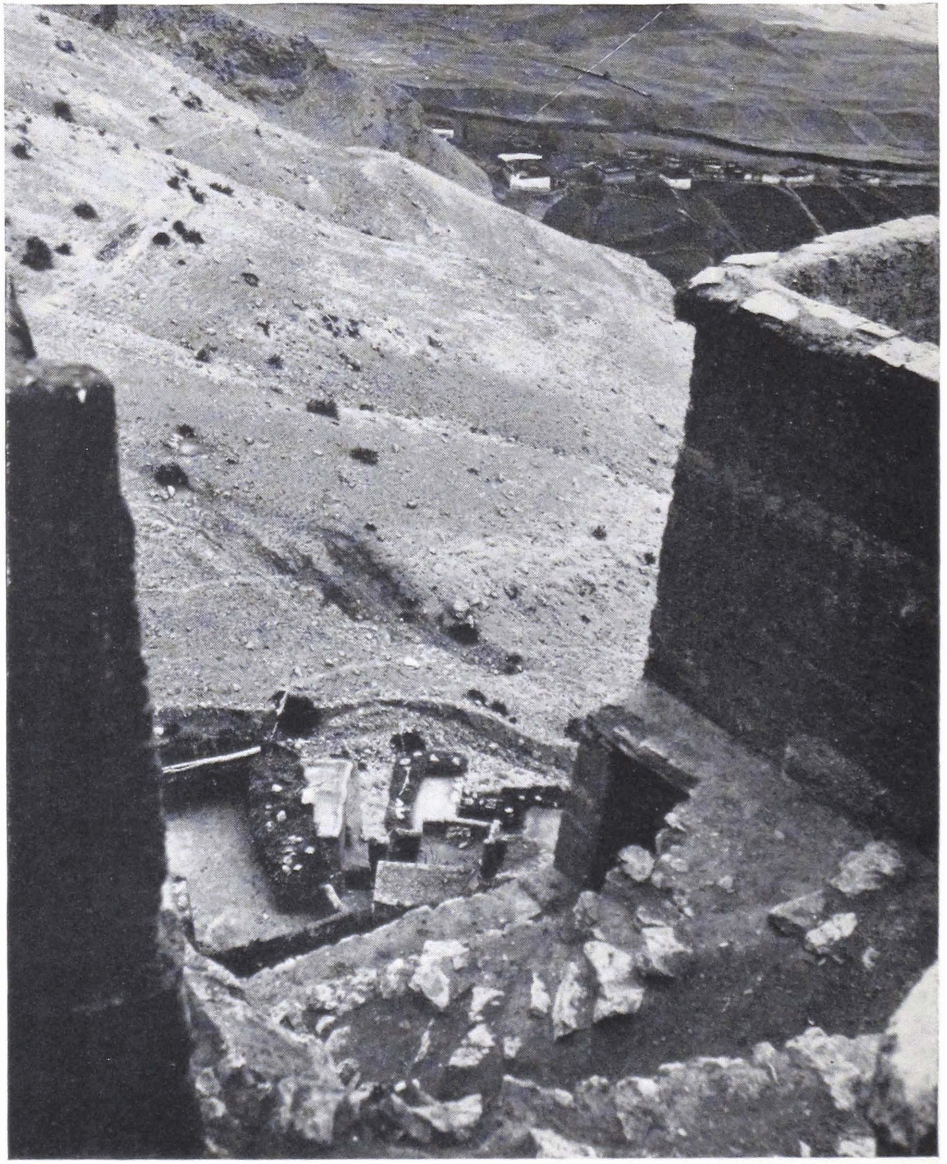
"A MAGNIFICENT BUDDHA . . . COVERED WITH GOLD LEAF"

THE BUDDHIST WHEEL OF EXISTENCE

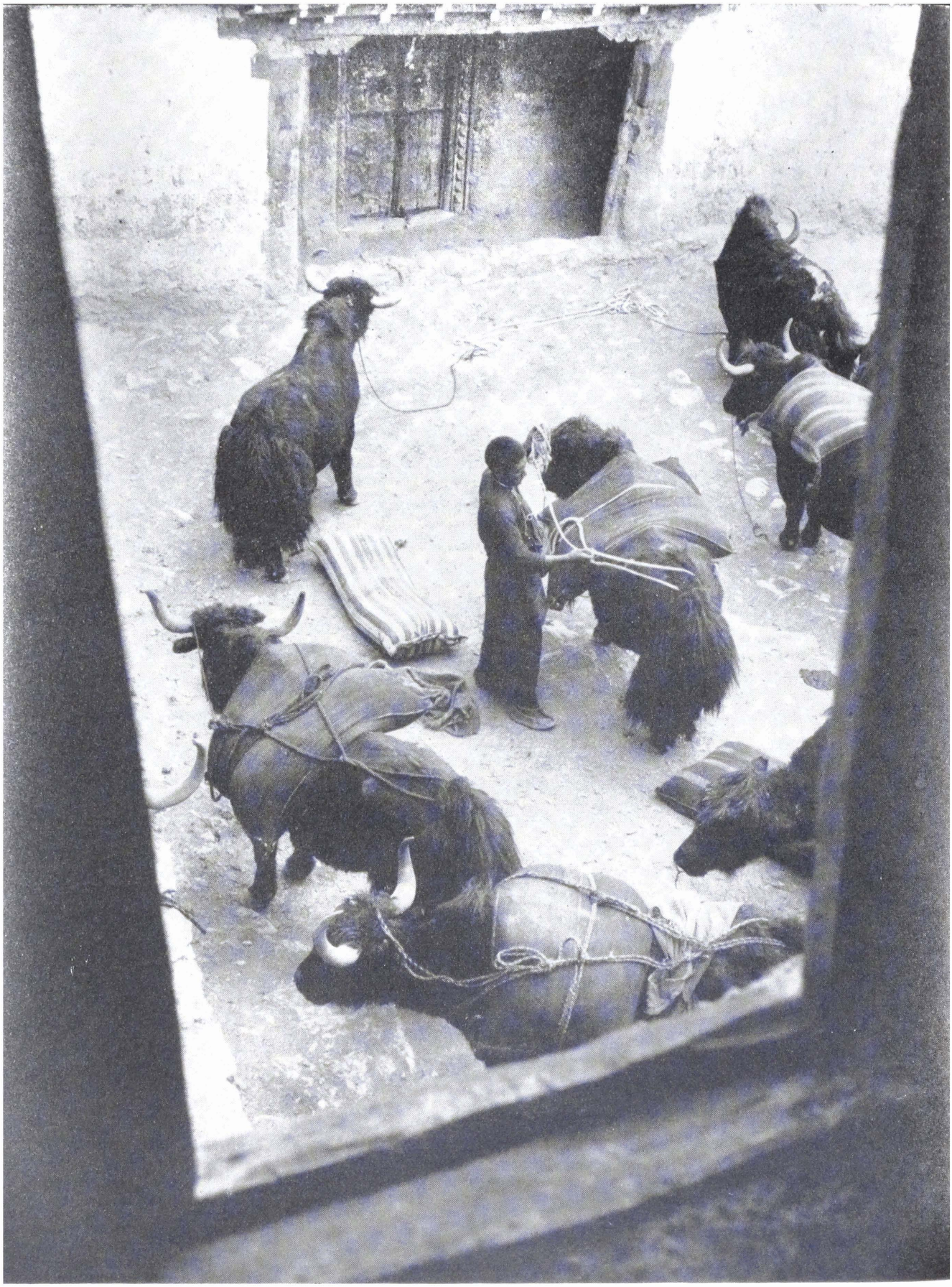
These are brought by villagers from the monastery, where they are carved on stone, and placed on the *mani* (or prayer) wall outside each village



IN THE ABBOT'S CELL



LOOKING DOWN FROM THE ROOF OF KEE MONASTERY ONTO THE CELLS BELOW



A LAMA UNLOADING YAKS IN THE UPPER COURTYARD OF KEE MONASTERY

one feel that God cannot be far away. The atmosphere of unconscious worship which pervades the valley is strongest here.

The upper buildings house the five gompas of the Monastery, a large kitchen, a special cell for the Abbot and a number of storerooms. These gompas are the focal points of the Monastery, for in them one looks for the treasures and the symbols of the Buddhist faith. Each gompa is dominated by a statue of Lord Buddha, looking down on his prostrate followers. In the half-light (Monastery windows are as small as any others in Spiti) the effect is awesome. The Buddha assumes a human form, and yet it is not human. For as legend relates, one of Buddha's disciples wished to draw His portrait for posterity; but when he came to measure His holy body no rule was long enough, nor was any measure sufficient. In answer to the disciple's prayer for assistance Buddha laid down certain proportions and features which should govern His portrait. And these have remained the same ever since. The features include specially long lobes to the ears, eyes shaped like an archer's bow, and of course His Third Eye, which signifies that he can see into the past, the present and the future. Covered with gold or silver leaf, these Buddhas seem to exude some of the all-embracing Compassion which is the central concept of Buddhist Tolerance.

On either side of the statues there are rows of wooden pigeon holes where the 108 volumes of the Kan-gyur, the Tibetan Scriptures, and the 225 volumes of the canonical commentaries are housed. These books may be placed above or beside the statues, but never below them; this because they possess greater sanctity than the latter, 'for it is by the word that the form is given life'.

Half-covering the books and the walls are the hangings, the t'hankas, oldest and most beautiful of all Kee's relics. They are among the last remaining legacies in Kee of the Golden Age of Western Tibetan art; many of them date back three hundred years and more.

Before the Buddha are the seven bowls of holy water, representing the seven offerings that should be made to an honoured guest; water for washing, incense, flowers, light, music, perfume

and food. Food is actually given, in the form of a Tsampa offering, and so is light, in the shape of a dish of yaks' butter which burns as a candle; and on special occasions the other gifts are also offered in kind. Distinct from these seven offerings of 'external worship' were the six offerings of 'internal worship' (which we found in only the two most holy of the five gompas). These represent sense and perception; there is a mirror for sight, a bell for sound, a stick of incense for smell, a tsampa cake for taste, some silk for touch and a book for knowledge.

Only the paintings on the walls are out of sympathy with the rest of the gompa, and these more than anything emphasise the relatively recent reconstruction of Kee and also the decline in the standards of monastic painting. For though the subjects are the same in many cases as those on the t'hankas, the colours are garish and unseemly, contrasting sharply with the quiet beauty of the hangings.

Nevertheless the overall effect is pleasing and in harmony with worship. Here surely a lama could learn to pursue the path of Realisation, on which Buddhist thinking is based. Why was it that Shiring had rebelled against following one of the most enlightened of all religions? He desired freedom; but had not some of the greatest intellects found just such freedom by doing what he refused to do?

Wherever we had gone in Spiti we had seen tangible symbols of this religion. First one noticed the prayer-flags: on the passes, protecting travellers; above the houses, warding off evil spirits and demons; high on the monastery roof, never ceasing in their prayers. The flags were gay and colourful, as if it were a pleasure to pray.

There were the mani-walls, made up of countless stones and slates. Many of them were intricately carved, by the lamas in the local monastery. As to the object of the 'manis' it has been written:[1]

> Does a childless man wish for a son? or a merchant about to travel hope for a safe return? Does a husbandman look for a

[1] General Alexander Cunningham in his *Ladak* 1854.

good harvest? or a shepherd for the safety of his flock during the severity of winter? Each goes to a lama and purchases a slate, and returns to his home full of confidence that his prayer will be heard.

The most usual inscriptions on these stones were either the 'Wheel of Existence' or else that favourite prayer, 'Om mani pad-me hum'. The subtleties of the Wheel of Existence are many, but basically its symbols represent the following: the small centre circle the Three Poisons of Life—Ignorance, Lust and Anger; the six sections the Round of Existence—Gods, Titans, Man, Animals, Ghosts and Tormented Beings, in that order; the wide outer circle the Twelve Interdependent Bonds which bind all living creatures to the misery of the centre circle.

The prayer 'Om mani pad-me hum' can be taken to have an infinite number of meanings and its literal translation, 'Om, Jewel in the Lotus, Hum!' cannot in itself begin to express them. An elementary rendering would take 'mani', 'jewel', a precious thing, to be the doctrine; and 'pad-me', 'in the lotus', to be the world which encompasses the doctrine. 'Om' is untranslatable, but might be taken as the initiation of worship. 'Hum' denotes defiance, which the supplicant utters at the enemy, the three poisons, or in another sense his own individuality which he seeks to dissolve. To the knowledgeable lama the meanings are boundless, though few Pitoons or even Tibetans are cognisant of these finer definitions; any more than a peasant farmer in Southern Europe will consciously connect his 'Hail Mary' with the doctrine of the Incarnation.

But, alas, the mani-walls are falling into disrepair.

Then there were the prayer-wheels which every house possesses. They range in size from a hand wheel to the largest monastic wheel, seven feet high and four across. These too are inscribed with the prayer 'Om mani pad-me hum'. Just as prayer-flags are constantly sending their message to Heaven, so throughout Buddhist country prayer-wheels are always turning. But in Spiti the prayer-wheels are turning less and less frequently.

There were the chortens, inside every village, symbolising the Four Elements, Earth, Water, Fire and Air, through which all beings struggle, via the Steps of Attainment, towards Enlightenment. But many chortens are showing signs of decay.

Now we were in the Monastery itself, and here was a Buddha smiling down to us in the half-light of the gompa. Was he trying to convey to us the Peace and the Release from Suffering which is attainable for those who are prepared to forget the will o' the wisp happiness and struggles of everyday life? Was he telling us that there are antidotes for the Three Poisons of Life? That Ignorance can be combated with Knowledge, Just Views, Awareness; Lust with the Negation of our Fictitious Individuality, in a word, with Non-Attachment; Anger with Loving-Kindness, with a consistent refusal to inflict suffering, with Compassion? He seemed to reiterate the Four Truths, on which all Buddhist Doctrine is founded. There is Suffering, and the cause of Suffering is Ignorance; the goal is the Cessation of Suffering, and this is achieved by Enlightenment. Ignorance and Knowledge cannot live in the same heart. Once Enlightenment has been attained, the Twelve Interdependent Bonds are burst asunder, rebirth is ended and there is no death. For Enlightenment breeds Enlightenment for ever.

Then I noticed that he was covered with dust, and I realised that he would never speak. For in Kee Neglect and Ignorance are too deeply rooted.

Beside the Buddha there were the books of his doctrine, the jewels of his faith. These represented many months of patient carving on the part of some master printer, for the blocks with which they were printed had been hand carved. These too were covered with dust, for not more than half-a-dozen of the hundred and fifty monks who inhabit Kee can read.

There were the hangings, examples of Buddhist Art, paintings on silk, many of them older than the oldest building standing today. Some of them may have been rescued in the nick of time from the Ranrik Monastery before it was sacked, some were undoubtedly imported from more richly endowed sister monas-

teries in Tibet, others were probably brought back by monks who had made the pilgrimage to Lhasa. Many of the paintings date back at least to the sixteenth century, for this period was the last in which anything of value was produced in Western Tibet. In 1646 the Central Tibetans, supported by the Mongols, conquered the whole region, and with their conquest artistic merit was snuffed out. The last three hundred years have in some ways been a Dark Ages for the area. But the paintings adorn a spiritually empty monastery.

With the sloth and the dust and disuse, perhaps there was something to Shiring's arguments after all. For he is not struggling to free himself from Buddhism; he is fighting away from the monastic system as it is in Spiti today.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dust and Decline

THE CLIMB FROM THE VILLAGE TO THE MONASTERY WAS STEEP AND tiring. If a monk saw us coming we would be greeted with water, Shiring had said, but as we approached the Monastery gate there was no sign of life. We entered through the gate, and still there was no one. Feeling like intruders into an age gone by we cautiously picked our way up the narrow uneven steps, twisting hither and thither. On every side were low doors, leading to the monks' numerous cells. All were tightly padlocked, some with shiny new Yale locks from Kulu, others with complicated and clumsy locks from Tibet. It seemed as if the Monastery was deserted. Perhaps all the monks had gone out for the day. Perhaps there was an epidemic. We climbed on, wondering.

Then all bedlam broke loose. A veritable Cerberus, a watchdog chained in a narrow passage which led to the central courtyard, woke up to our presence. He gnashed and howled and stormed at his chain, making any further progress out of the question. Garry said something which sounded like 'nice doggy', and then from a safe distance expounded the theory that if you look a dog straight in the eye and show no fear you can bend the beast to your will, no matter how wild or savage it is. I invited Garry to prove his theory, for we would get nowhere with this monster in our way. Cerberus cannot have read Garry's book, for as he approached the dog strained at his chain with a determined ferocity which boded ill for us if it broke.

A voice called from above, and as if by magic the beast became still. A monk appeared, reproved the dog and bowed to us in welcome. He was dressed as all other Piti men, in a coarse robe dyed red, ragged and patched. Only his face in repose, his shaven head and the beads which he constantly fingered marked him out as a monk. We returned his greetings and through Shiring,

our interpreter, we asked if we might visit the Gompa proper. He bade us enter and we did so fearfully, edging past Cerberus, who growled his hate.

The monk led us across the central courtyard, up another dark passage to the roof of the Monastery. The view from this roof or upper courtyard was breath-taking. The Spiti River was a mass of silver threads twisting through white shingle and dark rock. Patches of vivid green, marking the village fields, broke up the monotonous brown of the plateau behind. Bare foothills rose to a circle of magnificent peaks, capped in the splendour of eternal snow.

We turned to our host in his tattered robes and to the five or six other monks who were in residence. The great mass of Kee monkdom, nearly a hundred and fifty in all, were out in the villages helping their families gather fuel and bring in the harvest. Shiring added that this was an annual excursion, when the monks collected their everyday food for the next year. This comes from a 'lama's field' which is set aside by his family especially for his keep. Only a few monks stay behind to look after the Monastery.

We presented our gifts. We had not the traditional white scarves but instead we had brought some long-burning candles, several pounds of sugar, some empty tins and a lighter. We showed them how to work the lighter. Then a lama tried it for himself. Disbelief as he flicked twice and nothing happened, then a glow of triumph when it lit at the third attempt. A young inmate, a novice, cheekily snatched it away to try himself. Another monk grabbed it, and in a moment there was a raging quarrel. "Let me try it." "No, let me." "It's mine." The oldest monk appealed for peace, this was hardly correct behaviour, and then turned to us for judgement. At last it was agreed that each monk should have the opportunity of taking it to his village to show it off, and then it would be kept in the main temple for lighting candles. This satisfied them all, for each one could have his moment of glory where it counted most, in his home village.

"I will have to leave you now," the lama said, "for I have certain duties to perform. I will see you in the evening. This novice

and Shiring can show you over the Monastery together. You will see the kind of life Shiring would be leading if he were not such a rascal. Moslem indeed! I'm surprised I let you into the Monastery at all, you young scallywag." Then he turned to us as if to speak an aside. "Shiring would now be in the fifth year of his novitiate," he said in broken Hindi. "But he was wicked and unruly, and he would not conform with our way of life. But I still think he possesses a remarkable ability."

Feeling inside his robes he took a huge intricate key and led us through a doorway. There was a small bare room, an antechamber.

"You may sleep here tonight," he said, inviting us to stay with no more ado. Then he turned away, and we were left in the care of the Novice.

Shiring and this Novice had grown up together in Ranrik, and now they would be contemporaries in the Monastery had it not been for Shiring's rebellion.

Our tour of the Monastery began. First Shiring and our Novice took us to an outer temple, no more than a cell, which housed the largest prayer-wheel in the Gompa. It was easy to imagine a novice, after he had been naughty in some minor way, being sentenced to so many turns of the wheel. For the idea behind these wheels is not unlike the Papal 'Heavenly Treasury of Merit'; one can accrue merit by turning a prayer-wheel. Now obviously the bigger the wheel the more prayers can be inscribed in it, and the harder it is to turn. So the bigger the wheel the more merit saved up. This particular wheel was enormous, and it took considerable effort to pull it round.

In all we saw four of the five gompas which Kee boasts. The gompas are of varying sanctity, ranging from no more than a monks' common room to the fifth and smallest, the Holy of Holies, into which no visitor is allowed. Here prayers are said daily for the safe return of the Abbot. If a lama is destined to reach the higher ranks of his order he must make a pilgrimage to the Holy City of Lhasa where he stays for two or three years to study under a Teacher. (Some more fortunate novices may also

make this journey in preparation for full lamahood.) Once he has reached the highest places, and become an Abbot perhaps, it is customary for him to spend nearly a third of his time there. The present Abbot of Kee went to Lhasa eight years ago, just before Tibet was invaded from the north. He was supposed to have returned in three years. Now no one knows what has become of him, though it is realised that the invaders are not very favourably disposed towards holy men. Prayers are said for his safe return but it is not known when, if ever, he will come back. The monks go on, hoping and praying.

Kee must once have been an exceedingly rich Monastery, for the gompas were filled with extravagant and beautiful decorations. One in particular caught our eye. It was a t'hanka, a painting of a map. "The Monastery is very proud of that," Shiring said. "Most of these paintings and ornaments came from Tibet, and the silks from a country beyond. This map is a very precious hanging. It is the map of a city, perhaps of Lhasa. It is very old. Here, look closely. The red buildings are the gompas. It was painted before there was a Dalai Lama, in the days when all lamas were equal."

That meant that the map dated back at least to the first half of the seventeenth century. I could well believe it. Though it was more likely that the map depicted an important monastery of the Ge-luk-pa order, perhaps Drepung near Lhasa, than Lhasa itself. It was painted like many medieval maps, with no perspective and every building face on. Because the climate in Spiti is so dry the silk has not mouldered, and the lack of light has preserved the original colours.

I took several photographs of this t'hanka. The Novice was terrified by the sharp light, but Shiring reassured him that there was no need for fear. Nevertheless the Novice was taking no chances. Clearly this was some kind of magic. To forestall any possible celestial wrath he placed the bulbs before Lord Buddah in dedication. Though for some reason he took only the blue bulbs; the yellow ones were discarded as useless. Perhaps yellow and the mysterious do not mix.

One gompa was devoted to statues of various Gods and Goddesses in the act of union. These are not intended to be pornographic in any way. They symbolise the constant procreation which is required to keep the human race going. The central pair, locked in close embrace, are no more than the Father and Mother of the Human race. They are a common feature in Tibetan oconography. Yet they have been subjected to much hostile and uninformed criticism by western travellers. As Marco Pallis writes in his *Peaks and Lamas*, 'the trouble really arises from the rather prudish conventions prevalent in Europe itself, by which open reference is always avoided to whatever is connected with the act of procreation, while it is deemed utterly inconceivable that a visual portrayal thereof could have a reverent purpose. In the Orient the subject is treated without reserve: it need not be mentioned in whispers. . . . As to those who so easily fly to conclusions about the 'indecency' of the Father-Mother pictures, one is bound to say that such people reveal nothing but the nastiness of their own minds.'

And as one Tibetan writes, 'I admit I was horrified beyond measure when I first saw that the Christians worshipped a tortured man nailed to a cross as their symbol. It is such a pity that we all tend to judge the peoples of other countries by our own standards.'

Our tour of the upper monastery nearly completed, Shiring suggested a rest and some tea. He took us to the main gompa, the only one big enough to house all the monks at once. It was like an over-crowded antique shop. The walls were covered with numerous fresco paintings, some lovely, others grotesque. Dozens of hangings crowded down from the ceiling. The altar was a hotch-potch of images, cups and butter dishes. Everywhere dust was inches deep. The whole room gave out an atmosphere of faded magnificence.

Several monks were already sitting in the lotus position on the low benches, which were covered with carpets and hard cushions.

"Just watch this," Shiring whispered, "and you'll see I can't abide the prospect of living here forever."

Tea drinking was a lengthy ritual. A novice filled everyone's tiny cups from a large silver teapot which stood in an urn filled with charcoal. Garry made as if to sip at once, but a nudge from Shiring stopped him just in time. Each round of tea had to be blessed. This was no more than a formality, for while they chanted the lamas looked round, scratched their heads and fingered our clothing. Once begun, I thought they would never stop. On and on they went. Individually they took time out to sneeze, gaze at us or just rest. At times only a single monk would be chanting, and I thought the blessing would surely end now, if only from lack of enthusiasm. But then the others would take it up again with renewed vigour. The first five minutes passed quickly, for the repetitious chant was worth listening to; the next five were tedious, and then I watched in horror as my tea began to cool and the butter to congeal. They stopped just in time. At a signal we all drank together. The idea seemed to be to make as much noise as possible with each sip, perhaps in appreciation of the blessed tea. Certainly the gasps, gurgles and gurks combined to give a fruity orchestration.

The cups were refilled and the chant was repeated. The large silver teapot was replenished. But a second cup of cold congealed tea was more than enough, and we escaped before we could be offered the chance of a third. The lamas were obviously just beginning.

"Do you see what I mean?" Shiring asked as we got outside. I did.

The Novice, Shiring told us, lived in his family cell with his uncle, who was one of the elder lamas at Kee. One day it would belong to our young guide. He led the way down a little, below the level of the temples; then we traversed round the side of the hill. The Novice unlocked the door of his uncle's cell with a key that must have measured three inches by five. His family at least had not given way to the convenience of a Yale lock. The cell was in fact a flat, for there were three small roofed rooms and an open veranda. The first room contained only a hole in the floor. The veranda was piled high with brushwood for the

winter fuel. We squeezed past the brushwood to find ourselves in the kitchen-cum-storeroom. Throughout most of the winter the monks stay in their own rooms. It is too cold for much to-ing and fro-ing. It follows that each cell must be more or less self-sufficient. In one corner there was a dirty pile of meat joints, hard and withered from a prolonged frying in the sun. This drying process preserves the meat almost indefinitely. In the centre of the room there was a mud-brick fire; no chimney. The rest of the space was given over to more firewood, and sacks of grain which had been brought in from the village fields.

The last and smallest room served as both chapel and bed-sitter. There was a pile of skins, a few odd yak's-hair ropes, some keys and a worn out pair of hide boots. In the far corner there was a small mud shelf. This was the private altar. A butter lamp burned before a Buddha Box. Beside the Box there was a bell and a sceptre, representing Wisdom and Method, the twin aids to Enlightenment. Otherwise the room was bare. A barren world indeed for a little boy to spend five months on end.

We returned to the upper courtyard to find the tea-drinking over at last. So I asked if we could inspect one of the holy books in the main gompa more closely. The Novice suggested that the library would be more rewarding. This was bare after the chock-a-block temple, for there was only one small Buddha and a wall full of books. A lama was already chanting at a small stand, so I examined his volume. The script was block-printed on rough parchment. There was no binding; bundles of about two hundred sheets were stacked between two wooden covers.

I wondered whether the monk was reading or just reciting for our benefit, for the chanting seemed to bear little relation to the amount of print. Whole pages were turned over in a breath, while others lasted forever.

"Is he reading?" I asked Shiring.

"Of course not," he replied. "Though he knows whole sections off by heart, he certainly can't read."

For our supper we went to the monastic kitchen. But for the smells and the lack of tables this could have been a Victorian

kitchen. We were resigned to salt-butter tea, but tsampa was a pleasant surprise. Some Pitoons (and especially Tibetans) live on tea and tsampa from their first meal to their last. The tsampa is made from barley roasted to a golden brown; then the kernels are cracked so that the flour is exposed, and it is roasted again. This flour is put in a bowl, and hot butter tea is added. The mixture is stirred with the fingers until it attains the consistency of dough. Salt and more butter are added to taste. The result is tsampa. It would be monotonous stuff by itself, but undoubtedly it will sustain life at all altitudes and in all conditions. The taste is palatable, though it was disconcerting to think that much of the flavour came from the smoke of the dung fire over which it had been cooked.

Tastier was the goat gruel. Though I was surprised to find meat in a Monastery.

"Surely," I said to Shiring, "Buddha forbids the killing of animals. I have often read that Buddhists are only allowed to eat the meat of animals that have fallen over cliffs or been killed by accident."

"It's the same in the Monastery as it is in the village," he said. "In theory no one should kill an animal. In practice the accident is a slip of the hand just when it happens to be holding a knife near the animal's throat."

"Do you think it is the same in Tibet?"

"Surely, except perhaps in the holiest places. People must eat, you know."

On the wall of the kitchen was a hideous papier mâché mask.

"That's a Devil Dance mask," Shiring explained. "Once a year, during a religious festival the monks dress up and enact an old and famous play in masks such as that. It is a great occasion, with much festivity, and all the villagers come to watch."

"But what is a Devil Dance?"

"Ask the Head Lama to stage a short rehearsal. Then you'll see."

So the acting Abbot was found and asked if a short dance could be staged for our benefit. He was doubtful. Taking the hint I

gave him two rupees. He cheered up and said a rehearsal would be staged on the roof at once.

As one authority has written, "it is in the sacred mystery plays, miscalled 'devil-dances', that this art (of Dancing) reaches heights almost undreamed of. . . . Every Monastery has its dancing monks and costumes for these mysteries . . . hundreds participate, and the costumes are magnificent beyond words; the dresses are usually of ancient Chinese silk brocade and embroidery, with an underskirt banded in red and yellow, the two sacred colours. . . . It must, however, be borne in mind that the Tibetan sacred ballet is primarily meant to tell a story. It is a church service, in the fullest sense of the word, and not half-way to an entertainment. To us, who have singled the dance out of the whole family of arts for banishment from the service of religion, except in Seville Cathedral, where alone it survives, it is difficult to imagine that dignity and reverence can go hand-in-hand with so exciting a performance."

The full dance can last up to thirty-six hours. The Abbot and more senior lamas, dressed in their special robes, sit round the courtyard of the monastery, clanking huge cymbals to a slow measure. Other monks, dressed in brilliant costumes, dance in time to the measure, advancing and retreating, swirling this way and that. The story of the dance is the combat of the Gods with the Demons. The Demons had become too powerful and tyrannical over mankind, so the Gods descended from Heaven, took the shape of strange beasts, and in that guise fought with and destroyed the Demons. By the end of the dance all the Demons are prostrate or have fled.

Everyone assembled on the roof and then the dancers arrived. Their silk robes, painted with weird and colourful designs, were certainly magnificent. And their masks, with skulls and horns and grotesque faces, were superb. Anywhere else the costumes would have seemed beautiful and ridiculous. But here, with the atmosphere of the monastery, with the sun dying on the distant peaks, they were strangely frightening. With the gods' and demons' faces, laughing, mocking, it was hard to remember that

they were only monks dressed up, the same monks whose evening meal we had just shared. The spell broke when the dance began. They were obviously out of practice. So many bumps occurred that in a few moments the dance had degenerated into ring-a-ring-of-roses, with an accompaniment of muffled giggles.

Elsewhere in Tibet and Ladakh, the dancing may reach 'heights almost undreamed of'. But here in Spiti, as with so many other things, the dancing has become debased. The trappings still exist, but the festivals are little more than excuses for heavy drinking. Everyone enjoys himself, nothing is taken too seriously, and the real meaning of the dance is forgotten.

Shiring's comment was unequivocal. "The Demons may be prostrate at the end of the dance," he said, "but so is everyone else. With chang."

Dusk was rapidly invading the valley as the dancers filed away, their exhibition completed. The sun was already hidden by golden snows. Shadows lengthened and then enveloped us. The last of the yaks bringing grain from the villages were unloaded in the courtyard just below. The Spiti Valley settled down for another night, believing itself to be secure with the prayer-flags and the yaks' tails and the countless prayers of untold generations, protecting it from the evil spirits of the darkness.

Altogether we spent two days and a night in Kee Gompa. It was an exciting experience, for we saw exactly how Spiti monk-dom lives. We watched them start the day with a blast on a long trumpet, then the ritual of filling the little bowls all over the Monastery with holy water; holy by virtue of the fact it was the first from the spring that morning. Prayers, a meal, more prayers, tea, meditation, teaching, prayers and always more tea.

When we asked the Novice to explain what he did during the day his answer seemed reproachful. "Oh, I don't know. Fill the holy water jars in the morning, empty them in the evening, see that at least one butter candle is burning before Buddha in the main temple all day, cook, learn prayers and sometimes chant them. That's about all."

No description of Kee would be complete without mention of the dirt and dust. It is everywhere. Statues and priceless hangings are covered in it inches deep; before one can see their superb colouring one must dust and blow and dust again. Monks' hands were coated in grease, never to be washed off; heads shaved to varying degrees of closeness were matted with last year's dirt.

Looking over the photographs we took inside Kee Monastery I can smell the smell of Spiti; it is a smell quite peculiar to the place, and it was strongest in the monastery. Mainly, I suspect, because there were no women at Kee to put in order the monks' ideas on sanitation. Indeed the only lavatory in the monastery was a most sensational affair; it was a tiny room built out over the precipice, overhanging the courtyards fully a hundred feet below. For two days we lived with this smell at its worst, and to bear it we joked about it calling it 'Gompa No. 5'. This extravagantly priced perfume—the cost of an expedition—can be recommended for its staying powers: it stayed with us in our clothes, despite continual washings, for more than a fortnight after we left the Valley.

Behind this dirt and dust there is the magnificence of a former greatness. Centuries ago, when the influence of Tibetan culture and lamaism was at its height, when the Ge-luk-pa order was at its rigorous peak, Kee may well have been an outpost of monastic learning and reform. The richness and variety of its splendid ornaments and statues bear witness to a wealth that no longer exists. The crowded libraries must surely stand for an era of teaching long since dead.

The monastery still collects its 'bon' and 'bulwa'[1] from the neighbouring villagers, the monks continue to attend marriages and other lay ceremonies. But the villagers are receiving a poor spiritual return for their alms. Not many of the order's two hundred and fifty-three rules are observed by the inmates. Meat-eating may be excused on grounds of necessity; not so the heavy drinking which has become a part of every festival. Only in the

[1] 'Bon' is an annual tithe; 'bulwa' consists of harvest alms and funeral offerings.

matter of marriage are the Kee monks better behaved than their Red-Hatted rivals a few miles down the Valley.

After our visit to Kee I could understand the force behind Shiring's arguments. It was not the religion he objected to, nor was it the filth. It was the decadence and decay, the incredible waste, the narrowness which he could not tolerate.

"Thank goodness we are out of there!" he exclaimed as we emerged from the gate for the last time. I'm not sure that we did not all agree with him.

As we walked back along the river-bank towards base camp we talked of how best to appease the numerous very fierce Gods and Demons which inhabit the mountains, supposing one met one. Shiring thought that one should stoutly hold one's ground no matter who one met, and talking politely on equal terms, persuade him to become friendly.

"What if it was an evil spirit which wished to harm you?"

"Evil spirits are mostly cowards," Shiring replied. "If you are a good man and not afraid, then they will keep away from you."

Rinsing was horrified at the impiety of Shiring's suggestions. The only hope, he said, was to pray, and to pray hard. Though of course, he added slyly, anything blessed by a particularly holy man would be certain to help. Carefully he untied a grimy rag from around his neck and showed it to me. "This, for instance," he said proudly. "It comes from Lhasa. I bought it in Manali for twenty rupees."

"Or this," said Sunom, as he pulled out an even dirtier rag from his pocket. "Kee Gompa, one anna."

CHAPTER NINE

Ammonites and Leopards

BEFORE LEAVING ENGLAND I HAD AGREED TO COLLECT A CERTAIN kind of fossil called an ammonite for a distinguished geologist at Cambridge. Officially this was our best excuse for going to the Himalayas: the most interesting species of these special fossils can only be found in two places in the Himalayas, Spiti and Niti. Niti is in Tibet and is therefore out-of-bounds. So Spiti, ten miles the right side of the Bamboo Curtain, holds the free-world monopoly of these particular ammonites. The year before we had had a highly qualified geologist with us to collect them. But it had transpired that nothing could be gained by working on them *in situ*; they were not in the tidy layers they apparently should have been, for the area in which they were found had been convulsed by repeated glacial movement. So now their collection could be safely entrusted to a non-scientist like myself.

To acquaint myself with the finer points of geological fieldwork I had spent a day in Cambridge with the geologist examining the specimens collected the year before, trying hard to tell one species from another. After four bewildering hours I left his museum none the wiser but confused with half-remembered phrases: 'three lines are better than two', but 'one is better than three'. What about no lines at all? Or four? I simply could not remember.

Judy, Garry and P. N. would stay at Ranrik while I made an excursion to the ammonite fields a few miles away. Shiring wanted to come with me. He confessed that he had not asked the necessary permission to leave Ranrik when he came with us to the Monastery. For all Pitoons, even adults, must have sanction to leave the village while there is work to do in the fields. The Village Elders, he said, would be very cross with him. But he thought that if he stayed away another three days acting as my

official interpreter, they might cool off a little. Sunom, Rinsing and the ponymen came too. We began the trudge up to the high plateau of the Spiti Shales, between 14,000 and 16,000 feet, where the fossils are to be found.

First we had to cross the Spiti River. There is a bridge—of sorts. The river, more than a mile wide a little way upstream, suddenly narrows down between two rocky cliffs until it is no more than thirty yards across. The great volume of water swirls through these narrows as a tempestuous torrent. Some bits of wood precariously bridge the gap between the cliffs. No single log is long enough by itself. So foundation logs jut out from either cliff; other logs are lashed to these, and jut a little further. And so on, till at last they meet. Irregular planks are laid haphazardly across the top logs. There are no nails, no rope lashes, no joints: tread too near one end and the plank will tip up, despatching you to a watery grave. Large gaps between the planks invite you to slip. The whole edifice sways in the wind. A prayer monument at either end emphasises the danger. It is a frightening place. We went across one at a time. Nothing must upset the delicate balance of the person ahead. There were no accidents, but we were glad to be across.

A long trudge up a steep and precipitous path, and then at last we reached the crest which marked the beginning of the plateau. A little way ahead was Langja, the highest village in Spiti. It is remarkable as being the only village in the whole of Spiti with an export trade: it makes pottery from the clay in the Shales. Yet even in Langja there is no shop of any kind.

Just behind the village Sunom found the first ammonite. It was lying at the bottom of a small stream bed. Shiring was all agog.

"What a funny thing," he exclaimed. "It looks just like a worm which has curled up and gone to sleep. Only it seems to be a stone. How can a stone be so symmetrical?"

I did my best to explain. I told him that the ammonite was once a living creature, a kind of animal, but it had died a long time ago. A hundred million years ago, in fact.

Shiring was impressed, but he was not satisfied. "If it lived once, how can it be stone now?" he asked.

Again I tried to explain. But just try explaining the processes of fossilation—which you have grasped only dimly yourself—to a small boy in a foreign language over which you have only the uneasiest command.

Shiring accepted my highly improbable explanation of how animals became fossils and then plunged on. He wanted to know how it had lived, how it had eaten, he wanted to know everything about it.

I began from the beginning. I told him how what is now India had once been an island, separated from the rest of Asia by a shallow sea. I told him how the mountains had been below the sea, how all of Spiti itself had once been beneath the water's surface.

This he had found difficult to believe. Had the sea been so very high?

No, the mountains had been very low. These ammonites had lived in the sea which covered Spiti. Probably they floated about beneath the water's surface, rather like jellyfish do today. (But what were jellyfish?) Then the mountains rose up out of the sea, pushing it aside. Perhaps the mountains came up very suddenly, perhaps they took millions of years, no one knew for certain. As the sea drained away many of the animals which had lived in the water were left high and dry. Also many others had died before, and now their graves were on the land.

Shiring interrupted to ask what had been happening to the people during all this time.

I told him not to forget that this was long before man was on earth. And then I could have bitten my tongue off. For Shiring started on a completely new line of questioning. How had man begun? What was it like before he started? For that matter how had the world begun? Or had it always been here? Quickly we got right back to first principles. All that afternoon I tried to explain and answer questions. When in difficulties—and this was often—I fell back to cloaking my ignorance behind a hesitant translation.

We began at the beginning. I prefer the theory of two giant stars nearly colliding, and then with huge strides we worked our way through to the twentieth century. We arrived breathlessly at the present day.

"Well," said Shiring, "the Lamas wouldn't believe a word of what you say. They have quite different notions."

Talk stopped only when Sunom announced supper. Shiring silently digested all I had told him, I turned gratefully to beans and chapattis.

I could not help thinking that here was a golden opportunity for an intelligent missionary, no matter the religion. Train Shiring, guide him, allow him to develop his intellectual abilities along not too narrow a breadth, no indoctrination, mind you, and then send him back to Spiti to lead his people. Seldom can there have been such a fertile field waiting to be sown.

When our geologist collected ammonites the year before he had carefully labelled each one, noting exactly where it had been found, under what conditions, and other details of scientific interest. He had spent two weeks at his job, collecting four crates of fossils in all. I was allowing myself two days for the same number of ammonites, and Shiring thought we might do it in one. For I had put an idea to him which would have made an expert's hair curl.

"Shiring," I had asked, "do you suppose the good people of Langja would work for us if they were well paid?"

"Of course they would. They have nothing else to do. The fields at Langja are a month behind ours at Ranrik. So they are in a slack time. And there is no need to pay them well. Many here have never seen a rupee."

We went together to the village to find the Headman. He seemed willing, for as Shiring said there was little for the villagers to do at this time except collect fuel for the winter. And already the walls were bulging beneath the weight of the enormous heaps of gorse and brush piled high on them to dry. I explained what I wanted his people to do. Shiring translated, from Hindi to

Tibetan and back. I offered him two annas for the best ammonites found, and one anna for others acceptable. In translating my offer Shiring halved it. There was no use in my arguing. The offer was eagerly accepted. Only the Headman wanted to know why we wanted ammonites at all. Useless stones, pretty perhaps, but of no value, that was his opinion. I could not but sympathise.

Early the next morning the villagers paraded and were given their instructions. The great search began. Shiring and I stood on a hillock and watched the operation proceed. I felt like a general at manœuvres. Though a gold rush was more apposite. The villagers, spread over some six square miles, worked in pairs. A find would be made, perhaps a bed of ammonites, and a cry would go up. Some of the nearby prospectors would rush over to join in the spoils, others would look all the more intently in their own areas.

Late in the afternoon the count began. Sunom summoned the Langja-ites by bellowing from the highest hillock. They came in their pairs, laden down with stones and rocks and debris and miscellania of all kinds. There were also a few ammonites. I told Shiring what to look for, and together we separated the good from the bad, the best from the better. I tried hard to remember what I had been told in Cambridge. Was it one, or three, or how many lines that were of the most value?

The bargaining over the stones went as smoothly as could be expected. Shiring was ruthless. He relegated nearly all the ammonites we wanted, even some of the best, to the half-anna pile. Others equally desirable he tossed onto the rubbish. "They won't take the rubbish away afterwards, so why not?" he reasoned. Sunom abetted him in his dishonesty, and Rinsing only laughed, so clearly outvoted, I acquiesced. On the other hand the Langja men kept upgrading fossils from one pile to the other. It was difficult to keep order, for everyone was in a holiday mood. One ammonite in particular was seen to be relegated and promoted a dozen times, and this caused a hilarious breakdown in the proceedings.

The negotiations were getting nowhere; there was a further

interruption. Four Langja-ites staggered in carrying an enormous boulder between them. It was proudly dropped at my feet with a thud which shook the whole camp-site. Inside I could see a huge ammonite, nearly three feet across. I was not very good at hiding my excitement at such a remarkable find. Most of the fossils we had seen were no more than four or five inches across. This was a giant.

Sensing that I would give the whole game away by betraying my eagerness, Shiring drew me to one side.

"Give me fifteen rupees," he said, "and I'll get rid of the villagers."

"Is that enough for so many of them? We've employed nearly a hundred all day."

"All right, make it twenty." I gave him what he asked for, feeling very pleased that I had got so many specimens for the equivalent of thirty shillings.

Shiring went over to the Headman, paid him the money, and firmly said goodbye. The Headman took the hint, and five minutes later the last salaam had been exchanged and the last villager had left.

Shiring walked over to me and handed me ten rupees. "Change from the twenty," he said. Sunom was laughing too loudly for me to be angry.

While Sunom and Rinsing carefully packed the ammonites into wooden crates Shiring and I demolished the vast boulder and extracted the giant fossil, alas in five pieces. But we had our ammonites. So much for scientific collection.

When we left the Spiti Valley and went up into the mountains proper the precious crates of fossils were transported back to Manali by the ponies. Then, weeks later, Judy took them by bus and rail to Bombay. There she was told that a special licence would be needed to export the fossils out of India. She applied to the relevant authorities. No answer. Time was running short. Her boat left in two days. In desperation she went to the Bombay Offices of the United Kingdom High Commission. There she

was met by a helpful official. She explained the situation. She had applied for permission, her boat was leaving soon, could he help? Of course, he would be glad to. Where did she propose to put the ammonites on the boat?

"In the baggage room," she replied. "I don't want them to go in the hold."

He looked at her quizzically. "In the baggage room? But won't it be a bit hot for them there?"

"Oh no, they're quite used to it."

The conversation went on for ten minutes or so, Judy on the one hand, worried and fussed, the kind official on the other, eager to be of help, but very perplexed. There was an uneasy atmosphere. His questions became more and more bizarre; her answers sounded ludicrous. Was it the heat? One of them must be crazy.

At length the puzzled official asked if Judy had passports for the ammonites.

"But I'm trying to get a clearance certificate. That's what we are talking about, isn't it?" she asked in desperation.

"Every person has to have a passport, you know. Clearance certificates. . . ."

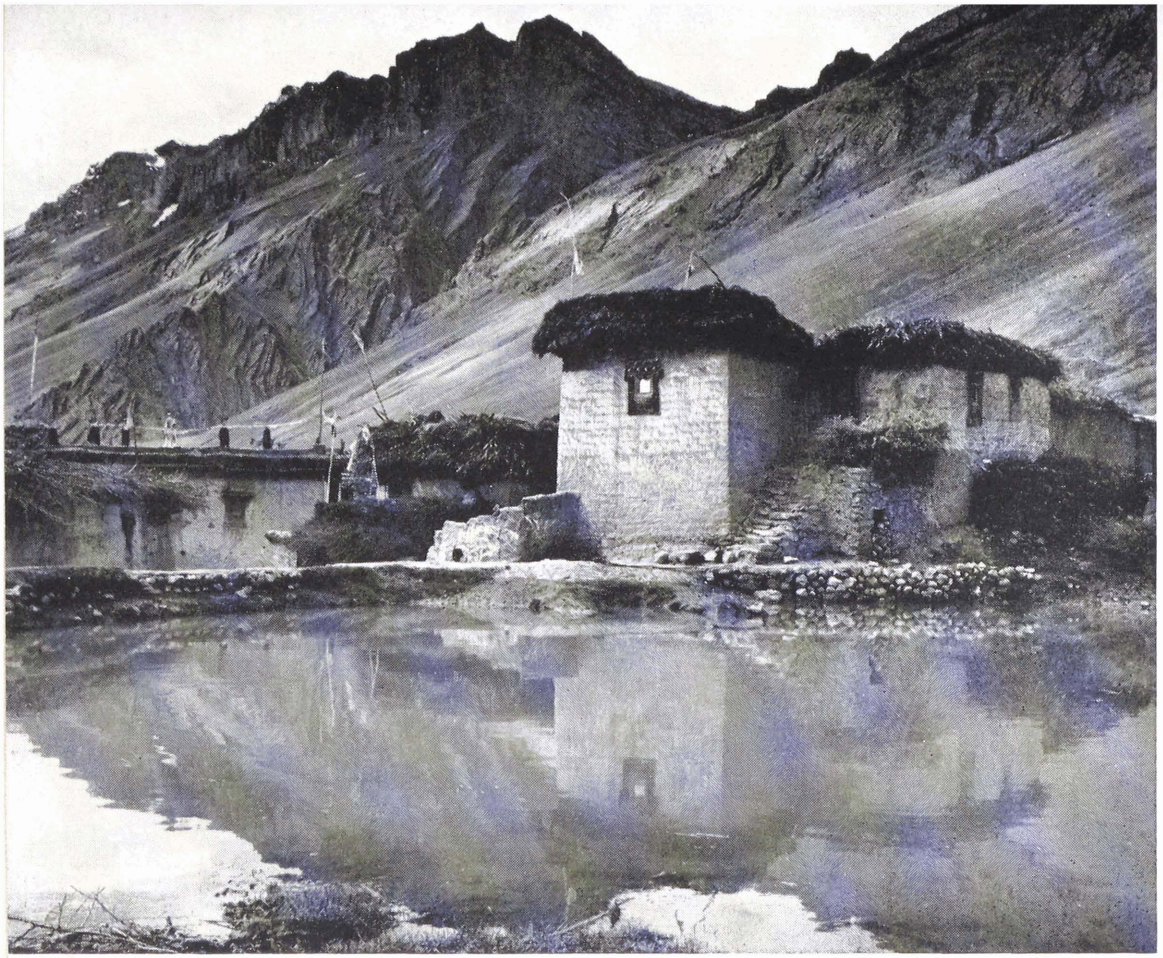
"Every person! I'm talking about ammonites, fossils, stones, little rock sea animals. . . ."

The official silently produced a Bible from a drawer and turned to 1 Kings 11:

> But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharoah, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Zidonians, and Hittites.

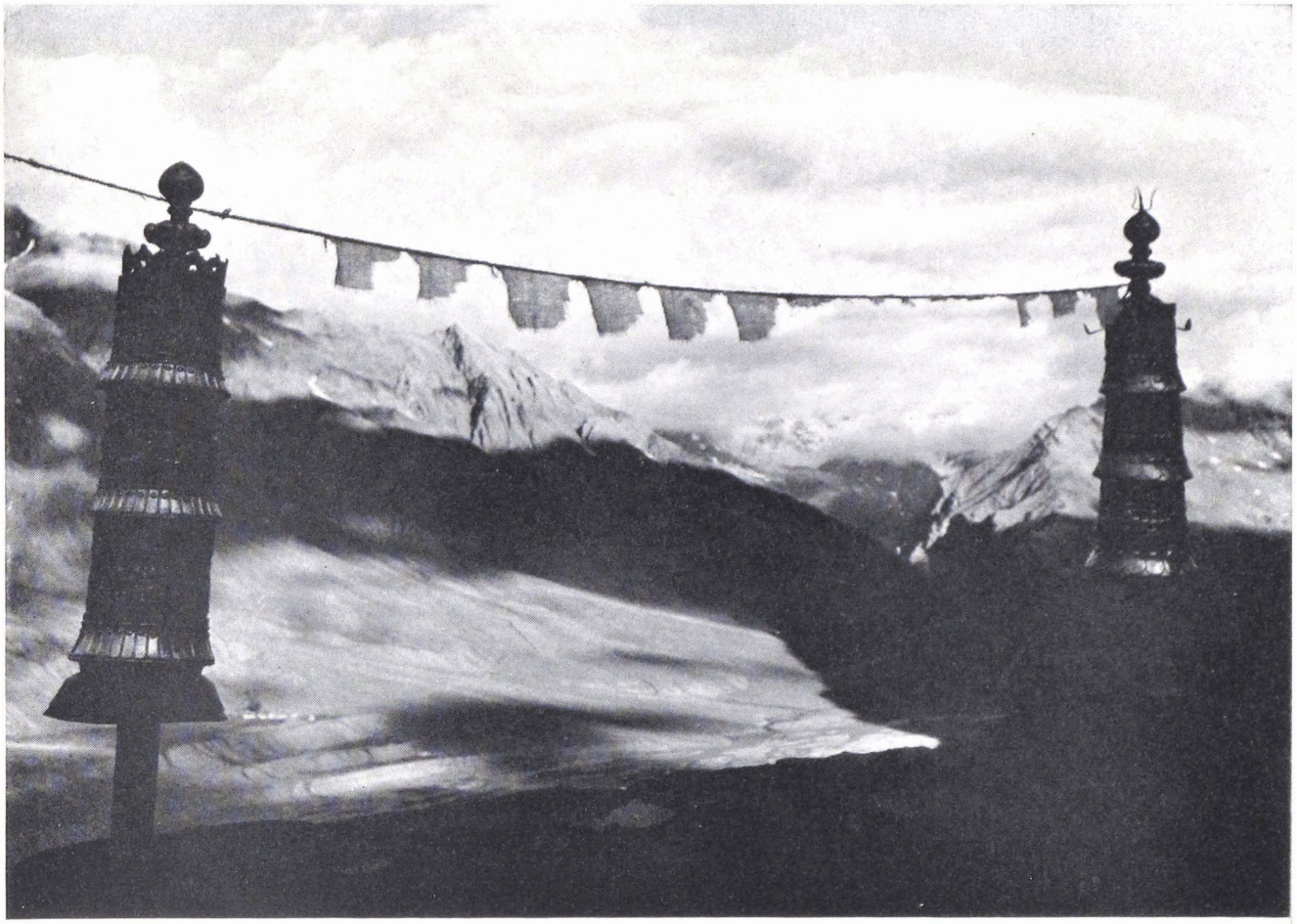
Very early the next morning, long before dawn, we rounded up our ponies which had been set loose for the night to graze and began to pack up camp. This unusual (for us) pre-dawn activity was necessary if our ammonite-laden ponies were to reach the Spiti River in time for a safe fording before the water level rose with another day's melting of the snow and ice thirty miles away: and I was determined to avoid wasting a single day while we were in Spiti. Shiring and the boys had no trouble in an early start,

JUDY WITH TWO OF THE DEVIL DANCERS



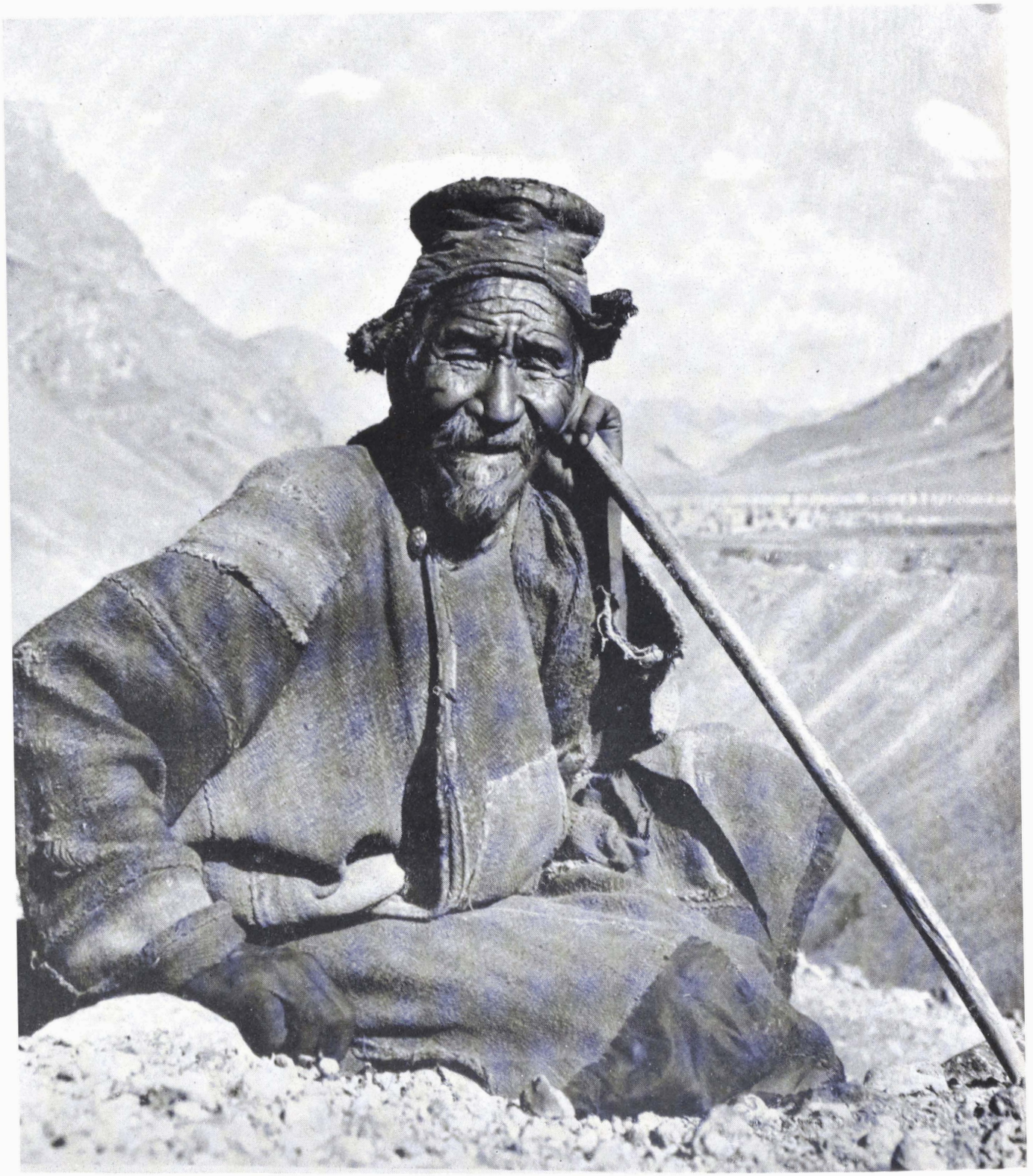
THE NONO'S PALACE

PITI PORTERS



DUSK ON THE MONASTERY ROOF

SHIRING DAWA AT LESSONS WITH THE SCHOOLMASTER



AN ELDERLY PITOON

wearing the traditional hat handed down from father to son

but I, oh dear how I hate leaving the luxurious half-awake warmth of my sleeping bag. Had we thought, we would have skipped breakfast and hurried down into the valley. But considerations of practability are quite beyond me at that time of day, and my stomach especially was in no thinking mood, being too concerned with other things. So we sat round a roaring-blue primus glowing wonderful smells through the chilly still-black morning.

As we ate, the Langja Headman appeared, and my heart sank, for I knew our early fording was gone. He came, he told me via Shiring, to express thanks for yesterday's employment, to enquire whether I would consider a little baksheesh for his own part in the negotiations, and to suggest that I would like some more ammonites. The tone with which he spoke this last suggestion indicated that he considered me quite mad to spend good money on worthless stones, and that he hoped that there would be no limit to my madness: might not the village coffers be filled to overbrimming by an infinite insanity?

I disillusioned him quickly.

Well then, he would say goodbye, he said, looking hopefully at the oversize chapattis and mutton we were gobbling. Inwardly I sighed, outwardly I asked him to share our insufficient meal. We were stuck. Well, at least I could enjoy the food and not be badgered by an inner voice which urged 'Hurry, Hurry'.

To change the course of our mercenary conversation—I still had qualms of conscience over Shiring's sharp practice in yesterday's bargaining—I asked politely if this village, the highest and most isolated in Spiti, ever saw wild animals during what must be a very severe winter at this altitude (roughly the same as the summit of Mont Blanc).

He smiled at the naïvety of strangers, ignored my question and told me a story instead. He had the grace to admit it was a legend. I could recognise most of the signs of an experienced raconteur getting under way, so I settled back to listen with a mug of hot bitter tea. The primus was extinguished. The sun, still hidden behind a horizon of jagged white, lent a magical backdrop of vermillion.

The Headman was slow and practised: his deep voice contrasted sharply with Shiring's boyish treble. A sentence, a paragraph with the confidence of one accustomed to a submissive audience, then Shiring's half-mocking half-believing interpretation. The substance of his story was this:

Many years ago (by convention this can mean anything from fifty to five thousand) a certain high and isolated village was beset each winter by hordes of exceedingly fierce wild animals. There was no food to be had in their summer homes high up on the mountains, the snow was far too deep. Cold and hunger drove them down to the nearest possible source of succour, and this was always, by virtue of its position, this particular village (I could see that with a little chang 'this particular village' quickly became Langja). Now animals, even wild animals, are all very well, but only in reasonable numbers. The hordes which laid seige to this village were anything but reasonable. Normally shy animals were transformed into hungry hunters, and their fiercer brethren became savagely vicious in their starvation. Not content with stealing scraps and garbage, the animals formed marauding-bands which stopped at nothing. As a winter wore on the situation became more and more desperate. Doors and windows were barred against the cold anyway, that was no hardship, but things reached a stage when a villager dared not open a door even for a moment. The wild beasts jumped up into the upper open courtyards and for days at a time the inmates could not move from one room to another. The terror, for it was no less, reached a climax one winter when several villagers died as the result of these attacks. Spring came, summer, and then all too soon winter was approaching again.

The villagers met time and again to discuss the situation, but no practicable means could be found to ward off the danger. Special prayers were said in the village gompa. Some thought of emigrating to a lower and therefore safer village, so gravely was the danger considered.

Then one day in the late autumn a wandering beggar arrived at the village (this was of course no real beggar: readers of Tibetan

and Himalayan folklore will recognise the disguised hermit-saint who appears in almost all legends). Fortunately the villagers, fortified by their recent praying, were able to recognise this beggar as the heaven-sent saviour (contrary to all tradition, this, which usually lays down that the beggar-saint is ill-treated and abused and certainly not recognised before he reveals himself with his special powers). Though it would have been difficult, the Headman added here, not to recognise the beggar for what he was. For his eyes emitted a wondrous shining light, a glowing almost, and surely not mortal. The problem was presented to him and he said that if he might partake of food while he was there (traditional, a saint always eats well in a country where semi-starvation is too well known to be revered) he would promise to rid the village of any further worries from wild animals.

He was as good as his word. Winter came, and with it the deep snow and the marauding beasts. Then in mid-winter, just as some of the villagers were beginning to wonder if the beggar was really a beggar after all because of his inactivity, there was a terrible storm which lasted for many days and nights. It was bitterly cold. The wild animals sheltered as best they could in the lee of the buildings, howling in anguish. Their noises, blended with the shrieking of the gale, was enough to frighten the most stoic villager huddled over his fire. In the midst of the storm, when conditions were at their appalling worst, the beggar went out naked into the white inferno.

When at last the storm subsided some days later there was a strange quiet in the village. Householders looked out apprehensively from behind strongly barricaded doors. Was it a trap? Would the wild beasts spring at them from hidden corners? A peek, braver exploration, and then the villagers rushed out onto their roofs, calling to each other from house to house. There were no animals in the village, no, not even animal tracks. Perhaps the beasts had all been frozen to death. The host of the beggar quickly contradicted any such ideas, shouting to his neighbours the story of how the beggar had disappeared naked

at the height of the storm. Soon everyone in the village had heard of the sacrifice. There was a moment of stricken awe as people remembered how they had doubted the beggar, and then furious chatter as each man told the next of how he at least had known all the time that the beggar was a true saint.

Then the remarkable thing happened. On the crest of a hill only just above the village there appeared in a single orderly rank every wild beast imaginable. Most of the villagers, timid souls, rushed indoors, fearing some new massive assault. But the Headman knew better and he called them out again.

From amongst the animals one came forth and advanced towards the village. It was the largest and strongest and most beautiful snow leopard ever seen. Obviously in control of the situation, it had only to bark twice at several of the wilder beasts who made as if to follow it and they retreated to the rank, chastened and obedient. As the snow leopard drew near to the village it was seen that its eyes emitted a wondrous shining light.

The snow leopard barked several times, and the Headman was made to understand that the villagers should put out some meat a little way from the village for the animals throughout the winter. If this was done the isolated village would never be bothered again by the onslaughts of wild beasts. The word was spread from village to village, from valley to valley, so thereafter the villages were secure and the animals were adequately fed. What happened to the saint no one knows.

The Headman coughed, indicating that his story was over, that his throat was dry, and were we by any chance contemplating a second brew of tea? I apologised, indicating our impoverishment, and sent Sunom for some water which was very grudgingly accepted and then spat out again. He had been ninety minutes at his story, and I was fidgeting to go.

Last farewells, and we returned down towards the valley, 'cho-cho-ing' our ponies forward. It was light now, even Base Camp would have the sun: only the deep contorted gorges still harboured the gloom of an hour before. The river would be

rising fast, the fording of the ponies would be dangerous, the day was half wasted. With these depressing thoughts I turned my back on the thousands and thousands of sea animals which had lain in the Spiti Shales for a hundred million years and more.

CHAPTER TEN

The Nono

THERE ONLY REMAINED A COURTESY VISIT TO THE NONO OF SPITI, and then we must be on our way to the mountains. For centuries Spiti was a weak pawn annexed first by one and then by another of its large warring neighbours. The Pitoons paid tribute to whichever neighbour was the strongest and the Nono was little more than a tax collector and petty governor. With the coming of the British Raj in 1846 frontiers were demarcated, wars ceased, and Spiti settled down to a century of semi-independence. The Nono became the virtual ruler of the province, for he was allowed to administer justice almost as he pleased. His word was law, and to the ordinary Pitoons he was the ultimate ruler. Only a few knew of a shadowy far-off Viceroy, regal deputy for a Queen half a world away.

Since the granting of Indian Independence in 1947 the Nono's authority has diminished almost to nothing. There has been a move afoot to 'Indianise' the people of Spiti; the arrival of the Schoolmaster was the first step in this direction, and with the setting up of a frontier police station at Kaja it has gone a stage further. These police administer justice, sending the most serious offenders to Kulu for trial (murder, arson and assault qualify for the journey), leaving only the minor offenders, petty thieves and the like, to the jurisdiction of the Nono. He has been demoted from Ruler of Spiti to a Magistrate Third Class (Honorary).

Shiring led the way to Luling, where the Nono resides in a building which is officially termed 'The Palace'. The walk was hot and tiring, the sun was determined to burn out the last of our energy and Luling seemed much further than the five miles the map proclaimed. But the trudge was worth it, for after ninety minutes of dreary waste plateau, dry and rocky and hopelessly barren, we came to the richest village we had seen.

Huge patches of bright yellow mustard broke up the greens of the unripe barley: the fertility of the fields blotted out the browns of the screes behind. A clear cold brook bubbled down through the houses, very different from the usual sluggish threads of silt that groped their way to the river below. Prayer-flags were more plentiful and more colourful on the roofs, and there were several small trees. Pink dog-rose bushes were dotted about, planted by the winds and gardened by nature.

But 'The Palace' was a disappointment. It was bigger than the average Spiti house, otherwise there was little difference. Only two tiny glass windows glittering in the sun announced the wealth and position of the owner.

The door which led to the stairs was locked with a great cumbersome lock, hand-made and weighing well over a pound. Shiring announced our arrival with a shout. A head appeared briefly from out of a window, disappeared again, voices, instructions presumably, and a young man came to open the door. Salaams, and then he led us upstairs across a deserted courtyard and into the Nono's reception room. The Nono Sahib had not expected us, we were told, but he would join us in a moment. In the meantime would we take a little refreshment after our tiring journey? He went to fetch it and we were left to ourselves.

This reception room was probably the nearest approach to luxury in Spiti. Two panes of glass formed a miniature bay window: where the grease and dirt was thinnest one could just distinguish the splendour of the valley outside. Through them the sun shone weakly, providing the only reasonably lit room in the whole province. Round the room were low red-lacquer tables, with intricate gold carvings on their edges. Just behind the tables not more than six inches off the floor, were the platforms on which we sat crossed-legged. These were covered with bright Tibetan carpeting, mostly yellows and reds. In one corner there was a beautiful carved cabinet, rickety and worn now, but still recognisable as a master carver's work: that too must have come from Tibet. Hanging from pegs driven into walls of pink plaster were the Nono's most prized possessions: two faded photographs, a

highly coloured Thermos flask and a cheap boy scout's knife with a dozen different blades, most of them broken. This reception room was the Nono's show-piece, an outward sign of his own sophistication, reserved for important guests and foreign travellers: certainly I have never seen a room more obviously set aside.

Several friendly but shy children, presumably the Nono's, had gathered at the doorway. They were no cleaner and no dirtier than any other Piti children. They burst into fits of laughter every time we spoke, let off a flashgun or scratched ourselves—a frequent occurrence.

We had had no refreshment or drink since leaving camp and now to our joy a young girl broke through the babble of children and placed silver dishes of dried apricots and sugared barley on the low tables. Another girl followed with dishes of butter-salt tea. Shiring could not contain himself. This indeed was a feast for a hungry boy, and sugared barley, his favourite sweetmeat too! Luckily the rest of us preferred the apricots. The tea was the first I had enjoyed, perhaps because the Nono's was less rancid than most, or perhaps I was extra thirsty.

At last the Nono appeared. He had a presence, a dignity of office perhaps, yet physically he was but the shell of a fine-looking man. A pitted face and a disfigured nose testified to the ravages of disease. His bloodshot eyes and the jars of arak in a corner were the marks of a different complaint. He was perhaps forty.

He was dressed in the ceremonial robe. It was cut as are all Spiti 'dressing gowns' but it was made of a finely woven material and edged with strips of gaily-coloured felt. He seemed ill at ease in his outfit and continually smoothed down the skirt of his robe in an agitated manner. Had he but known he was to be thus honoured, a feast would have been prepared. . . . Had he but known . . . He welcomed us in Hindi as faltering as my own, apologising for his poor hospitality. P. N. told him he should not think of it, the tea was excellent and the sugared barley was just what we had been longing for.

The Nono shook his head, saying that things were not as they

used to be. It was so difficult to get things in from the outside world, especially now trade with Tibet was becoming more restricted. And the price of everyday necessities! Salt cost three times what it had twenty years before, and good tea was almost impossible to find. We might have been in England listening to a hostess over a tea table.

Judy ended this sterile line of conversation by noisily draining her cup in the best Spiti fashion. The Nono clapped his hands and a beautiful solid silver tea urn was carried in. It was very old, he told us, and was reserved for only the most honoured guests. Our silver chalices were refilled, drained, and filled again, and the conversational strain was relieved for a good while.

Did this by any chance belong to us, he asked in the next pause, and from the inside of his robe he produced a battered-looking envelope.

It was a letter to me written exactly a year ago. How had it found its way to Luling?

The Nono explained. The post was brought into Spiti by three runners, who divided the distance between them into three stages. By running non-stop in a kind of relay race they covered what was usually at least a week's journey in just two days. The weakness of the system was that if one runner became ill or deserted the letters were delayed indefinitely. That very thing had happened the year before. The middle runner, who covered the ground from Chatru to Losar, had become enamoured of a passing nomad girl. He had gone off with her into Ladakh, deserting without finding a replacement. The mail had accumulated in a cave for many weeks, until at last the first runner had become so worried that he had taken it to Losar himself. My letter was among this lot. It had found its way to The Palace for the address on it was:

P. F. Holmes, Esq.,
c/o The Nono,
SPITI.

I took some photographs, listened while Shiring explained

the working principle of my flashgun, watched while the Nono carefully stored away some of the blue bulbs (inadvertently belying his attempts at sophistication: he realised this too late and looked up, grinning sheepishly), and then sat down again for more tea. I wanted to get the Nono onto the subject of local government, for I knew that his power was rapidly slipping away with the coming of Indianisation. P. N. had been briefed beforehand, so between us we steered the Nono onto what turned out to be his pet subject. He lost his shyness and hesitancy and became quite voluble. P. N. had to interrupt from time to time to bring him back to Hindi, for he would lapse into his more familiar Tibetan.

Spiti, it seems, has always been divided into five administrative districts called 'kothis'. Every village belongs to a kothi, though rather haphazardly, for one village may be surrounded by others all belonging to an alien kothi. Each village has its headman, chosen from among the chief landowners on the village council. The headmen of each kothi in turn meet and choose their chief (almost always the most affluent landowner among them, for he can afford the biggest bribes and longest parties), and he represents the kothi on the Nono's Council.

The Nono's Council is there to help and to advise him. It may have dated from the time, centuries before, when the Nono was a foreign governor (the title 'Nono', which means 'nobility', is much more common in Ladakh, and Spiti was once part of the Ladakhi Kingdom of Little Tibet) and needed local assistance and knowledge to govern and to extract tribute. When Spiti became semi-independent by default with the decline of the Ladakhi Kingdom the first Nono's descendants probably stayed on as hereditary rulers. Whatever the reasons, by the time the British Raj took over Spiti in 1846 the Nono was securely ensconsed as ruler of Spiti. For just over a century, until 1947, he had been allowed virtual independence.

Included in his duties was that of Supreme Judge. All cases from petty thieving to assault and murder came before him. This may seem to indicate extraordinary laxness on the part of British

officialdom, but the truth is that crime hardly exists in Spiti. When a criminal case or civil dispute did arise the ceremony that went with the trial quite overshadowed the trying of the case. When two men were accused of the same crime, and both protested their innocence convincingly, or when two parties brought a difficult dispute to court, the correct decision was left for the Gods to decide. A large urn of hot oil (water was allowable) was prepared, the names of the two parties were engraved on stones, the stones were wrapped in flour and thrown into the urn; a functionary of the court, poor man, then plunged his hand into the urn, and the first name that came up was considered the guiltless person. Tossing a coin would have been simpler.

But this ceremony was the climax of the case. The hearing which led up to the urns might have taken almost any length of time: especially in civil cases, when custom decreed that the parties before the court of the Nono must supply him and his counsellors with chang until the case had been decided. This often led to the most protracted proceedings. Indeed had it not been for the visit of the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu every two or three years during the century of British Rule, probably few civil cases would have been terminated before the decease of the parties.

With the coming of the Indianisation all this was changed. The Nono's powers were whisked away from him and suddenly he found himself a mere Honorary Magistrate. With his power went the power of the Council. A frontier police post was established at Kaja, such criminals as there were were deported to Kulu for trial, and the Nono was relegated to being the butt of the policeman's jokes. Not unreasonably the Nono's fondness for arak gradually changed to a need.

The Nono told us all this with only a trace of self-pity. He was not a broken man, and he had kept his dignity when all else was taken away. It was a sad story, well known to history, and I could not but reflect that though the changes had been drastic for the Nono they had hardly begun for the ordinary Pitoon.

While the Nono and his council of five have lost their former

position and power, so the Headmen of the villages have, to a lesser extent, had their authority undermined. Formerly the Village Headman tried minor offenders, and if they were beyond his jurisdiction he sent them on to the Nono's court. Now with the Nono downgraded the Headmen is left without any formal jurisdiction at all. In the case of a strong personality this does not matter: he commands the same respect and obedience he always has. But in the case of a weak or old Headman the result is quite different. We saw a good example of what can happen during our first expedition to Spiti.

Two of us[1] had decided to force our way up the Ratang Gorge. We had three porters, but if we were to do any useful exploration we would need two additional porters from Ranrik to help us on our way. Alas, we had no Shiring or P. N. to help us: even the Schoolmaster was on leave in Kulu. Luckily an official who had been sent into Spiti by the Indian Government was on hand to negotiate for us. He went to Ranrik village and arranged for two porters to go with us. On the appointed day the seven of us set off up the gorge. With some difficulty we covered three miles in about six hours; then we set up camp. The next morning we packed up early and were just about to leave the site when far above us we heard a faint whistle. Scarcely believing our ears we scanned the slopes to see who or what it could be. There, half a mile above us, were our two scientists.

They were extremely agitated, I could see that, for they were waving their arms and shouting, though I could not hear at that distance what they were saying. They descended a little and shouted again. Now I could just make out one or two words: 'Stop'. 'Camp'. 'Attack'. Attack? Were they demented? Surely I had mistaken them. At last they reached us, utterly exhausted. Between gulps of hastily prepared tea they told us their astonishing story.

They had returned from a week-long geological excursion

[1] Our party had been larger: two climbers, Trevor Braham and myself, two wives, Judy and another, two scientists, three porters, four pony men and twenty-four ponies.

the day before, a few hours after we had left Base Camp at the mouth of the Gorge. They had found Ranrik Village in an uproar. Two families complete with goods and chattels were sitting in the middle of the village, sobbing and bewailing their fate as an occasional stone was thrown at them; the houses they had been turned out of were about to be set on fire.

Insults were freely offered by and among the villagers. The village council was in session, and the shouts of extreme policy could be heard across the village. The official was beside himself with remorse and concern. Worst of all, an attack was hourly expected on our base camp where the two wives were, unprotected.

The problem was a constitutional one. Apparently the official, in innocent ignorance had neglected to ask the Village Headman for permission for our two local porters to leave Ranrik. They in turn had assumed that he had obtained the necessary permission, so they had left without asking for it themselves.

When it was discovered that the two porters had departed without sanction the village council was incensed with wrath. Here was yet another case of outsiders usurping precedent and setting aside proper form. Very well, they would retaliate. First the unfortunate families of our porters were evicted from their homes, then plans went forward for an attack on our unguarded base camp. At this juncture the scientists arrived on the scene.

As soon as they discovered what all the fuss was about they went straight to the Headman, reasoning, as anyone else would have done, that with adequate compensation it would not be too late to repair the damage done to the Council's honour. They reckoned without the complexities of Spiti village politics.

Ranrik, being the largest village in Spiti (with a population approaching two hundred), has a council of twenty. Now from the very first day of our arrival in the area the council had split into three ill-defined groups, the pro-Expeditioners, the anti-Expeditioners and the know-Nothingers. A straight-forward division, and only to be expected. But such are the complications of currents of opinion in the council that it is virtually impossible

to find a permanent working majority to back any single man. Each and every member develops his own opinions, slightly different from everybody else's, and to these he sticks, forming a compact one-man faction to which no one else belongs.

In the present emergency shades of opinion varied from vaguely conciliatory ('accept the bribe and forget the porters') through vaguely menacing ('compensation and the porters back—or else') to a downright and dangerous extreme ('don't-forget-our-honour, fight'). There were, as always, twenty separate shades of opinion, but a majority were bunched at the extremist end of the scale.

The scientists were admitted to the Council meeting with a good deal of muttering. The landowners of Ranrik were clearly in an ugly mood. Nevertheless our scientists stoutly began negotiations. First they asked, through the medium of the trembling official, what the trouble was. If we had inadvertently transgressed custom through our ignorance then we asked for their understanding and forgiveness. Some young hot-head at the back shouted that we certainly had transgressed and we would be made to pay dearly for our insolent mistake. There were murmurs of approval at this outburst.

The Headman explained patiently why all the trouble had begun: the porters had not sought permission to leave the village. Again an interruption: the same young extremist shouted that that was not all. The Ratang Valley was held sacred to the village and our intrusion would violate its sanctity (patently nonsense this, as one or two suppressed giggles showed: Ranrikers regularly go up the Ratang to collect firewood). Further, we might well be paid agents of the itinerant shepherds, seeking a short cut from Spiti to Kulu that would bypass the upper villages of Spiti (which depend to a large extent for their income on levies imposed on the passing guddees). A single glance at the Ratang Nullah at any time during the summer should have been enough to reassure our antagonist: no sheep could possibly penetrate the swirling torrent without laboriously being dragged across on a rope; how could a family of guddees, perhaps five in all, drag a thousand animals across time and time again? But the

absurdity of the accusation did not penetrate to the other nineteen of the Council. Here was a very real threat where it would hurt most.

The sanctity of the valley could be laughed away. An earnest explanation went a long way towards pacifying the fears of the minority of moderates that Spiti would lose some revenue by a new sheep route. New objections were thrown up by the still angry council, and they were dealt with by the scientists. Always the argument came back to the breach of custom that had occurred. It became more and more apparent that our real transgression was to be in Spiti at all. In another language one could visualise the slogan 'Spiti for the Spitoon'.

It became clear that the Headman could not hold his own, and it was equally clear that his days as Headman were numbered. He was interrupted, abused, even laughed at by the extremists. He was too old and too infirm to show a strong hand. The scientists offered him ample compensation for our misdeeds; fifty rupees, a vast sum in Spiti. He was on the point of accepting when the extremists united to shout him down. There was much shouting and confusion, but one thing was clear. For perhaps the first time in Spiti history a headman had been virtually dismissed from office.

The extremists demanded the immediate return of the two porters. No compromise on this point could be reached. They must be back in the village within twenty-four hours or else our camp would be pillaged.

The revolt was not an attempt to promote 'Indianisation' by weakening the office of the Headman. Quite the opposite. It was a conservative return to the past. The landowners of Ranrik had seen the power of first the Nono and his council, and then the Headman whittled away to nothing by the foreigners. They were determined that whatever else happened their own freedom and the customs of the village should not be violated. When it came to the test they were prepared to push aside a compromising Headman in defiance of one tradition to ensure the safe-guarding of another, a village custom which at that moment represented to them the pre-Indian Spiti they had known before. In point of

fact, as we discovered this year, they were quite prepared to allow us to employ men from the village as porters, so long as we went about the negotiations in the time-honoured way.

By now it was six in the evening and our scientists had been on the move since seven that morning. Nevertheless they had a quick meal and then wearily set off after us. All night they travelled, groping their way up the first three miles of the Gorge. They reached us just in time. Another fifteen minutes and we would have disappeared from view. We had no choice but to send the reluctant porters back to the punishment they would surely receive. Splitting four hundred pounds of equipment and food between the five of us we pushed on as best we could.

Thank goodness, this year we had P. N. to negotiate and Shiring and the Schoolmaster to advise on procedure and proper form. And the Nono, knowing all about our troubles the previous year (had not all Spiti gossiped about it all winter?), offered help if we required it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Gorge

THE PITOONS ARRIVED *EN MASSE*, SWARMING OVER THE LOADS AND over us almost before we knew it. I was surprised by their prompt arrival, for though I had told them to come at dawn I had not expected them until well into the day. P. N. had asked for eighteen men, well aware that we would need twenty; Rinsing and Washing had spent the early hours making, as nearly as possible, eighteen equal loads. It must be admitted that some of the loads were on the heavy side.

Suppose for a moment you are a Pitoon. This is what you must do.

Size up the load with your eye. Gaze meaningly at your prospective employer with a slightly quizzical look as if to say "we agree, don't we, that this load is absurdly large and heavy?" If he knows his business he will have two wall eyes. P. N. knew his business.

Next grip the box lightly, give an imitation of trying to pick it up, but don't on any account move it an inch. The corners of your mouth turn down with indignation. Add a glint to that meaning look. It now says, "well! I knew this was heavy, but really! this is too much. What do you take me for, anyway, a yak?" Your employer shows no signs of even knowing that you exist.

Now make a gigantic effort, get the box (which really weighs much less than you thought it would, and much less than you are accustomed to carrying) a good six inches off the ground, and drop it with a resounding bang, on a sharp stone if possible.

Stand back, survey the box, and slowly shake your head. Your employer is staring at you with distaste. For the first time you speak.

"It is too heavy."

He calls. One of his own porters comes over and lifts the box effortlessly. You shake your head again. You are not impressed. After all, in addition to his wages this porter is getting free clothing.

The employer may come down a little from his ivory tower, but he does not hide his repugnance of having to do so. He says something. It sounds as if he is offering a large tip at the end of the day, but he is careful to make no definite offer; you know that you won't get that tip unless it is promised, so you are not interested. The box, you repeat, is too heavy.

If he is foolish at this game, as most Europeans are, he will now lift the box himself, just to show you that even he, who is not used to carrrying heavy loads, can pick it up without difficulty.

You are not troubled. You murmur something about crops in the fields that need tending. You try another load. It also is too heavy.

And so it goes on. You know that without your help the Sahibs will never get up the nullah, where, for some reason beyond comprehension, they want to go so badly; he knows that you are going up the nullah to collect firewood, and you would like to be paid for the journey you have to make anyway.

P.N. knew his business, and the Pitoons knew theirs. They argued that twenty-two men would be needed to carry our eighteen loads, since the loads, as we must surely know, were exceptionally heavy. And although P. N. had only asked for eighteen of them, twenty-two had come along just in case and wasn't that fortunate.

P. N. told them not to be silly. Eighteen was the limit.

The Pitoons went off into a huddle. One of them, our agent whom P. N. was secretly bribing, argued longest and loudest, against us. Although he made a great show of being anti-employer, his arguments belied his real position.

"The loads are too heavy for eighteen of us to carry, is that agreed?"

"It is agreed," chorus the moderates and 'don't-knowers' among the porters.

"There are twenty-two of us, so the loads should be divided among us, is that not right?"

"It is indeed right."

"But the Sahib will only pay for eighteen of us. Shall we accept pay for twenty, even though twenty-two of us are carrying, if he offers it? After all, it will probably mean extra baksheesh, and as we are all going, we might as well be paid for it."

"It is agreed then" (this is the second agent, also bribed secretly, but not so lavishly). "We will accept pay for twenty though twenty-two carry."

"It is agreed," chorus the rest of the Pitoons.

The extremists, who would have said pay for twenty-two or no work, have not been able to get a word in edgeways.

And so it was arranged, after only two hours' delay. Everyone was satisfied. They had fought us up from eighteen to twenty, we had reckoned on twenty from the start.

Now there was a mad scramble to get the lightest loads. But that was none of our business. We turned to say goodbye to the Schoolmaster and his wife who had come down from Ranrik to see us off. And to Shiring.

This last was the most difficult. Shiring had arrived at dawn, long before the Pitoons were due. Standing about, lonely and forlorn, he kicked at pebbles and gazed up the gorge. Tears were never far from his eyes. He talked a little with P. N., pleading to come with us. A long silence while he dealt savagely with a pebble, and then, "Please, please, Babuji, I promise I won't be in your way. I will carry a load just like the others. Please, let me come with you."

We could not, and he knew it. Also he could not, and he knew that too. But that did not stop him from torturing himself, and us.

I shall never forget a tiny lone figure, at the top of the hill, gallantly waving to us as we disappeared around the first bend of the nullah. I have no doubt that he was crying. He was not the only one.

The year before, Trevor Braham and I, together with three

Ladakhi porters, Rinsing and Sunom among them, had become the first mountaineering or indeed non-Spiti party to penetrate the Ratang Gorge. The Pitoons go up the Gorge regularly during two months a year, May and October. In May the summer sun has not yet properly begun the melting of the winter snow, which in places still lies forty and fifty feet deep. The nullah is comparatively shallow, no more than waist deep, and there are large snow bridges to help in all the worst places. The Ranrik men make perhaps half a dozen three day trips up the Gorge in the last half of May and the first half of June, collecting wood for the next winter from the abundant copses of dwarf juniper. For the upper Ratang is like a Garden of Eden compared with the barren Spiti Valley.

During the last half of June, all of July, August and September —during the Spiti summer, that is—the Pitoons keep well clear of the Gorge. The nullah is too swift and tumultuous to ford, and the snow bridges have melted away. Not until the summer ends and the first cold nights which herald the approaching winter begin do the Ranrik-ers dare to attempt the nullah. Then, thanks to the deep-freezing effects of the nights, the nullah becomes reasonable once more. So shallow, indeed, that it would be possible to walk up the bed of the nullah all the way, were the water not so desperately cold. The Pitoons use these last three or four weeks before the winter proper to drive their yaks up to the fertile grazing fields near 'The Meadow', so that the animals can enjoy one really good graze before the privations of winter.

These eight weeks of easy passage in May and October are all very well for the Ranrik-ers, but they are of no use to the mountaineer. May is too early—the passes into Spiti are not yet open—and October is too late—the weather is uncertain and the nights too cold.

The one European who had studied the Ratang Gorge with a view to reaching the peaks of the Great Divide from the north during the summer had come away thoroughly discouraged. 'The sides of the nullah are wall-like,' he had written, 'and the continual crossing and recrossing of the river involved in a journey

would be impossible until the snow water had drained away.... From what little I saw of the nullah I think it would be very difficult to force a route along the cliffs above the river.'[1] So Trevor and I had not been over-confident of our ability to push our way up the Ratang.

We started up at the beginning of September, when the waters were at their highest, in full spate. Stream crossings had been out of the question. Whenever a difficulty, such as a cliff face, presented itself, we either had to climb across it or over it.

In four long hard days we had continually made arduous detours; we had hacked and forced our way across hundreds of yards of steep crumbling mud and stone cliffs; we had been forced into extreme rock-climbing during our nightmare progress. On the worst day of all, when a high rocky pinnacle stood in our path, we had made no more than four hundred yards. Nothing had been barred. Pitons, rope slings, even knotted bootlaces were used as we inched our way up and then down. Once Sunom fell fifty feet, stopping at the lip of a vertical precipice. And when we only just saved ourselves as a rock ledge collapsed under us, Trevor had thought we were pushing the issue beyond the bounds of safe mountaineering. The porters, even the usually imperturbable Rinsing, had been dubious, wondering if we could survive.

Once through the Gorge we had been too exhausted to do anything but climb the nearest peak and return back to base camp as quickly as we could. On the return journey down the Gorge we had taken greater risks to avoid the worst detours. First Rinsing and then Sunom had nearly drowned, and then Trevor had almost come to a sticky end falling on a scree cliff.

But from that one summit we had seen and photographed a whole new world of rock and ice. That splendid panorama was drawing us back; and we had only one approach—the Ratang Gorge.

When I told the boys, back in Manali, that we would be going

[1] J. O. M. Roberts, *Alpine Journal*, No. 261, Nov. 1940.

up the Ratang again this year, their faces, and Sunom's in particular, had become very grave indeed. "Ratang no good, Sahib. Ratang very bad." Sunom remembered only too well how he had almost drowned the year before.

Judy also, was none too happy. She had nearly drowned on the way into Spiti the previous year, and she knew very well just how unpleasant a nullah can be.

P. N. had no experience of nullah crossing, except what he had learnt on our walk into Spiti, but the deafening roar of the nullah, almost a bellow of hatefulness, and the indecent swiftness of the water was not lost on him. As we stopped to prepare for the first crossing he whipped out a little book, which he had kept hidden till now, and began to read feverishly. It was Dale Carnegie's *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living.*

Now we were at the place which Sunom feared so much. This was the first fording on our way through the Gorge. Anxiety filled his eyes as he tried to make a joke about it.

I picked up a stone about the weight of a cricket ball and threw it into the middle of the torrent. Several Pitoons did the same. Nothing was said—we were too busy listening to the noise the stones made. A watery 'plug' is no good at all; the water is too deep for safety. But a brittle high-pitched 'plunk', on the other hand, indicates that there is hope.

Hope established, Garry and I gallantly stood aside to let our muscleman Washing test the stream. In he went, alone and heavily laden. One slip and he could never recover. But it did not occur to us that he might slip. He was so very strong.

Washing felt his way across, probing with his ice-axe, feeling for a pot-hole, shuffling his feet so they never left the nullah bottom. Once he cried out when a boulder was swept over his foot. But he reached the far side safely. The ford was 'tik-hi', Okay.

Garry and I followed, almost carrying P. N. between us. The water was just as I remembered it: bitterly cold, tugging at me, always trying to overwhelm me. We held on to each other for dear life. Garry and I, at either end, groped with our ice-axes.

We scuffled and swayed and half-slipped. It seemed an eternity yet in thirty seconds we were across. My feet were crying out with the pain of the sudden cold.

The Pitoons followed on after us, in twos and threes. They rolled their skirt-trousers up above their waists and plunged in. Sunom came across between two of them, eyes wide with unashamed fear. Once safely with us he was much happier. Perhaps the Ratang was not such a bad place after all. In a few minutes he was boasting to the Pitoons of his prowess.

"This is nothing," he said. "I have crossed many streams very much worse than this miserable trickle. Some so high." And he raised his hand far above his head to indicate the depth of the fearsome streams he had crossed in his day, and burst out laughing.

Washing was in his element. Having recovered from his first crossing he returned to help Judy. Poor Judy! She started white with fear, and once in the stream she grew whiter and whiter with cold. But with Washing I knew she was safe.

Nelly liked the crossing even less. I should have mentioned her before. We had hoped to buy a goat and a sheep at Ranrik to take up the valley with us for meat supplies, but the negotiations were so protracted that we only had time to buy the goat. The goat was Nelly. The Pitoons were bringing up a huge ram for their own meat supply, so we had two pitiful animals bleating in chorus. Both might be drowned at the end of a rope, so one of the Pitoons, the strongest (who we nick-named 'the British Israelite' because of his remarkable features), took pity and piggy-backed the ram across. Washing, making his sixth crossing, followed with Nelly.

We dried ourselves out, restored circulation, and congratulated ourselves on our safe crossing. Nullah fordings are always an event. Even if there are half a dozen in a single day each one safely accomplished is a minor triumph.

But I knew this was only the beginning. Around the next corner the rock-climbing would begin. Thank goodness, I was wrong. There was a huge snow-bridge across the nullah, the as yet unmelted debris of winter avalanches and drifts. We could avoid

the difficulties. By noon we had covered the same ground as had taken a long eleven-hour day the year before. Sunom laughed with glee. "Ratang atcha. Ratang very good," he shouted at me as we reached our first camp-site.

Camp sites in the Spiti Valley had been governed entirely by the question of 'was clean water available'. That too was applicable in the Gorge, for the main stream was full of silt which had a most turbulent effect on our insides. Just as important now was the finding of a level site, not so easy in this Gorge. Rinsing believes that four things go to make an ideal camp-site; clear water, level ground, fuel and an early sun in the morning. To that I would add a good view. But we were lucky if we found two of these in the Ratang.

The Pitoons watched fascinated as the boys went about pitching the tents. As each one of them had to handle every piece of equipment as it was produced, preparing camp took a long time. Again, as with Gergin, we were made to feel thoroughly encumbered with so many possessions. The Piti men split up into groups of three and four. Each group collected its own firewood, made its own fire, cooked its own food and smoked its own pipe. One man carried a large cooking bowl and a ladle, another small bags of tsampa, salt and meat. The third man carried the pipe and tobacco. Camp established, the Pitoons passed away the rest of the afternoon gambling.

The game they played was a form of snakes and ladders. A circle of pebbles marked the course, and twigs the men. I am a bit hazy about the finer points of the game (which explains why I consistently lost), but the men changed hands with bewildering rapidity.

The game is played with dice. The shouts, invocations, prayer and ceremony that accompany their throwing put my 'spit and whistle' methods to shame. It was a marvellous performance to watch, and obviously the local Gods were tuned in, for I had astonishingly bad luck. The stakes were low, but nevertheless I lost all of four annas (sixpence) to the British Israelite.

As we played, a communal pipe was passed around our group.

Buddhist custom frowns on the smoking of tobacco, but naturally this does not stop the Pitoons. Technically their religion says 'tobacco shall not touch thy lips'. This is interpreted to mean that a pipe should never touch their lips. They get round this by cupping their hands and inhaling through them.

The second day was much the same as the first. Thanks to the frequent snow-bridges we managed to avoid all the difficulties. In less than an hour we covered ground which had taken nine hours the year before. We were through the worst of the Gorge now, and for the first time since the Chandra Valley greenery was reasserting itself. After the barren dryness of the Spiti Valley it was joy to camp in a copse of dwarf junipers, with a small clear stream running through rich grass. For the first time on the expedition there was firewood aplenty, and we made full use of it. No pipes, no yarns and no songs, thank God, but nevertheless a roaring campfire which more than once threatened our nearby tents.

On the third day we reached the Meadow, where Base Camp was to be set up. It was a paradise. Flowers, grass, clean running water, a flat camp site, fuel (both dung and wood) and a clear view of mountains all about—what more could one wish of a Base Camp. There was even a colony of strikingly beautiful birds to welcome us.

The Pitoons departed down the valley early the next morning. We had said goodbye to the last Spiti people we would see. Cheerful likeable fellows, we were sorry to see them go. But we must get down to the serious business of mountaineering.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mountains

ALL WINTER I HAD BEEN STUDYING MY PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN THE year before. First I had made huge enlargements of the major peaks, then I had spent long hours tracing possible routes up them. I had studied the ridges and cornices, I had measured the angles and distances, I had pitched a camp here and scorned a route there. Now I was face to face with the same peaks. It was an exciting moment. There ahead of us was the massive bulk and sheer precipices of Moby Dick, looming 20,000 feet and more into the sky. To its right was the easily recognisable Ratang Tower with its spire-like summit. The same mountains, but they were changed. Everything was steeper and higher and larger than my photographs had told me, I had forgotten how vast the Himalaya could be.

I began to wonder about the itinerary we had given ourselves in London. From a comfortable armchair ambitious planning is all too easy. Nearly any mountain can be climbed with a good meal and a vintage year snugly inside one. Such considerations as bad weather, illness, fatigue, lack of acclimatisation, these are either forgotten or brushed aside as trifles. The execution of these plans is quite another thing. A headache and a heavy load are a much stronger argument at 20,000 feet than a blank on the map. And when a cold and sleepless night is added even the promise of a first ascent means nothing. During the next five weeks, while we were busily clambering up one peak after another, we had ample time to recall the realities of Himalayan mountaineering.

We began optimistically at Base Camp, sorting out what we would need for our first excursion. We seemed to need an awful lot.

"Surely we can cut down on all this," I said. "What about these jars of peanut butter, for instance? Must we have them?"

Garry's hurt reply left no doubt in my mind that we must.

"What about this pickle then?"

P. N. was certain that we could not do without that.

"We won't need all these compasses and altimeters, will we?" Garry asked.

So we carried heavy loads, which throbbed and hurt and ached. As we pushed up towards the head of the Ratang Valley, establishing a chain of camps as we went, so in each camp a few more 'essentials' were left behind. By the time we had left super-advanced-base-camp behind us our loads had been reduced to a more reasonable sixty pounds.

The gorge was clearly behind us. A mile upstream from Base Camp, where the nullah took a right-angled bend, the valley widened out, becoming more friendly. But there was little enough to see. The vegetation became sparser and sparser until, at 16,000 feet, there was none at all. Shale, a few dirty snow-bridges, rhubarb stalks and the ugly grey flanks of Moby Dick, so high above us that I got a crick in my neck if I stared too long, these made up our limited view.

Advanced-base-camp established, we pushed on up the bleak scree valley towards the glaciers whose issue supplies the Ratang Nullah with its ferocious torrent. Once we reached the ice sheet progress became difficult again. For it was cut into valleys and hillocks of ice, very steep and covered with a thin layer of pebbles. These slipped away at the merest touch to reveal the bare ice.

To a detached observer this junction of the glacier might seem a most impressive place. The high mounds of dark glinting glacier, the constant rumblings far below, the cold, cold water rushing pell-mell across the ice, the circle of snow-covered cornice-topped peaks guarding the valley, the black shale ridges contrasting with the bitter bright white of the snow; the blue of the sky and the still of the air, all these might have impressed. But I was anything but detached. The sharp edges of my ponderous load, burying themselves in the small of my back, and the slippery sliding slopes, which I cursed and lost my knuckle-skin on, these between them kept my mind strictly on my present discomfort.

We found a flattish ribbon of moraine in the midst of this turmoil of ice, and here we placed our super-advanced-base-camp, our jumping off place for the peaks around us.

You must not assume that our life was all work, with a dawn start, hard slogging all day, a camp site reached at dusk and then a few brief hours of sleep before the same again. Quite the opposite. We had gained a vertical mile since leaving Base Camp at 14,000 feet; the altitude and our consequent breathlessness, the heavy loads and our own natural inclinations combined to ensure a short day every day. We would rise at dawn, be off by seven, and reach the next site by one or two in the afternoon. Distances between camps were never more than five miles, for it was my intention to have a line of camps through which a casualty could be easily evacuated.

This regime left us with long idle afternoons, pleasant enough at the lower camps with all their amenities, loathsome when we were tired and suffering from high-altitude boredom. Once, when Sunom was away, we tried cooking. We started at three, prepared for the worst, and by six we had achieved singularly little. Garry was bleeding, P. N. was burnt and I had lost three socks in the flames. We settled for cold sardines, condensed milk and chocolate, all together in what Garry called a 'Spiti Sauce'. Sunom, to his astonishment, was given a hero's welcome when he arrived the next morning.

Sometimes we would bring out our two battered packs and settle down to a session of cards. On the very first day of the expedition P. N. had announced with an aplomb which would have delighted Stephen Potter that he was very bad at learning new card games or new rules, so would we mind abiding by his rules. He then went on to explain that he partially understood three games; Whist, Sweep and a third which we called the 'Expedition Game'. Unsuspecting us. A practised gamesman myself, I should have known better than to believe a word of what he said. For a single game was enough to show that P. N. had the feel of cards right down to his fingertips. The rules we had been beguiled into adopting were so framed that whoever won

the first hand was certain to win for most of the afternoon. P. N. invariably won the first hand.

Worst of all was when bad weather confined us to our tiny two-man tents. Garry and I shared one. Now he is six foot three, and though I am a mere six foot one, neither of us was made to squeeze into these tents. Add three cameras and the countless other gadgets which go with map-making, two large pairs of boots, and nearly a hundredweight of assorted clothing and equipment, and you have a desperately uncomfortable afternoon and a truly sleepless night. We tried to read, but on our first excursion there was, by some oversight, only one book available—P. N.'s book on how to stop worrying—and he monopolised that. In the end we often descended to a rudimentary 'Battleships'. There were meals, of course, but that diversion only lasted a few minutes. All in all we spent more than half our time in bed. There can be little doubt that if there is an occupational disease for Himalayan climbers, then it is bedsores.

From super-advanced-base-camp we decided to turn right, into the highest cwm, for an attack on the peak at its head, which for no particular reason we named the Boomerang. From the summit we should have a magnificent view of the area around us. I thought that one camp in the cwm and another on the ridge behind would be advisable, but P. N., who had yet to learn about judging distances in the mountains, thought me crazy and said so.

"Why, it's only two or three furlongs to the snow basin up there. Half an hour at the most."

I tried to explain how difficult it is to judge Himalayan distances. I quoted Mummery's famous dictum that 'it's a sight farther and a sight steeper than you think it is'.

P. N. would have none of it. He went off on an impromptu recce in the evening and came back more convinced than ever that the cwm was only a few hundred yards away.

We started early the next day. Five hours later we were still plodding towards the snow basin which P. N. had so confidently predicted as being less than thirty minutes away. When the moraine rib ended we ploughed on up through semi-breakable

crust, which gave way at every third step. When we reached the basin at just past one we were at the end of our tether. Poor P. N. said nothing more about distances throughout the whole expedition.

The boys had fallen behind, more than half a mile, so feeling truly magnanimous, even heroic, Garry and I dumped our loads and returned to help them out. Washing, as a matter of pride, refused to hand over a single ounce; Rinsing tried to do the same but I managed to snatch a heavy paraffin can from him. Sunom, having no such scruples, cheerfully handed over half of his load.

Tents were up in a matter of minutes, and just in time too. We had been climbing in bright and enervating sunshine, wishing it would cloud over. Now it suddenly got cold. The clouds came scurrying over from the north-west. It was an electric storm. We watched it coming, over the Spiti Valley, over Base Camp where Judy would be shivering in the rain, and finally over us. The lightning alarmed us a little, for our ice-axes might attract it, and our tents were moored to them; but in the event the walls of the cwm proved high enough to protect us. The lightning and thunder quickly gave way to snow. And how it snowed. All afternoon, great big flakes, as if someone was determined to bury us. Every few minutes we had to kick the tent walls from the inside lest the weight of the snow proved too much for the seams of the slim material.

The least pleasant aspect of climbing in the Himalayas is the establishing of the High Camp. The summit climb the day after is always an enjoyable contrast, for at over 20,000 feet climbing with or without one's load makes all the difference.

We would begin hoping for a good hard crust of snow, but somehow the sun always beat us to it. Today was no exception. The route to the ridge where we would place our high camp lay up a long snow ramp. Without loads, and by choosing the most favourable route, we might have only sunk in a foot or so at each step. The sixty pounds on our backs changed all this. We floundered along with snow up to our knees, and in bad places

up to our thighs. Garry and I would take turns to lead, ten paces at a stretch, then a rest and a change of leadership.

After an hour we came to a patch of particularly soft snow. Garry was in the lead. He sank in up to his chest. Cursing quietly he carefully levered his way out of the hole. He stood still for perhaps three minutes, panting hard. I could not but admire his composure. He moved forward a pace, and immediately he sank in again, deeper than ever. Then some mental barrier broke. The snow became a tangible living enemy for him. Crying with rage and frustration he hit out with his ice-axe and kicked with his feet, bellowing curses. Within seconds he was sobbing from exhaustion. To my shame I could not control my laughter. Thank God he found it all as difficult as I did.

I took over the lead, struggling on for three steps. Then while I rested Garry ploughed past for another three paces. So the agony went on. At length we emerged from the worst snow, but even then our pace was pitifully slow.

We were resting every five steps now. Five eternities, one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . , lungs fighting for oxygen, head throbbing, then stop, rest, doubled over, head burying itself in the cold steel of the ice-axe, trying to shut out the hammering inside. My whole being, my life's ambition centred on reaching that hump of snow twenty feet above. Once there I knew things would be easier. But before I had achieved that goal it was forgotten, and another beyond beckoned to me. There was nothing to think about save the lurch of the pack as I stepped heavily through the snow crust, the clink of my tin cup on the metal carrier-frame, and the problem of taking the next step.

After four hours Garry and I shared the last of our condensed milk. P. N. had stopped about two hundred feet down the slope and sat quite still, morosely surveying the magnificent panorama of peaks about us. The boys were still further behind. Right now none of us felt very mountain minded.

The view from our high camps more than made up for the agony of getting there; though one tended to forget this on the

way up. This ridge was particularly airy. It seemed impossible that we had struggled up that steep snow slope which was surely about to avalanche. Even as we watched the lower half of the ramp slid away, obliterating the footsteps which testified to our journey. The growl of the crashing snow drifted up to us from the cwm, but we were secure in our isolation. The mountains which had seemed so huge had dwindled into perspective. We could see storms in the valleys far below us. Glaciers snaked in between the peaks. Most wonderful of all was the silence of the mountains around us. We could see other fresh snow avalanches crashing down from distant ridges, and below the glaciers we could see the roaring torrent of the nullah. Not a sound could we hear. Knowing the roar of the nullah and the thunder of the avalanches so well, it was as if the sound track of a familiar film had been cut. The peace was all-embracing. Surely the Pitoons cannot be wrong in ascribing this as the home of their Gods.

But now the boys arrived and quickly our tiny oasis of life rang with sounds as we put up tents and prepared food. A huge cairn of stones was built in thank-offering for our safe ascent. Streams of paper fluttered from our tents as toilet rolls, revered as prayer-flags, were unwound.

Shortly after two we were in bed, ready for another sixteen hours' rest. Sunom brought supper, a mush of stewed steak with a chapatti the size and consistency of a discus. The meal was rounded off with a pint of treacly tea, ten hands of the Expedition Game (losing again to P. N.), and two phenobarbitones.

It began to snow, and it snowed all night.

I dreamt that I was drowning. A green sea closed over me. I could no longer breathe, my lungs were bursting with their final effort; I could feel the wetness pouring over my face as I sank down. With one last despairing effort I flailed out with my fists to ward off death. I awoke to find myself pushing the green wall of the sopping tent away from my face. It had partially collapsed under the weight of the snow fall during the night. The walls were dripping with condensation, for the sun was already peeking

over the mountain tops. I lay still for a moment, recovering my breath, watching drops of water falling from the tent roof to splash on Garry's nose. Drip . . . splash . . . drip . . . splash. He reached out of his sleep to scratch, and then subsided into rest again. I moved the tent wall half an inch so that the drip fell into his eye. He awoke, startled and bewildered; then he groaned.

I climbed over him to reach the snow-sleeve entrance to our tent. Emerging from the cool green darkness I blinked at the glare and brightness of the snow. Our ice-axes, anchors for the tent guys, were coated with brilliant ice diamonds. Outside it was cold and quiet. The splash of the droplets falling on Garry's exasperated face were like explosions in the enveloping silence. The mountains too were still asleep. Not a whisper, not even of the wind. It seemed a pity to begin the day, to disturb the smooth virgin snow around the tent.

Then suddenly the camp was all activity. Rinsing was busying around, collecting crampons and ice-axes, sorting out rucksacks, prodding Garry into movement. Sunom had the primus singing, melting snow for our tea. P. N. emerged massively from his tent, plunked himself on his carrier and looked gloomily up at the peak high above us. For this was a summit day!

Our first peak was also Garry's first major climb, so he shall tell the story. He writes:

> With so much new snow about our climb was in doubt. Peter was disconsolate at the prospect of a wasted day. Secretly I was glad to have a day to rest in which to recuperate from yesterday and acclimatise for the ascent, but I dared not say so. My rest was not to be, however, for just after eight a large avalanche cleared our prospective route; in a moment we were outside our tents swathed in cameras, waiting for P. N. to put his boots on. Washing and Sunom were detailed to stay behind to prepare food for our return. They both looked rather thankful.
>
> The first part of our climb was easy—a three-hundred-foot slide down a snow slope. My exhilaration as I shot down was

partly spoilt by the thought that this was precious height being lost.

Then the climb began in earnest. Mostly it was snow climbing on steep exposed slopes. As we got higher so the snow became softer and once again we were wading through a sea of white frustration. No loads, which helped, and better still, I was spared the agony of breaking steps; Peter and Rinsing shared that between them. Nevertheless as I trudged on upwards I steadily lost ground to them. To boost my morale I noted that P. N. lost steadily to me.

The only difficulties involved two sinister crevasses bridged by fragile-looking new snow. We found that by making a steep traverse beneath a cornice we could avoid the first crevasse; but there was no escaping the second one. Its upper ice wall overhung a seemingly bottomless crack. The only way was a narrow snow gangway. I stopped and watched, glad for a respite, while Peter tested it, pronounced it 'justifiably safe', and then slowly worked his way up it. Rinsing went next, moving cautiously over this obviously frail bridge. Then it was P. N.'s turn, for he had caught us up again, and last of all it was mine. I was halfway across when the bottom of the bridge fell away. I froze, watching fascinated as the snow disappeared down the yawning chasm. Moving slowly, cautiously, inching my way upwards, expecting the bridge finally to collapse at each step, I edged my way towards the others. Ice-axes were extended and I grasped them thankfully. I was on firm ground again! I was safe! Only now I lay there in the snow for fully ten minutes, too breathless even to congratulate myself on my narrow escape.

We moved on. Quite suddenly we were at the top. We stopped to let P. N. catch up and then we walked hand in hand to the topmost point, at 20,700 feet.

I felt strangely elated to be on this virgin summit. In England I had been sceptical of Peter's passion for climbing, and even yesterday when I had been killing myself so that the mountain could be climbed I had been less interested in the climbing than in testing myself to the limit. Now I began to understand some

of the reasons for this strange activity, the sport of mountaineering. It was not just the view. It was not being the first person to climb this particular peak. Nor was it that I had climbed the mountain myself. It was a little of each of these three and then something else, far greater. I began to understand. . . .

Peter was already busy taking a panorama. I looked around to see what his camera would record. Far below a huge glacier flowed away to the west. In Tibet to the north-east storm-clouds were gathering. Northwards lay the Gorge up which we had come; somewhere down there Judy was sweltering in the sun. Dominating the scene was the huge peak to the south-east which Peter worked out to be nearly 23,000 feet high. It was a vast wedge of rock, an inverted ship's keel, continually swept by avalanches as we watched, tremendously steep. I thought it impossible and Peter laughed. "It looks it now, doesn't it?" he said. "But I'll bet that in fifty years' time it will be climbed by women for training."

After a final look round we started down again. We had been on the summit for nearly an hour; it seemed like five minutes. We left a little pile of milk tubes, film cartons and cheese wrappers behind us. I wonder if we should have buried them, leaving the mountain top unscarred by traces of our ascent. Is the mountain any less lovely because of a few pieces of paper and metal at its top? No one will ever see them, for the debris we left will quickly rot and disintegrate. Nevertheless that we left them there at all rankles.

Peter had hoped to get right down to the camp at the glacier junction that day, but it was clear to everyone that the snow was too soft for further descent. So we played some more rummy, ate some more chapattis, took some more sleeping pills and slept for fourteen hours.

By noon the following day we had reached the glacier junction, the descent having taken four hours as opposed to two days on the way up. Peter, Sunom and Rinsing were to stay at this camp. P. N., Washing and I were to go right down to Base Camp. P. N. obviously needed a rest, and though I

would like to have stayed I found myself with several nasty-looking boils which urgently required Judy's expert attention. Also it would be a relief to get away from the inevitable porridge which Peter insisted was so necessary for a high altitude breakfast.

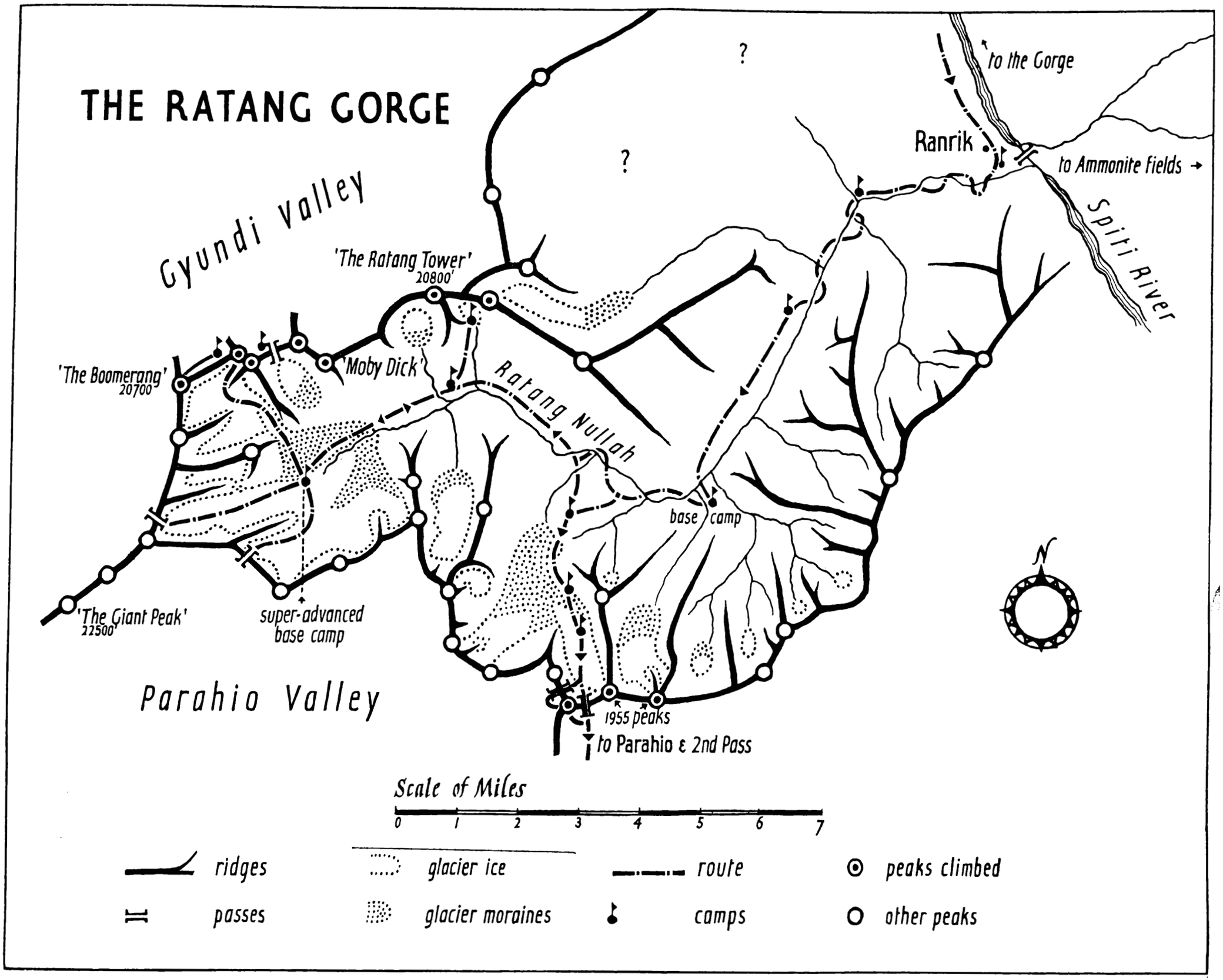
The return was tiring and not without incident. We were twice nearly swept away when we tried to ford the swollen nullah. On the third attempt Washing crossed by himself with his pack, and then came back to help me. By that time I would have cheerfully thrown it away, precious camera and all, I was so wet and cold. But once across we were quickly back at Base Camp, revelling in the luxurious warmth of a camp fire. I sat back, sipping some hot cocoa, and told Judy of our doings. I am afraid I felt disgustingly proud of myself.

During the next few days Rinsing and I, with Sunom in support, explored the glaciers of the upper Ratang basin and then climbed the Ratang Tower and Moby Dick as well as a number of lesser peaks. It was a pity that Garry and P. N. were not with us, for it was an exciting time, seeing new ground and solving topographical mysteries. But they were both obviously in need of a rest at Base Camp. For one reason only I was glad to see Garry depart. He would insist on porridge for breakfast. Each day he ate platefuls of the grey tasteless mass which I found quite unpalatable. Now at least I could begin the day with a rational breakfast of sweet cake and custard.

Our ascent of Moby Dick was noteworthy only because Rinsing and I both fell nearly six hundred feet on the way up. We had started early from a high camp after a sleepless night due to an extremely deep cut Rinsing had acquired while opening a tin without a tin-opener. Nevertheless, having gone through the customary struggle to establish our high camp we were in no mood to turn back without at least an attempt on the peak.

Our route lay up a steep ice gully. We were feeling rather dopey from lack of sleep and for some reason or other we decided not to put on crampons. The gully certainly warranted them. We

THE RATANG GORGE



climbed up laboriously, nicking tiny slots in the hard ice; balance was exceedingly precarious. In places there were a few pebbles embedded in the ice, and we tried to tip-toe upwards using these as footholds. In an hour we climbed perhaps six hundred feet.

Rinsing was in the lead, about ten feet above me, balancing uneasily on two pebbles, when the inevitable happened. A miniature avalanche, no more than a fluffle of snow, slid down the gully towards us. I had no chance. Rinsing shot into my legs, and down we both went in a heap, sliding and tumbling head-over-heels, over and over. At first I tried desperately to brake with my ice-axe, but the ice was too hard, the slope too steep and our momentum too great, and then it was knocked out of my hands anyway. Next I began to make breast-stroke motions as I somersaulted down the gully, for I had once read that was what one should do in an avalanche.

We arrived at the bottom of the gully in a heap. Rinsing was muttering and groaning. I lay still, my eyes closed, mentally checking for broken bones. No, I was all right. I opened my eyes. Still only blackness. "My God," I thought, "I'm blind." I put my hands to my eyes in a panic, to find my balaclava covering my head like a sack.

"Rinsing? All right?"

"Yes. But why did you keep hitting me in the face?"

So much for my breast-strokes.

We had been very lucky. There had been no outcrops of rock to tear us apart as we hurtled down. The fall had given us both a nasty bruising, and Rinsing's hand was no better for the tumble, but otherwise we were all right.

I can remember my reaction to that fall very clearly. It was not of thankfulness that we were all right, and not of fear because we had fallen; it was merely intense anger at having wasted an hour's hard work.

We literally took the mountain by force. Three hours was enough to see us to the top of Moby Dick and another subsidiary peak, also over 20,000 feet high. Moby Dick's summit was impressive, with steep snow falling away on either side, but we were

in no mood for jubilation. A few minutes' rest and we started down, reaching our camp by noon.

We packed up and hurried on, scurrying past super-advanced-base-camp. Once a late afternoon avalanche narrowly missed us, but we were too intent on losing height to be distracted. For it was obvious by now that Rinsing was in a serious condition. His damaged hand was throbbing painfully, his head was 'very bad', and he was surely running a high temperature. Probably it was stupid of us to have done the climb, but never for a moment did Rinsing consider not attempting it. Now he was barely able to walk; but he was kept going by the thought of the wonderful reception Sunom would give us.

Sunom was not there; not a tent was standing. I was furious, for I had given him strict instructions to wait for us (I did not know that he too was suffering from exhaustion, and had retired to Base Camp while he was still able). There was nothing for it. It was too late to consider going on to Base Camp, and anyway neither of us was capable of a further effort. I got the tent up and made supper. Rinsing seemed to be on the verge of collapse; I wondered if he would be able to continue tomorrow.

The details of our walk to Base Camp are best forgotten, for Rinsing felt worse than ever. With no load he had to rest every hundred yards and this was going downhill; there could be no doubt that he was really ill.

At Base Camp Judy diagnosed high-altitude exhaustion, strain and overwork, shock and loss of blood. Poor Rinsing! We were fortunate that there was nothing wrong with him which time and rest would not cure.

Judy had done wonders at Base Camp. A stream had been diverted so that it ran down among the tents: the tent sites had been properly levelled off: finally she had built a stone and mud oven. Now she was cooking all kinds of delicacies, including bread. Spring flowers bursting into bloom each day lent colour to the camp. It was wonderful to return to this peace and luxury after the monotonous wastes of the upper Ratang.

There was a prayer-wheel in the water sending its messages to Heaven, an afterthought of Angrup's. For he had become thoroughly frightened; first Washing and then Sunom had exclaimed about the hair-raising experiences they had been through. Apparently we had, unknown to me, narrowly escaped death on countless occasions. The cold had been unprecedented, the snow deeper than we were tall. Avalanches of incredible size had thundered down about us and huge crevasses had sought to swallow us up. Camps had regularly been placed on knife-sharp ridges with dizzy precipices on all sides, and the routes we had taken were so steep that it had been a relief when they eased off to the vertical.

First P. N.'s and then Sunom's exhaustion had emphasised the dangers we had survived, and now that Rinsing, the toughest of them all, was ill, and had fallen two thousand feet down a rocky precipice (this was what our gully slide had become), what might not happen to Angrup? His face became longer and longer as he listened to Sunom recounting the difficulties we had faced. It had been quite an excursion, hearing Sunom telling it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Long Day

WITH THE USUALLY CHEERFUL RINSING PROSTRATE, SUNOM, Washing and Angrup allowed the uncertainty of our future plans to upset them. From the first I had told them that we would return to Manali by way of the Parbati; and the event had always been far enough ahead to be easily ignored or forgotten about. But now we had climbed a number of peaks and Sunom knew I had designs on only one further summit; once that was climbed our trek back would begin.

"How will we go, Sahib?" Sunom asked.

"To Manikaran by way of two high passes," I answered.

"Where is Manikaran from here?"

I pointed vaguely to the south-west. "Beyond those mountains," I told him.

"And where are the high passes?"

I indicated the diametrically opposite direction. This did not encourage him, especially as he could remember all too well the mountains and difficult ground he had seen only a few days before from a high camp; difficult ground that extended right across our south, effectively cutting off, so he thought, any southward advance. And what was this business about going east to get to the south-west? It was all most confusing.

So I drew Sunom a map in the dust with a stick. It looked something like the illustration opposite.

Carefully I explained that 'GN' was the Gyundi Nullah—"yes, Sahib, I know the Gyundi Nullah"—that 'RN' was the Ratang Nullah, where we were now, that 'PN' was not Pran Nath (worth a laugh, this) but the Parahio Nullah. 'PR' was the Parbati River, 'M' was Manikaran, and '(M)' was Manali. The upside down 'V's' were the mountain ranges.

Sunom understood all this perfectly.

Very well, the two 'X's' were our two passes.

Sunom understood that also. But what was 'S'? That, I explained, was where Sunom was now. He smiled wisely. He understood now. He knew as well as I that there was no direct pass from the Ratang to the Parbati, so it was clear why we had to start back by going in the wrong direction.

But I had hoped to avoid his next question.

"Have these passes been crossed many times before?" he asked hopefully.

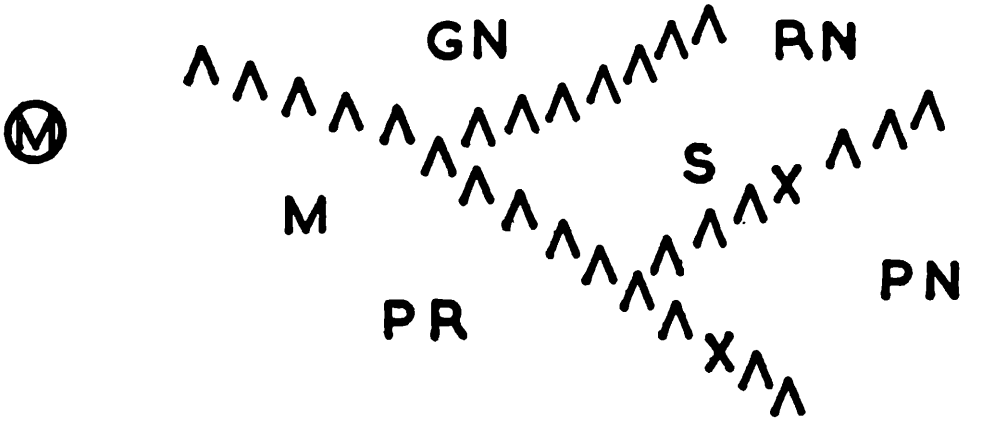
"No, not many times," I hedged.

He paused and considered. "Have they been crossed at all?"

I should have known it was no use trying to fool wily old Sunom. "The second one has been crossed once. It was easy. The first one has never been crossed, but Manali Sahib (this was Trevor) and I saw it from the peak last year. It also is very easy."

Sunom was not entirely at ease. Washing was openly rebellious. I showed them photographs of the north side of the second pass, which helped a little, but I had no photographs of the first. All afternoon there was an atmosphere of unhappiness, uncertainty and doubt among the three boys.

Something had to be done. Garry and I decided to give morale a boost by proving that the first pass, Sunom's chief bogey, was nothing to worry about. We would start at dawn the next morning. We thought it better not to take any of the boys with us in case the pass did not look reasonable at first sight and so



dishearten them. Our equipment consisted of an extra sweater and an anarak for warmth, an ice-axe each as usual, and a camera. For nourishment we took a bar of chocolate. The sketchiness of our equipment was not lost on the boys, who were heartened to see that we expected such an easy time of it. I took care that we left camp with a confident optimism which I was not too sure we felt. I told Judy to expect us back by three.

All morning we climbed. First over grass meadows filled with spring flowers, then over a no-man's-land where a few flowers and the moraine struggled for supremacy, then on to the moraine proper. We were gaining height quite quickly now, and by noon, when we at last reached the ice of the final glacier, we were at 17,500 feet. Only a bend in the glacier prevented us from seeing the pass.

Now it must be admitted that we had not brought a porter with us because, quite apart from any disheartening first impressions he might get, I frankly didn't know what to expect. I had originally seen the pass while Trevor and I were looking for a route on a nearby peak the year before. The conversation had been only half-interested, for we had been intent on our route finding. It might have gone something like this.

Me: "Oh look, Trevor, there's a gap in the ridge down there."

T: "So there is. Might even be a pass into the Parahio."

Me: "Looks steep but it might go. Wonder if anyone will ever use it?"

T.: "Doubt it. Now what do you think of that ice face . . ." (and here he went into details about our proposed route).

We studied the possible pass for about a minute without a great deal of enthusiasm one way or the other. We had taken no photographs of it. In the months of planning for this present expedition I had rather taken the pass for granted.

We rounded the bend in the glacier and there was the pass before us. Only no pass. "Damn it," I thought savagely to myself, "so I was wrong."

And when unsuspecting Garry mildly observed that "it doesn't look too good, does it" I turned on him with an unpardonable

savagery and told him that "there bloody well was a pass there, whether he could see it or not."

First impressions could hardly have been less favourable. Where I had expected to find a pass a four-hundred-foot slab of ice hung at a wickedly steep angle. Left of the slab was out of the question. Right was our only hope. We trudged forward to have a better look.

For some reason I had left my anarak and camera at the bend in the glacier, a mile from the scene of operations. I was bitterly to regret this unaccountable foolishness.

A big bergschund to get across first, then six hundred feet of snow, ice and rock. Steep yes, but the rock seemed to offer a few connecting platforms which might see us to the top. I prodded tentatively at the lip of the bergschund, it seemed fairly solid so I stepped across the abyss where the two lips almost met. Garry followed. A hundred feet up steep but firm snow easily enough, and there we reached rock. A rock wall or an ice gully, that was the choice. I began to wish that we had crampons with us, for the gully looked easier; but wishful thinking would not help so we took to the rock wall.

The details of that six-hundred-foot climb do not bear thinking about. Suffice to say that we climbed on steep loose rock and even steeper ice. The whole place was unpleasant and unsafe. It took us three hours to get up, and in the process we had thoroughly frightened ourselves. What a relief to be at the top!

There was the Parahio, a long way below. Were we the first ever to enter this valley? I doubted it. But certainly we were the first ever to cross from the Ratang to the Parahio. We were excited, at least until we remembered that we had to go back.

We knew the pass was all right for the boys. If we fixed ropes, used crampons and cut enormous steps they would be able to get up. And the Parahio itself? Far below, it was green and dark and wide, a haven of brushwood and flowers. We climbed to the summit of a small virgin peak near by, a few hundred feet above the pass itself, for a better look. There in the distance lay

the second pass. It was known to be easy. And the way to it certainly offered no difficulties. We were as good as home.

It began to snow. Snow and hail lashed into us as we huddled behind a boulder. How I longed for my anarak! It was 3.30 p.m. now, and it had taken us five and a half hours to reach the bottom of the pass from camp. We must hurry or we'd be benighted.

Three alternatives offered themselves. One was to return the way we had come; this we dismissed at once. Another was to climb Peak 19600 and drop down to Base Camp on its far side; this would almost certainly involve a bivouac, and although safe must be regarded as a last resort. The last alternative was to descend roughly a thousand feet on the Parahio side and then climb up again to the top of a scree slope. We didn't know whether this was possible, but it seemed preferable to climbing over Peak 19600.

We started down.

Another snowstorm blinded Garry who had left his glasses behind and froze me, without my anarak. Our hands (yes, gloves forgotten too) quickly grew numb as we clung onto snow, ice and wet rock; time was progressing considerably faster than we were.

Half an hour later we were well down on the Parahio side, traversing rocky slabs covered with verglas. The storm still thundered down on us, making the slabs more tricky than ever.

"What a mess," I thought. "A thousand feet down on the wrong side of the Divide and sundown any minute now."

I wondered what Judy was thinking.

Peter and Garry left early, expecting to be back in five hours or so. The sillies have not taken any food with them, even though they ate hardly any breakfast.

The day has been like any other at base camp. Very hot all morning, overcast by noon, and soon afterwards sharp thunderstorms. We were glad enough for the cooling rain at first, but now it is distinctly cold. It is so cold that even Nelly has crowded

into our Mess Tent. If it is this cold down here what of the two boys high up?

While Peter has been away climbing up the Ratang I have not worried too much. But now it is three and suddenly I am panicky. They have been gone quite eight hours. The limit, Peter promised. But there is no sign of them.

P. N. and I play cards. But I can't concentrate. P. N. goes out of the tent and looks up the valley. Nothing. The wind is strong, whistling overhead like an express train, and although the rain has stopped it is still very cold. We evacuate the tent and Sunom makes tea. We all drink in silence.

I go to put on my boots. I am going five hundred feet up the ridge to get a good look. P. N. says he will come with me. Perhaps we will see them and then we can go out to meet them. Up we go, higher and higher, in the hopes of a better view.

It is very chilly up there. The sun is setting fast, very fast. I can see the shadow moving up the side of the hill opposite. We can see nothing. We say nothing. What is the use? I start to calculate. I can see at least two miles. It will be quite dark in an hour. What should we do? What would Peter do? He'd probably laugh. But we must do something. In a minute it will be too late. Oh why did this have to happen?

P. N. and I discuss the situation. He says Peter is obviously a very good climber but he adds, "Mr. Peter is very free with the mountains." Which is another way of saying what I am afraid of.

We decide. We will send a camp up to the next meadow beyond the gorge. If the porters hurry they can be there before nightfall and then no one will have to ford the nullah in the dark. P. N. looks at me. "Mr. Peter is very free with the mountains," he repeats, and then he runs off down the hill.

I am to signal if I see anyone. I keep my eyes glued to the snow patches they will have to cross, but boulders keep moving. It is very difficult to see anything clearly, especially as my eyes keep misting over. I feel something terrible must have happened. Even a twisted ankle would be bad enough in the

wrong place. And when I think of the avalanches and stonefalls we can hear all day long . . .

I can't help it. I am seized with a fear and panic quite unknown to me before. Nothing will stop the tears.

Below I can see Washing and Angrup hurrying off up the gorge. They look like two tiny specks, and they are only a few hundred yards from camp. Please hurry, Washing and Angrup.

P. N. has climbed up to me again. Soon it will be dark. Washing and Angrup are already out of sight, lost in the bends of the gorge. I turn to go down to camp. P. N. insists on staying, until it is really dark, so I give him my anarak. It is no good my staying. I cannot see with so much water in my eyes. He will signal if he sees anything.

I return down to where Rikzen and Sunom are quietly preparing supper. Unspoken sympathy fills their eyes. They are so gentle. They say nothing. I retire to the Mess Tent.

"Memsahib! Memsahib! Come quickly. Petersahib. Garrysahib. Decko! decko!"

There comes P. N., careering down the slope, my red anarak tied to his ice axe, flapping a crusader's banner behind him.

Long after dark they arrived. A feast awaited them. But they were so very tired.

I dreamt of a pass. Only is it a pass? We are in the law courts. Garry is there in a wig. I am defending, he is prosecutor. The pass is on trial. Is it a 'pass'? Garry says it is a masterpiece of overstatement. The judge is Nelly. She nods her head wisely.

But it will certainly go. It will go.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The First Pass

IT WAS REASSURING THE WAY SUNOM AND ANGRUP, HAVING accepted our word that the passes were all right, became cheerful and friendly and forgot the worries of the previous week.

Manikaran became a catchword. "Alu, anda, ata, gosht, dudh aur cheeny," Sunom chanted. Potatoes, eggs, ata, meat, milk and sugar, these were the good things we would find at Manikaran.

At Manikaran all our troubles would end.

Manikaran! Manikaran! It was almost a prayer.

Perhaps the tiny Angrup-made water-wheel, a jam tin with prayers scratched on it, had done its job. Base camp was at peace.

We climbed our last peak. While Garry and I were away Nelly was despatched. Poor Nelly. She more than anyone else had appreciated the difficulties of the Gorge. Until Washing had taken pity on her she had all but drowned at every fording. Once up at Base Camp the Ranriker's ram, her companion in misfortune, had been executed and since then she had never been quite the same. Undoubtedly she had known for some time what was in store for her; her sad wistful bleat and the wise tolerant look in her eyes, which seemed to express the sufferings of untold generations of Nellys, belied her frisky snapping up of the succulent buttercups in The Meadow.

With true feminine disdain she would have nothing to do with the one other female on the expedition, Judy. Garry was her only real friend, and to him she told all. When he was in camp she would not drink unless he led her to the water. When she developed a passion for Vita-weat he went out of his way to pamper her desires. Quaker Oats was another favourite. Polythene and toilet paper were sampled, but somehow they missed that special flavour which Nelly enjoyed best. But not all the buttercups and

Vita-weat in the world could make up for her loneliness and her longing for animal friends in Spiti.

There was some talk of taking her back to Manali alive, but I had to put an end to any such ideas. We had to have meat. Angrup had been unable to watch the slaughter, so Judy told me, and Sunom had openly wept as he went about the throat-slitting.

Garry spoke Nelly's epitaph when he sorrowfully said that it would be wonderful to get back to civilisation where one didn't have to stroke one's dinner for a whole month before one ate it. As he wrote,

Peter bought a little goat,
Sunom cut it dead,
Others had it for their tea,
But I went ill to bed.

But she made a fine stew. For some of us, at least.

Indeed Garry was really not well; he was suffering a great deal from boils. Judy decided that this was the time to use our carefully preserved supply of penicillin. Not unnaturally Garry baulked. He knew he was in the hands of rank amateurs when it came to jabbing with a needle.

She handed him our only medical book, written for the use of Ship's Captains who were without a doctor's services. The author was singularly pessimistic. Nearly every summing up of a disease ended with the encouraging words that 'this complaint often proves fatal.'

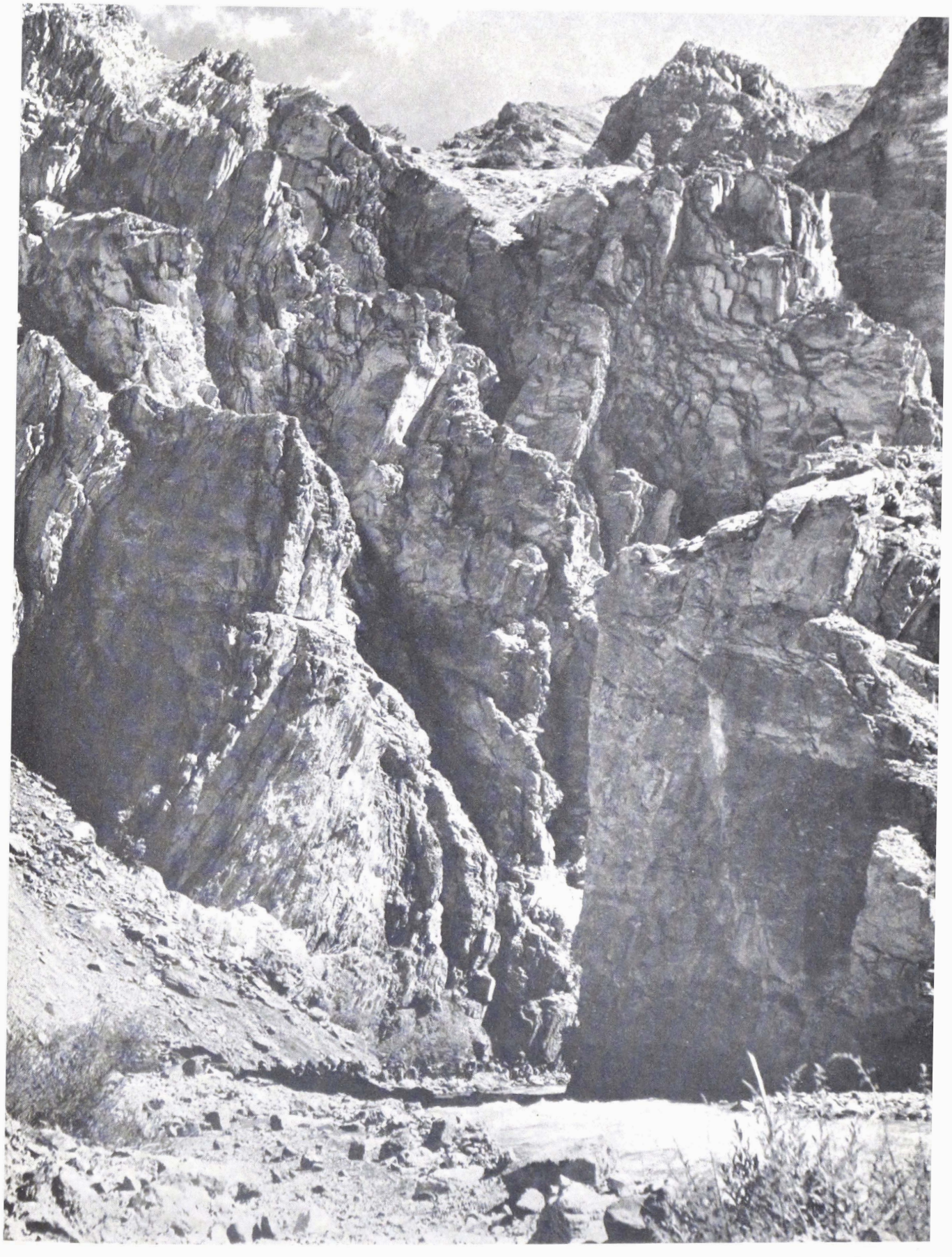
A few minutes' reading and Garry's cheerful willingness to trust to luck faded. The question did not now seem to be how quickly he would get rid of the boils, but rather if he would live at all.

Now though Judy is impervious to the most grisly wounds, for some reason she is incapable of seeing a needle going into anyone without resorting to the smelling salts. My only experience at the friendly end of a needle was giving a shot of morphia in Korea, and then the poor fellow died (not entirely, I should add, from the effects of morphine).

THE AUTHOR ON THE SUMMIT OF THE RATANG TOWER

HELPING JUDY ACROSS THE NULLAH

PITOONS PLAYING A FORM OF SNAKES AND LADDERS



THE RATANG GORGE
The Expedition resting after a nullah fording

"THERE IS A BRIDGE—OF SORTS"

So she was to prepare the solution and sterilise the apparatus. I would administer the needle. When Garry asked me if I knew how, I was purposely rather vague about the results of my previous injection.

Water boils at an absurdly low temperature at 15,000 feet, so the instruments boiled away merrily for over an hour before they were pronounced sterile.

The boys were watching the sterilisation fascinated, and when Judy declared the boiling sufficient, Sunom helpfully picked up the syringe with a dirty dish cloth and proceeded to dry it.

We settled down for another hour's boiling.

We had altogether four glass capsules of distilled water (a *sine qua non* of penicillin shots) and enough penicillin for a like number of injections.

I carefully took a glass capsule and broke it between forefinger and thumb as a the book directed. The glass splintered and I got cut. Naturally I dropped the capsule.

At the second attempt I was more successful.

By now Judy was shaking like a leaf, for as I have said, needles are not her forte. She spilled the contents of the second capsule.

The contents of the third capsule found their rightful place and the solution was carefully mixed. Somehow the last air bubbles would not get out of the syringe. Judy squirted the whole solution away in her efforts to be rid of these bubbles.

I mixed the last solution we had and carefully filled the syringe. There seemed to be a few obstinate air bubbles, but I ignored them.

I moved to the scene of action, Judy handed me the sterilised cotton wool, knocking over a jar of very messy Bovril at the same time.

I applied the cotton wool to the top outside quarter of Garry's left buttock. He started visibly, his muscles tightened, and he began to read P. N.'s book backwards. I inserted the needle, quietly and, I thought, efficiently. I sat back to admire my handiwork.

"Get on with it," shrilled Judy nervously.

'Push the plunger smoothly and firmly' advised the Ship's Captain's book. I pushed, firmly. Nothing happened. I squeezed, joggled, banged and forced the plunger. Still nothing happened; the penicillin remained where it was, in the syringe. I turned for the piton hammer, but thought better of it.

There being nothing else I could do, I regretfully withdrew the needle from Garry's buttock. I squeezed it again. Still nothing happened. Judy dismantled the syringe and spilt all the penicillin.

She almost collapsed with relief. So did Garry. I thought it was a pity. It was all over. No penicillin after all.

The rest of the afternoon was spent convincing Garry that he was lucky not to have had the injection. To distract him we played 'Pooh-sticks'. The course was twenty yards long, and ran along the tiny stream which gave us water; this at its widest was not more than eighteen inches. The course was a good one, varied, fast and difficult. It included a severe rapids, two treacherous backwaters where one's match could be delayed indefinitely, and a long stretch of slow-flowing water where careful navigation was necessary to avoid the many grass stalks which hung into the water.

After fifteen exciting races which took all afternoon Rinsing was declared the overall winner, with P. N. second. Sunom was disqualified for blowing on his match.

Before setting off towards the first pass we reduced our equipment and food to what at the time we considered the barest essentials. I reckoned that getting to the foot of the pass would take us two days, and the crossing of the pass another day; four days would be spent in the Parahio and a fifth getting over the second pass; allow an extra day for bad weather and that made a total of nine days. Judy set about sorting out food for eight of us for nine days, seventy-two man days in all. We would abandon surplus goods here and now.

Garry and I went through the equipment. Anything we casually threw away would be salvaged by the boys, so we systematically drowned everything that was deemed unnecessary in the nullah.

They looked on sadly as equipment and clothing was thrown into the swirling torrent. We were abandoning very little food; some sugar, a tin of porridge and a bag of ata. Our calculations in England as to what we would eat had been surprisingly accurate.

We put this food in wooden boxes which we were also leaving behind. It broke Sunom's heart to leave so much for the Spiti men, but he saw that we could not do otherwise. Whichever shepherd got up the Ratang first that autumn is now a rich man. The bartering value of the wooden boxes, the numerous tins and above all of the sugar will have made him, by Spiti standards, a millionaire. A thought which upset Sunom the tight-palmed not a little.

Two weary days of carrying double loads brought us to within half a mile of the first pass.

Sunom looked miserably at the ice cliff facing us. "No pass there, Sahib."

I told him not to worry. The pass was around the corner. He would see it tomorrow.

Garry being incapacitated, P. N., Rinsing and I spent the afternoon prior to our crossing preparing the way. For four hours we worked on the cliff face. We cut enormous steps up the ice, cleared away all the debris on the rock itself, made a platform halfway up to stockpile the loads on, and fixed three one-hundred-foot ropes over the hardest places.

The proceedings were enlivened twice. First a boulder came out of nowhere from above. I felt nothing and my skin was untouched, but two pairs of stockings over my right ankle were torn to ribbons. Then P. N. all but fell on one section of steep ice, for he would insist on keeping his ice-axe below him, where it could not act as a safeguard.

When we plodded back to our uncomfortable glacial camp the boys crowded round Rinsing, asking what it was like. In his pride he could only answer that it was "good, very easy".

They took his word for it and that was that.

The half mile to the foot of our pass was a long tiring walk. Almost a 'Rinsing mile'. Garry and I carried maximum loads, the

boys made two trips. With my seventy-five pounds threatening to throw me off balance at every step the ropes we had fixed the previous day were a godsend.

We moved slowly, resting every few paces, for we were at nearly 19,000 feet. Thank goodness we had cut the steps yesterday. They had frozen into miniature platforms. Our immediate objective was the ledge we had cleared, for we are going to leave the loads there and pull them up from above on ropes. Garry stopped on the ledge to supervise the load-tying-on, while Judy and P. N. and I pushed on up to the top.

The boys arrived at the platform from their second carry. Gone was all womanish fear; they were intent on getting safely across. Rinsing had said that the pass was easy. Whatever they thought of it now they would get up somehow, if only to save disgracing themselves. And anyway Memsahib was up, so they had no choice.

We arranged the ropes, tying nylon to nylon. I hacked at the cornice and a large hunk dropped away. Garry tied a tent on the rope and we pulled. The friction of the rope through the cornice was terrific; hauling was very hard work. First the tent jammed under a rock overhang, then under the cornice itself. This was hopeless. We would be here all day.

To everyone's surprise Washing appeared from below with a heavy load, forcing his way up a nasty rock route on the right. He reached a small rock pedestal about ten feet from the top and then made as if to throw his hundred-pound load over the crest of the ridge. He gathered himself and heaved. The load did not quite make it; it fell back on him heavily, pushing him off balance. For an awful moment he poised at the brink, clutching the load; then he toppled backwards, over the edge. Mentally I was already scraping him off the rocks six hundred feet below. A miracle saved him. One of the straps on the load caught on a spike of rock. It held for an instant. And in that instant Washing managed to regain the pedestal. A very, very near thing.

More hauling. Another load had become stuck, so Garry climbed up towards it. He got into difficulties and shouted for a rope. No sooner had he got his head and shoulders through the

loop than he slipped and fell heavily. Thank goodness for the rope. Another uncomfortably close thing.

Again a load got stuck, this time firmly embedded in the underside of the cornice. Rinsing climbed up to it. He reached the load, freed it, and then was overwhelmed in the ensuing shower of snow and ice as part of the cornice collapsed. His ice-axe clattered down the slope, stopping near where Garry was anxiously watching. Rinsing had the presence of mind to grasp with both hands the load he had just freed. His unexpected weight on the hauling rope nearly pulled Angrup, Sunom and me over the edge, but luckily P. N., our anchor man, was firmly belayed, and he held us all. We could never haul the load and Rinsing up so they were both lowered away.

At last all the remaining loads were safely with us on the ridge. Ropes were gathered in and coiled, and Garry and Rinsing began to climb up. They preferred the rock route to the steep ice, and in a few minutes they were standing on Washing's pedestal. Garry with his fantastic reach, could grasp good holds on the ridge. He heaved and was half up, resting with his stomach on the edge, chest up, legs dangling below.

Suddenly he shouted. I rushed over to help him. For Rinsing, too short to reach any reasonable holds, had unexpectedly taken it into his head to climb up Garry. And climb up he did. While I hung on, and Garry suffered, Rinsing made rapid progress; up he came, swarming up Garry's legs, over his back, using his shoulders as a final hold for the pull-over.

We were all at the top. Alive. So were the loads (at the top, not alive). Wonderful. Congratulations and laughter all round. Morale rose one hundred per cent, for there, several miles away and many thousands of feet below, was wood, greenery and grass. Manikaran seemed no distance away now. The second pass would be nothing. There it was, eight or ten miles away, beckoning to us.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Disaster and Return

FOR A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT FOLLOWED IT IS NECESsary to break into the narrative here with an explanation. In the summer of 1952 two mountaineers, Kenneth Snelson and Jan Graaff, had explored and climbed just to the south of the Divide, in and around the Dibibokri Basin (see map facing page 184). Snelson wrote an article covering their activities in the *Himalayan Journal*.[1]

On July 4th, 1952, they climbed a peak of 19,200 feet on the Main Himalayan Divide, and this they called the Ratiruni Pyramid. From the summit they had a clear view to the north and 'below . . . was the upper valley of the Parahio, a great long smooth glacier. . . .'

'To our joy, there seemed to be a way into this sanctuary. By branching off our route to the summit of the Pyramid we could have reached a saddle at about 18,000 feet and now we could see reasonable snow slopes descending from the col to this new glacier, in fact here was a pass across the main range.'

On July 5th they crossed this pass and camped on the Spiti side of the Divide. On the 6th, 'after a cold dawn start, we reached the head of the glacier and following a stiff climb up steep snow, brilliantly led by Graaff who cut hundreds of steps, we . . . looked onto yet another glacier of which the map gave no hint. This was a tributary of the Parahio, joining it some miles below our pass.'

'We returned to camp and packed it. We could have retraced our steps over the pass beneath the Pyramid but decided to take a chance by trying to break out of the sanctuary into the main Parbati Valley. The chance came off. We ploughed up rotten snow slopes to a col at about 17,000 feet and looked hopefully

[1] Vol. xvii, 1954 pp. 110–17. *The Dibibokri Basin . . . and Beyond*, by Kenneth Snelson.

downwards. We were rewarded with steep, though feasible slopes which we descended for 5,000 feet to the warmth and luxury of a valley camp. The following day, July 7th, was a delightful stroll through carpets of wild flowers down the Parbati and up the Dibibokri to Base Camp.'

Two major passes over the Great Divide were thus discovered and crossed in two days by this energetic pair. A third pass was to be discovered a few days later.

'. . . I was keen to try and find a pass to the Parahio from this (Main) Glacier. With Pasang Sherpa I pushed up the right-hand branch beneath the fearsome wall of Peak 21350 and camped near the head of the glacier at 17,000 feet. Ahead was an ice-fall but very early in the morning we evaded this by cutting steps up a small ice couloir to the right, negotiated a steep tongue of snow and then some of the most insecure rocks I have ever met to stand at 18,500 feet on another new pass over the great Himalayan Range. On the other side we looked down easy snow slopes to a tributary glacier of the Parahio, the third new and unmapped glacier to be discovered.'

We were making towards the head of the Parahio and these passes now.

Four days were spent moving up the Parahio, according to plan. I was on the look out for Snelson's second pass which led, in a few hours, to 'the luxury of a valley camp' in the main Parbati Valley. As Snelson and Graaff had been able to get right down from about 17,000 feet to 12,000 feet in an afternoon I knew there could be no difficulties. Also at this time of year we could expect to find shepherds and their flocks in the Parbati Valley at 12,000 feet.

This was important, for we had been getting through our supplies rather faster than we had anticipated, and severe rationing had begun as soon as we had crossed the first pass and it was realised that we were eating too much. Sunom was in charge of the rationing, and he was meticulously fair. No one was allowed more than two spoonfuls of sugar in a pint mug of tea (we were

accustomed to six or seven), and no amount of cajoling would get one more than the allocated four chappattis per day.

In spite of these measures we were perilously low in supplies by the beginning of the last day in the Parahio. There was enough food for one more day's complete feeding; tomorrow we would have only a little ata and two packets of soup. But there was no need to worry. We knew we were in for an easy day. We would be down in the Parbati by supper-time and guddees would be there. I could already taste the milk that they would surely offer us.

The fifth and last day in the Parahio began easily. Starting from a camp at the foot of the last glacier at 7.30, we moved steadily along the moraine and ice after an initial climb up the glacier's dirty snout. The glacier was shaped like a 'Y', and we had started from the 'Y's' foot. By noon we were approaching its junction. Up towards its head we had a good view of what must surely be Snelson's Ratiruni Pyramid. To its left was the pass we had seen from our peaks the year before and from the first pass this year. Which of Snelson's three passes this was I could not know, but it was certainly one of them.

The glacier seemed to be rather longer than I had hoped, but we were covering the ground quickly and there was no reason to push the pace. First the left-hand branch of the 'Y' came into view. There could be no way there. A sheer mountain wall rose up to an awesome spire of granite and ice. The pass before us must be the easternmost of Snelson's passes, the one we wanted to cross. I trudged forward for a glimpse up the right-hand branch, where the other passes must be. A dark dank cwm, encircled by a black rock wall, rising out of the ice for thousands of feet, came into view. The cwm was cold and evil-feeling, and I could not help shuddering as I looked at the frowning precipices coated with grey ice. Garry and I searched for the possibility of a way out, but we knew it could not be.

Something was very wrong. The left-hand branch of the 'Y' was a good deal shorter than Snelson had indicated on his map;

and where were his other passes? Which of his passes was before us now?

Suddenly a cold blast of air swept down on us from the pass above. Clouds were gathering with alarming rapidity around the peaks ahead of us, and the wind began to pick up. The weather was becoming menacing. Surely those dirty grey-black clouds heralded an approaching storm. We must hurry!

Until now I had been confident that we would have an easy crossing, but with the weather turning bad on us and the uncertainty inside me, I found suddenly that I was very tired. I tried not to communicate my doubts to the others. The boys still had complete confidence in what I had said. I had told them that this second pass would be simple, a mere formality, before we marched triumphantly to Manikaran, our Mecca. I encouraged them now with the same words. The pass might be a little further and a little higher than we had hoped, but once we reached the top, phooft, it would be nothing.

"Beat the storm to the pass and we will have a camp on grass tonight," I promised. "Quickly, jilde!"

The approach to the pass from the 'Y' junction took three dreadful hours. It was cold, for with every minute that passed the wind became stronger. Little eddies of snow whisked away from our feet, stinging the face of the man behind. The sun had long since disappeared. As the wind became more violent loose snow hissed down and along the whole surface of the glacier. Crevasses presented themselves at regular intervals, and we had to make short but exasperating detours to find a safe crossing. The snow was crusty; sinking in a foot, struggling free, only to sink in again, was heart-breaking, especially now we were oppressed by a sense of urgency. At every pace our carrier-frames with their double loads bored into our backs and pulled at our aching shoulders. Chests heaving, pulses racing, lungs straining, we ground on pace by pace. The pass seemed to be getting no nearer.

Garry pointed with his ice-axe to a steep snow slope opposite, barely half a mile away yet only just visible in the gloom of the

impending storm. "Surely that's where Graaff cut his steps . . . surely that's his brilliant lead," he shouted through the wind.

"Could be," I thought, hoping with all of me that it was.

At last we reached the foot of the final slope, two hundred feet high. It was 4 p.m. I remember burrowing under my gloves to look at my watch and thinking we would have to hurry even faster if we were going to get down to the guddees in the Parbati that evening.

Washing reached the top first, dumped his load, and then descended to help Garry and me with our loads.

"What's the other side like?" I asked. "Asan, easy?"

"Ney, Sahib, mushkil, difficult."

Of course he was joking. Silly of him to joke at a time like this. Or else he had misunderstood me. We knew the other side was easy.

I climbed on up. Garry was with me. As we reached the top we were met by the full strength of the wind. It screamed over the ridge at gale force, spitting bullets of hail into our faces. We peered hopefully over the ridge and down the other side. Far, far below, through the swirling mists, a huge glacier glistened ominously.

Where were the 'steep but feasible slopes'?

Where were the green meadows of a valley camp?

This was no pass. We were at the top of a dark, frightening precipice.

Everyone had struggled to the top by now. The boys had carried mammoth loads over difficult ground for nine hours, in the firm expectation of a valley camp in the evening. Now they were too tired even to put on extra clothing, too cold to think. They were huddled together, terribly discouraged. Sunom moaned through gritted teeth that this was surely the end. Peter-sahib had promised an easy descent, he had promised wood and water and flowers and warmth. . . . Now we would all die here together.

The precipice before us was immense. Thousands of feet below a vast grey ice field wound away into the cloud. Its very

size was sinister. It must be miles to its mouth. The sheer cliff face down which we must descend was covered with debris; whole sections were plastered with ice.

The descent before us was a risky, even a desperate undertaking, the boys had already assumed it was impossible. Yet for some reason I never considered retreat.

I started on a solo recce down the cliff face while Garry and Judy went through our loads, throwing out the last vestiges of luxury.

Garry made straight for P. N., who even now was tentatively fingering that damn book of his. With a yell of exultation Garry snatched it out of P. N.'s mittened hands and hurled it high up into the gale. P. N. watched mutely as it was whisked away, torn and buffeted, into the mists.

The boys were dumbfounded as Judy ruthlessly swept through the loads, tossing out goods which were worth tens and hundreds of rupees in Manali. When I started to descend alone they realised we were in earnest. And the contradictions of their own thoughts —we're all going to die miserably one minute, goodness, she's foolish to throw that out, I could get twenty rupees for it the next—were not lost on them. They cheered up a little.

And when Judy turned to the boys' loads of their own clothes and belongings—this was too much!

"We're all right," said Rinsing. "We'll go anywhere with you and Petersahib."

"Come on then, tie up the loads. Petersahib will be back any minute now."

Meanwhile I had started down the face, moving super-cautiously. For the rock was steep, loose, and underlaid with ice. The exposure was not extreme, thanks to the cloud which blanketed any worrying view I might have had. Though I was left in no doubt as to what would happen to me should I slip, for the rocks I dislodged bounced once or twice and then disappeared from view, into the void below.

To my surprise I found that as soon as I dropped below the

level of the ridge I was out of the wind. This raised my hopes considerably. On the other hand the clouds were already upon us, and the storm which had been threatening all afternoon could hardly be expected to hold back much longer. There was no time to lose. I sacrificed caution for speed.

By doing a gigantic zig-zag down and across the cliff-face I found that I could reach a small ledge six hundred feet below the ridge. What happened below the ledge I couldn't tell, for the mists and cloud were too thick; but at least we could spend the night there, out of the storm, and, thanks to a convenient overhang, free from the danger of avalanches.

I retraced my steps for a few feet and then shouted through the clouds. No answer. Another shout, louder and more urgent. A faint voice answered.

"Come on! No wind! Come on!" I bellowed for all I was worth.

They came at last. Slipping, stumbling, half-falling, they came. In ninety minutes we reached the ledge.

It began to snow. Lightning played on the peaks about us. Feverishly we scratched away at the ledge, moving boulders and shoving away scree, doing our utmost to make a level place. Somehow we got two small tents up and crowded into them. We were too tired to bother about food. Save it for breakfast. We climbed into our sleeping bags, huddling together for warmth.

It snowed on. The wind whistled and groaned, the tents strained at their guys. Stone-falls thundered by. Snow avalanched almost as quickly as it fell.

Through it all we slept, exhausted.

It was much too cold to get up while our ledge was still in the shade. When at last I did poke my head out of the tent I was greeted by a cloudless sky. All about there was a silence which only the mountains know. In spite of the sun's warmth seeping through me I shivered as I looked around. It seemed impossible that we should have safely descended the sheer black wall above us. Our ledge was a tiny sanctuary in a vast wilderness of pre-

cipitous rock and ice. Hopefully I looked downwards, seeking a possible route down these steep ice-bound slopes to the glacier far below. The exposure was prodigious. A single step off the ledge and we would fall half a vertical mile. The storm had been a godsend. We would never have attempted to force this precipice had we been able to see what we were doing.

Over breakfast, while we ate the very last remnants of our food, we discussed the situation. We were lost. That much was clear. We had no more food. We could expect to keep going four perhaps five days without further supplies: after that we would be in desperate straits. Certainly we had crossed the Himalayan Divide, for the huge glacier below us flowed away to the south.

No one considered retracing our steps. Somehow we must get down. By following the glacier to its snout we should eventually come to the Parbati Valley.

At least we were in no hurry. The weather was perfect, so we could afford to wait for all of the dangerous new snow to melt away before we started down. We tried to make something of our surroundings. Below was a vast basin of ice, ringed on all sides by impressive peaks. None of them was familiar, but then we could hardly expect them to be.

Garry started to draw the skyline in his diary, taking bearings at the same time, while I took a panorama of the scene. I swung the camera from left to right, starting with a group of granite spires and ending with a fine snow peak, down which avalanches were rumbling already. That snow peak.... Wait a minute....

"That snow peak! Isn't that the peak in Snelson's photograph?" I shouted out my discovery.

Rummaging around in my rucksack, I searched for the precious little bundle of papers on which I had taken thousands of bearings in the last few weeks. Among them I found what I was looking for; Snelson's article and photographs.

There could be no doubt about it. There was the Dibibokri Pyramid. There was 21760.

We must be above Snelson's Main Glacier then.

We were descending what he had described as 'a most frightening rock wall'. I could well believe it.

No wonder Snelson's map was wrong. The Survey map is reasonably accurate to the south of the Divide. But not only was it drawn from conjecture on the north; more serious, the southern and northern sections bear no relation whatsoever to each other.

It is easy to blame the Survey map for our predicament, but to do so is manifestly unfair. The map is based on Surveys undertaken in the 1850's and 1860's, when the map-makers worked with primitive equipment under severe conditions. Often reports ended like this: 'I trust that any deficiencies in this report will be excused. I have no proper paper; my hands are so benumbed with cold, that I can write with difficulty, and the ink freezes in my pen at every two or three words. . . .' Further, the early surveyors were under instructions to map valleys and trade routes as accurately as possible; the tangled mountain ranges could wait for a second survey, which, because of two world wars, never came.

The fault was entirely mine. It is convenient for explorers plunging into new territory to have an accurate map to guide them, but they should not expect it. Both our predecessors and ourselves had assumed too easily that the Survey map was essentially correct. It was a stupid mistake, and now we were paying for it.

It was nice to have discovered where we were, but it did mean that we were certain to go hungry. Still, once down the precipice our way was clear; follow the glacier downwards and sooner or later we would reach the mouth of the Dibibokri Nullah, where it met the Parbati.

While we waited for the last of the new snow to melt away we had one final drastic revision of our equipment. Loads must be cut down to a bare minimum, for it was obvious that we had a desperate descent before us. We had no more food: therefore one of our two remaining paraffin stoves could be abandoned. After the descent we would remain very much lower, so some more

clothes could be discarded. All but one of our nylon ropes were left on that ledge, for the cliff face was too loose to allow the use of ropes. And finally we hurled two tents over the edge. The way they were dashed asunder as they fell two and a half thousand feet in a couple of bounces did nothing to raise morale. Then we started down.

There were two possible routes. Rinsing suggested a direct descent down a vicious-looking gully, presumably thinking that 'the sooner we get out of here the better'. Garry and I vetoed this idea in favour of a long traverse to the right which seemed considerably safer, if no easier.

The rocks were still slippery and the snow, where it existed, was in execrable condition. We moved down one at a time. Starting from a platform either Garry or I would lead off down, not stopping until we found a large overhang to shelter under. Then one by one the others came on. A fusillade of stones announced their progress. Once everyone was down to that particular overhang the process would begin all over again. It was slow but sure, and fairly safe.

In places we cut dozens of steps across slabs of ice to avoid the worst of the rock. Time and again sections of the cliff which seemed hopeless from above were found on closer inspection to have a hidden weakness in their defences. Once we had to slide down a smooth fifteen-foot slab of rock, but the landing was good and no one was hurt. We must have sent down many tons of debris that morning, for in places whole sections of the cliff fell away at the merest touch.

As the sun climbed higher snow avalanches began to thunder down from high above. None threatened us, for we were on a buttress standing well out from the main face, but twice the gully Rinsing had wanted to descend was swept by deafening avalanches. He grinned sheepishly.

The descent of the face took all morning, but at last, to everyone's relief, we reached the glacier. We trudged over the uneven ice, but the glacier seemed to go on for ever. We gave up at 3 p.m., weary beyond words. For supper there was icy water and

minute fragments of mint cake which P. N. had found in his anarak.

During the next two days we continued down the valley. At noon on the third day we reached the Parbati Valley proper. It was drizzling and we could see nothing through the thick monsoon mists. We simply couldn't carry our loads any further. We sat about, feeling hungry, indecisive. What to do next?

Towards evening the mists lifted a little.

"Petersahib, look!" Sunom was beside himself with excitement.

And with good reason. There, high above us, was a huge flock of goats. We strained to see the guddee with them but there was no one.

"Come on, what are we waiting for?" I asked impatiently. There was some food. Let's get it.

Sunom knew better. Much better. "Wait," he said. "I'll get them all for you."

He was as good as his word.

He called them down. It was a remarkable performance.

The goats were traversing the slope a thousand feet above us. Sunom began to call.

"Wooooooooooo. Wooooooooooo." Each call lasted from ten to fifteen seconds, rising in crescendo to a full-throated roar.

The goats paused, undecided. We could sense their uncertainty. They thought they had been turned loose for the summer, and here was their guddee, calling them down already. Had they miscalculated the dates? Surely not. Stop. Listen. There was the call again. Come on, we'd better answer it.

Down they came, a tide of white moving, tumbling across the green of the slope. It was a wonderful, breath-taking sight; fine beasts, long-haired woolly goats.

They stopped fifty yards from camp, perhaps aware they had been hoaxed, that we were not their owners after all. Garry went left, I right, and Sunon and the boys up centre. A wild chase, simultaneous rugger tackles, a mass of human and goat rolling down the hillside, and we had six bleating she-goats.

We took the two youngest and let the others go. Our only knife was too blunt to cut their throats, so we had no choice but to strangle the poor beasts. It was an unpleasant business, but the results, a few hours later, when Sunom presented us with a steaming hot liver and kidney supper, made it well worthwhile. We didn't even notice that sickly sweet taste of freshly killed meat. We were too hungry.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Reflections

I ARRIVED BACK IN DELHI WITH A HEADFUL OF MEMORIES AND nearly three thousand photographs to sort through. Looking through these photographs brings back to me in a way no diary can the atmosphere of our expedition. Washing fording a nullah in his muscular way; for some reason I remember that he played an excellent hand of Whist, and that on more than one occasion he and I were able to confound the indomitable P. N. Sunom giggling; but he was more than a clown, he was Father of the Expedition. Rinsing looking grim in an advertising photograph; what a wretched actor he was. I had told him to smile, for this might be valuable copy to a benefactor one day. And there he was, solemnly holding a tin of biscuits as if they were bad fish.

What fine boys they were. Each in his own way made an important contribution, though Rinsing was in a class by himself. We realised just how much we depended on him when he was prostrated with fatigue and the others had become disheartened. I remember him best, however, ploughing through waist-deep snow at over 20,000 feet, muttering to himself as he drew upon his vast reserves of energy.

Even the moods of the mountains can communicate themselves through a camera lens. There are the still mornings with an indigo sky above, cloudless save for the wisps of grey clinging to a precipice, hangovers from the night before. As the sun climbs high the valleys become airless, and Base Camp is hemmed in and irritating: higher up, on a summit day, one climbs blissfully in shirtsleeves, heedless of the burns that will surely follow. But a too-calm beginning to the day bodes ill for the afternoon. How often, between Base Camp and a High Camp, we slogged all morning beneath a sun which sapped our wills and softened the snow, camped early with exhaustion, to watch a fleet of broody

galleons come racing from Tibetside, bringing with them the anger of the Gods. And who can forget their anger in the mountains? Lightning hurls itself against the defenceless ridges, and the thunder is half-drowned in the roar of a loosened snow face and the crash of a stone-fall. Our tiny tents, perched uneasily on a ridge or huddling beneath an overhang, seemed fragile and lonely in this chaos of noise and demolition. Even a Himalayan storm will end, however, and then there comes the white covering to heal the scars. And when the snow ceases, perhaps at last light, there is an absolute silence while the world recovers. The mountains are too exhausted for further protest, the growl of the avalanche and the groan of the ice are stilled. The aftermath of such a storm, in the glow of evening, is utterly beautiful. There in the distance a white summit tipped with gold brings promise of a sun tomorrow. Little wonder that Gods live atop mountains—where else could they be?

In contrast, one's lasting impression of the Spiti Valley might easily be the extraordinary barrenness of the scenery, or the primitive conditions which have not changed in a millennium, or even the smell, Gompa No. 5, which pervades every house and every person. Much more important, however, was the friendly hospitality with which the Pitoons greeted us wherever we went. They possess a gaiety which is rare indeed today. Alas, if the Indians have their way all this may change.

The Central Government at Delhi made great plans for Spiti. They envisaged a general uplifting of the Pitoon from his centuries-old way of life to a modern and more productive existence. Their plans were based on six concepts: Education, Health, Agriculture, Law, Frontier Security and Communications.

Education was entrusted to the Schoolmaster; he was to begin with the six- and seven-year-olds, teaching them through the years right up to High School level. Other schoolmasters would follow to extend this teaching throughout Spiti. In no time at all Spiti would be assured of an educated citizenry.

The health of the Pitoons was to be improved by an itinerant

doctor who would travel from village to village during the summer months. Eventually the hereditary diseases which are rife in Spiti would disappear and the Pitoons would become healthier and more energetic.

The improvement of Spiti agriculture was to be the task of the Agricultural Inspector. It was known that only 0·1 per cent of the ground in Spiti was cultivated, and though the greater part of the province would have to be written off because of its mountainous nature, the planners saw no reason why the whole of the valley plateau could not be utilised with proper irrigation.

Law as Delhi knew it would replace the Nono's archaic brand of justice; it would be supervised by a Frontier Police Station at Kaja throughout the year, and during the summer months a visiting magistrate would administer it. The Nono would not be deprived of all his jurisdiction overnight, but by his appointment to a Third Class Magistracy Honorary he would be left with only the most petty offenders. At the same time these border police would patrol the frontier between India and Tibet, keeping out unwanted foreigners and keeping in the Pitoons.

Finally a jeep track would be built from Manali, over the Rohtang La, up the Chandra Valley, over the Kunzum La and down the Spiti Valley to the frontier. An ambitious plan indeed.

The motives behind this grandiose project for the development of Spiti were fourfold. There was the undoubted desire to help a backward community develop its resources and improve its condition. There was the motive of security, both from the battleground of Kashmir to the north and from the eastern neighbour Tibet.

The fear that the Pitoons might look to Tibet rather than to India as their patria led the Indian Government to seek closer political and economic ties with Spiti. For the fear is a very real one. The Pitoons are Tibetan in race and religion, in culture and eustom, in geography and climate.

The last of Delhi's motives for helping Spiti was one of sheer competition. The Chinese across the border are building roads the length and breadth of Tibet. The romance of the road to

Lhasa will shortly join the fable of 'The Golden Road to Samarkand'. Schools are being opened in the provincial capitals, vehicles and manufactured goods are seeping through the country, there is even talk of building aerodromes. Perhaps the legendary Tibetan Air Force will come into being at last! With the Chinese doing so much 'good' so near at hand, the Indian Government undoubtedly feels compelled to follow suit. 'Keeping up with the Joneses' covers the situation exactly. The fact that the Pitoons would so obviously prefer to remain as they are enters into it not at all.

The Schoolmaster, forerunner of 'Indianisation', duly arrived in Spiti. Everywhere he found difficulties. He was allotted a tiny room in a broken-down house. The adults were hostile, the Village Council ignored him. The children worked in the fields in summer, in winter they refused to leave the warmth of their homes for the draughts of the schoolroom. Had it not been for Shiring he would have given up altogether.

When we first met the Itinerant Doctor Judy asked him what he did. "I distribute petroleum jelly and goodwill," he answered with a smile, "and there is little else I can do." Not a single Pitoon would allow him to look beneath his greasy smock. The D.D.T. which he attempted to dispense was met with contempt. His talks on hygiene only served to amuse the Pitoons. What would they cook on if they had no dung? As for washing, why eliminate the very greases which he was doling out. This last was unanswerable and the Doctor retired to the Police Station at Kaja, awaiting the coming of autumn and his release from Spiti.

The agriculture Inspector arrived full of enthusiasm, but two months were sufficient for him to write a most pessimistic report on Spiti's agricultural future. When we asked him why his plans for Spiti fell so far short of his original hopes, he replied that if he put in a favourable report he might well be the one chosen to implement his proposals. Fussy, scientifically minded and very-up-to-date, he had been shocked by everything he had seen. The ploughs were little more than sharp stones with a wooden handle insecurely attached. Crop rotation was unknown.

The Pitoon apparently did not use the grade of wheat his agricultural college had laid down for that particular type of soil. Why there was not continual starvation in Spiti was a mystery to him.

The proposed jeep track from Manali to the frontier, were it possible, would more than anything serve to establish a lasting bond between India and Spiti. But it is almost certainly a too ambitious scheme. When we first walked into Spiti the project seemed well on its way to completion. A year later, of the thirty miles of jeep track, so laboriously hewn out of the mountain-side, barely a trace could be seen. Winter had done its devastating worst.

What have been the effects of Indianisation on the Pitoons, of civilisation coming to a backward community? Civilisation has taken a bad drubbing. The Pitoons were simply too much for it. The schooling, the colleges, the healthier conditions, the enlightened agriculture, indeed the enlightened people, all these hopes have been dashed. True, the Nono has been divested of his authority, and his Council is powerless. True also that an attempt is being made to guard the frontier against infiltration. But while warlords and politicians in Peking and Delhi may talk of 'closed frontiers' and 'watertight security precautions', the Pitoon comes and goes just as he has for centuries. As well try to stop the winds blowing across the frontiers. He needs tea and salt, and Tibet is the nearest place to get them. Thither he goes.

The best hope for Spiti to progress—though not, one hopes, towards Indianisation, a concept as ugly as the word—seems to lie with one such as Shiring Dawa. If he is adequately trained, now, before he is any older, there is no saying what changes he might accomplish for the good of his people, with the benevolent support of Delhi. He alone among the Pitoons has the ability to cope with the advances which must surely come one day.

There is a Tibetan saying which warns of the strife and unhappiness which comes with the foreigner. Modern ways are seldom conducive to peace. But with Shiring to show the way there would be a hope that the contagious happiness which characterises the Pitoon of today, and which we were lucky enough to experience, would not be lost.

APPENDIX A

The Tibetan Year Cycle

THE TIBETAN CALENDAR IS BASED ON A SIXTY-YEAR CYCLE. EACH year is indicated by twelve animals and five elements in various combinations. The present cycle began in 1927. Here it is:

1927, the Year of the Fire Hare
1928, the Year of the Earth Dragon
1929, the Year of the Earth Serpent
1930, the Year of the Iron Horse
1931, the Year of the Iron Sheep
1932, the Year of the Water Ape
1933, the Year of the Water Bird
1934, the Year of the Wood Dog
1935, the Year of the Wood Hog
1936, the Year of the Fire Mouse
1937, the Year of the Fire Ox
1938, the Year of the Earth Tiger
1939, the Year of the Earth Hare
1940, the Year of the Iron Dragon
1941, the Year of the Iron Serpent
1942, the Year of the Water Horse
1943, the Year of the Water Sheep
1944, the Year of the Wood Ape
1945, the Year of the Wood Bird
1946, the Year of the Fire Dog
1947, the Year of the Fire Hog
1948, the Year of the Earth Mouse
1949, the Year of the Earth Ox
1950, the Year of the Iron Tiger
1951, the Year of the Iron Hare
1952, the Year of the Water Dragon
1953, the Year of the Water Serpent
1954, the Year of the Wood Horse
1955, the Year of the Wood Sheep
1956, the Year of the Fire Ape
1957, the Year of the Fire Bird
1958, the Year of the Earth Dog
1959, the Year of the Iron Mouse
and so on.

APPENDIX B

Finance

THE HEAVIEST SINGLE EXPENSE FOR BRITISH CLIMBERS GOING TO the Himalayas is, inevitably, getting there, and then back again. Below is shown the cost of both our Expeditions: in 1955 six of us, five from England and one from India, spent five weeks in the hills; in 1956 four of us, three from England and one from India, spent ten weeks.

Anyone intending to organise an Expedition to the Indian Himalayas should bear a few points in mind. A large deposit is usually demanded by the Indian Customs Authorities on all equipment that is imported for subsequent re-exportation: duty must be paid on any equipment which is lost, sold or otherwise not re-exported. So unless one is careful gifts to porters and others can be very expensive. A high rate of duty must be paid on all food that is taken into India, even though it is to be consumed by Expedition members. Accommodation in India *en route* to the mountains is, in the cities, invariably expensive; beg, badger or bribe rather than stay at a hotel. On the other hand there are always cheap rest houses in the country. Ponies are better than coolies, as they carry much more for the same price, and are less temperamental. Where ponies are not available proportionately more must be allowed.

Prices are always rising, but even today a rule-of-the-thumb estimation for the entire cost of an Expedition should not come to more than £500 per head.

These are the details:

	1955 £	*1956* £
Travel, by rail, sea, air and bus	1056	593
Equipment	220	215
Accommodation in India	50	42

APPENDIX B

	1955	1956
	£	£
Ponies	220	90
Coolies	10	37
Porters	60	108
Food	390	260
Customs Duty	90	50
Medicine	40	27
Tips and presents	25	30
Shipping	65	50
Miscellaneous (insurance, postage, cables, etc.)	45	65
Photography (excluding equipment)	140	100
	£2411	£1667

APPENDIX C

Food

WE BASED OUR FOOD SUPPLIES ON THE FAMOUS DICTUM OF THE late Tom Bourdillon 'that there should be some'. The list is self-explanatory when it is remembered that we went to an area where the only local food available was an occasional scraggy sheep. In other parts of the Himalaya the list could be considerably shortened. To all intents and purposes we had to be self-sufficient for the ten weeks we were away from Manali. The quantities would have been exactly right, apart from a small surplus of sugar, had we not encountered unexpected difficulties on our return over the Divide.

Any Expedition should ensure that ample quantities of sugar, condensed milk and meat are on hand. Allow at least 4 oz. of sugar per man per day, and then some. Any surplus will be welcome as a gift to the locals. Next in importance are the liquids, and here variety is the keynote. In a hot area such as Spiti, where temperatures are over 100° F. almost daily, it is impossible to take too much lemonade powder. These vary a good deal in quality from one manufacturer to another; one of the best lemonade powders is made by Three Cooks of Reading. Mint cake is the one essential luxury. The rest is up to individual preference. Those going to a cold climate might take a little more than we did.

This is our list: it covers 260 man days (4 × 65). We ate well.

160 lb.	granulated sugar
20	assorted jams
5	pure honey
10	marmalade
12	assorted sweets
24	dried fruit
25	dried milk
15	spaghetti
8 lb.	small raisins
5	dates
2	dried banana bars
24	porridge
18	fruit cake
20	assorted biscuits
9	drinking chocolate
3	Bovril

4 lb.	coffee	12 lb.	sausages and baked beans
36	tinned meats	7	dried vegetables
10	cooking fat	3	salt
5	bacon	3	peanut butter
3	mixed nuts	12	Vita-weat
20	tinned vegetables	20	processed cheese
12	sardines	4	oatmeal blocks
10	tinned butter	5	Indian tea
84	ata	35	condensed milk (in 2-oz. tubes)
20	rice	10	soup (in 2-oz. packets)
5	herbs, curry, sauces, etc.	18	bread and scone mixes
24	mint cake	15	lemonade powder
15	custard powder	6	assorted liquids
8	butter		

This gives a total of 766 lb., or just under 3 lb. per person per day. In addition we ate three sheep and two goats.

APPENDIX D

Photography

THE SELECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC EQUIPMENT IS ALWAYS DIFFICULT for the mountain traveller. And among mountaineers there is an endless controversy as to the best size of camera to climb with. Basically the problem is to find a compromise between the advantages of a small camera and a large negative.

The miniature camera has become very fashionable, especially since the war, and to my mind it is a great pity. Its advantages are too well advertised to bear repetition: ease of handling, its small size and weight, its wide range of interchangeable lenses, many of them very fast, and the comparative infrequency of film-changing are among them. Against all these pros there is but a single con: the size of the negative. The 35-mm. negative is simply too small. All too often the rewind cassette leads to hideous scratches, and even minute abrasions, acceptable on a larger format, become yawning gashes under quite moderate enlargement. A 35-mm. negative has to be very good indeed to stand severe enlargement. Again, the subject must fill the format; and there are a complete series of lenses to make this possible. Yet how often does one find a completely new photograph in the darkroom in some corner of the negative. With the 35-mm. negative this is lost.

At the same time no one, least of all a climber, wants to carry more camera weight than he must. For all practical purposes large slide cameras—10 × 8 in., 5 × 4 in. and the like—must be ruled out for Himalayan work. A few enthusiasts will disagree. Given time and transport, they are right. The Grandmaster of us all, Signor Vittorio Sella, used extremely cumbersome equipment to record his masterpieces. But most mountain travellers will find two hundred-weight and more of camera too much.

One is left with the $3\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ in. and the $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. square sizes. Both are excellent. The $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. square negative—more than four

times the size of the miniature negative—will stand up to the most severe enlarging, and the slightly larger $3\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ in. is even better. The lenses are not as fast, but with outdoor mountain work that matters not in the least. The bulk and weight are increased, but the additional burden is well worth while. Some photographers find it difficult to compose on a square format, but I for one often leave the 'shape composition' to the darkroom.

'What of colour' the miniature enthusiast exclaims. Here he has a much better case. Colour films are notoriously slow, and that extra stop or two on a miniature lens can make all the difference in poor light. And certainly I would agree that a square format is wasteful with colour. A square transparency nearly always needs 'shaping'. The only argument against a 35-mm. transparency is the blockmaker's reluctance to work with it. If the transparencies are intended only for lecturing and home purposes then no better medium exists.

I have often asked myself whether it is worthwhile taking colour above the snowline. To date there is no colour film capable of recording adequately the extremes of light and dark shadow at 20,000 feet. Either the skin is too dark or the sky too blue. Filling in with flash is an answer, but one that not many could be bothered with at that altitude. Snowscapes are perfectly feasible, of course, and at sunset wonderful results may be achieved. During the day one often stops down to $\frac{1}{50}$th at f. 11, and this on slow colour film! If there is a great deal of rock and scree in a snow picture they can be turned from a dull black or brown to an interesting purple tinge by omitting to use the ultra-violet filter. But for all normal pictures above 10,000 feet a U.V. filter should be used, for the purple tinge gives a very unreal effect. Black and white film has more than enough latitude to cope with the extremes of light. At high altitudes it is unnecessary to use more than a light yellow filter, for the sky is quite dark enough already. One last point about high-altitude photography. Whenever possible one should use a firm tripod securely placed on rock (not snow!); with laboured breathing it is almost impossible to have a really steady hand.

The only other problem I encountered was at Kee Monastery. The temples were pitch black. My light meter was useless. With the narrow latitude of colour film I had to hit the right exposure exactly. What to give? I guessed with a single flash (P.F. 25) and f. 2 at 12 feet, and the results were excellent. It was good luck rather than good judgement. The most important shots I bracketed to ensure some kind of result, but it proved unnecessary.

I took the following equipment with me.

For Black and White

1—Rolleiflex with 3·5 Tessar Lens, case and lens hood.
1—Rolleicord with 3·5 Xenar Lens, case and lens hood.
1—Flashgun.
1—Pan head.
Both sets of Rolleinar and par lenses.
6—filters (light yellow, deep yellow, light red, deep red, green and ultra violet).

For Colour

1—Leica M3 with 5-cm. Summicron f. 2·0 lens, with case.
1—13·5-cm. Hektor 4·5 lens, with case.
2—lens hoods.
2—ultra-violet filters.
1—flashgun.

General

1—6 lb. Linhof Tripod with a ciné pan head.
1—spirit level for panoramas.
3—lens brushes.
1—chamois leather cloth.
1—small screwdriver.

Film, etc.

30—cassettes of Daylight Kodakchrome (36 exposures per reel) for 35-mm. colour work.
140—reels of 120 F.P. 3 for general work.

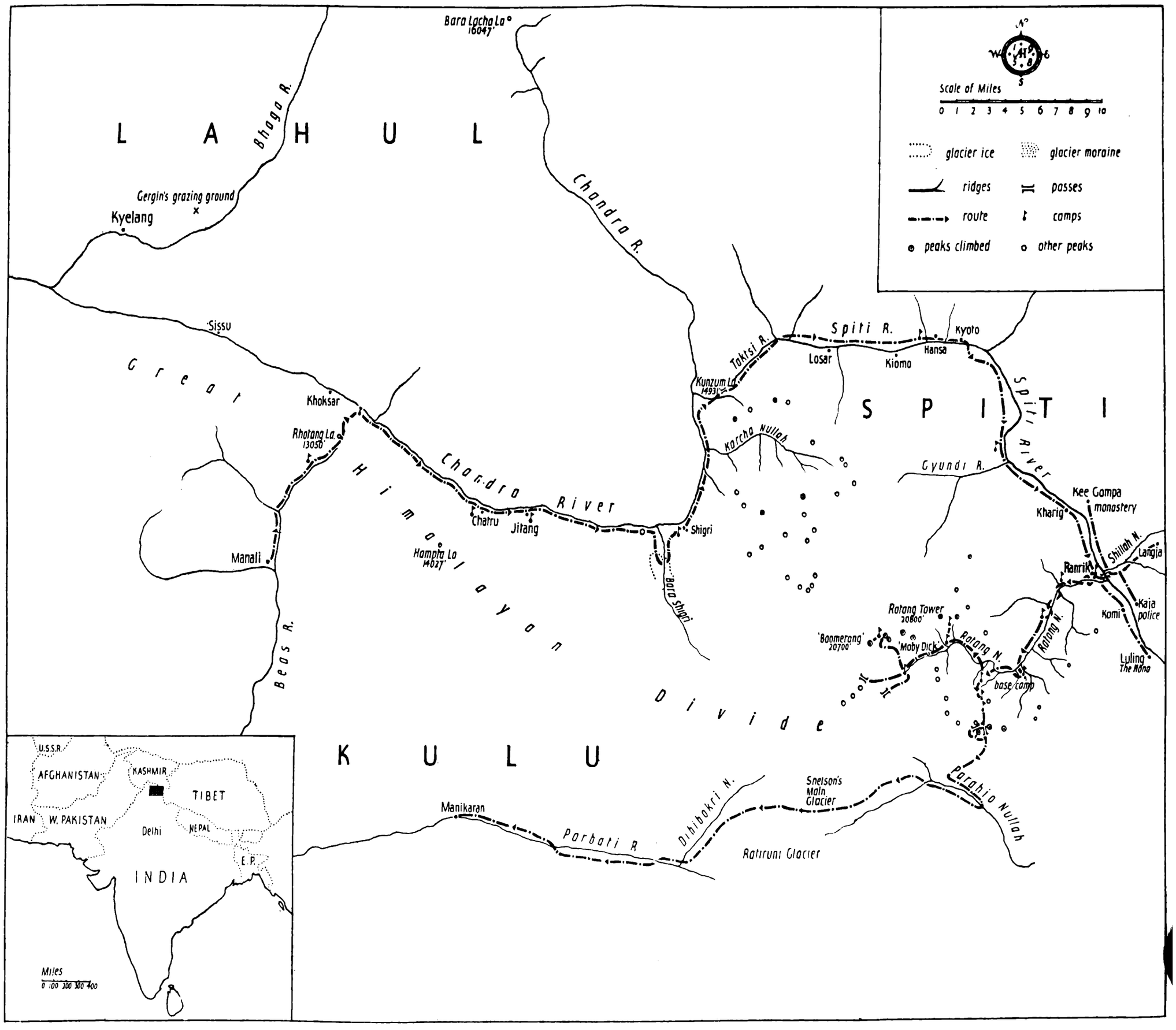
10—reels of 120 H.P.S. for emergencies.
200—P.F. 25 yellow flashbulbs.
250—P.F. 25 blue flashbulbs.

I took the second Rollei in case anything drastic happened to my Rolleiflex. But barring a fall, nothing is likely to go wrong with these wonderful cameras.

If I go again I would add a wide-angle lens to the Leica (possibly a Japanese lens for its speed); this is essential for any kind of indoor work.

And if sufficient funds and space are available I would take a 5 × 4 in. plate-camera for colour, to placate the block-makers.

'ITI, LAHUL
AND KULU



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