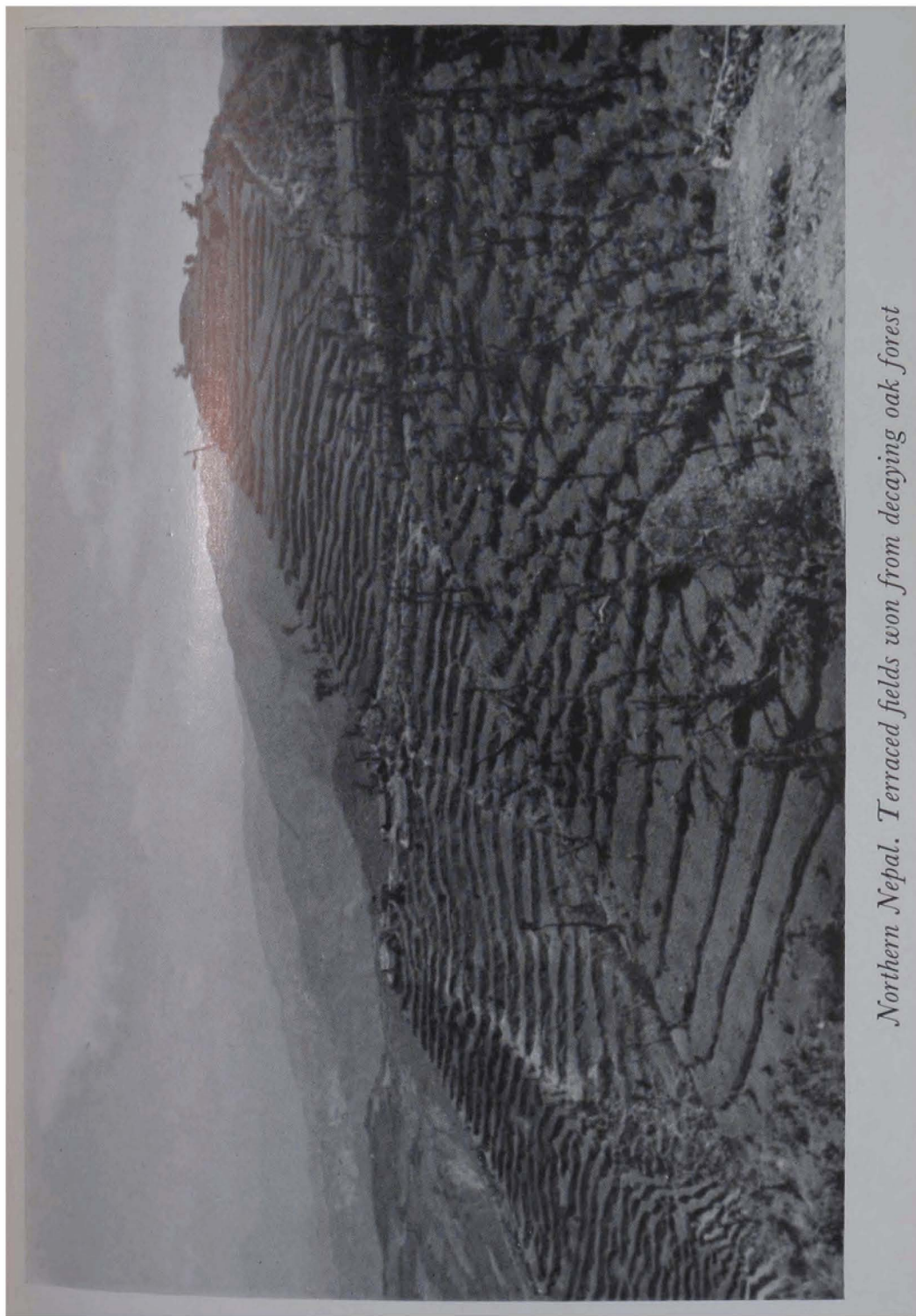


TO THE GOSAINKUND

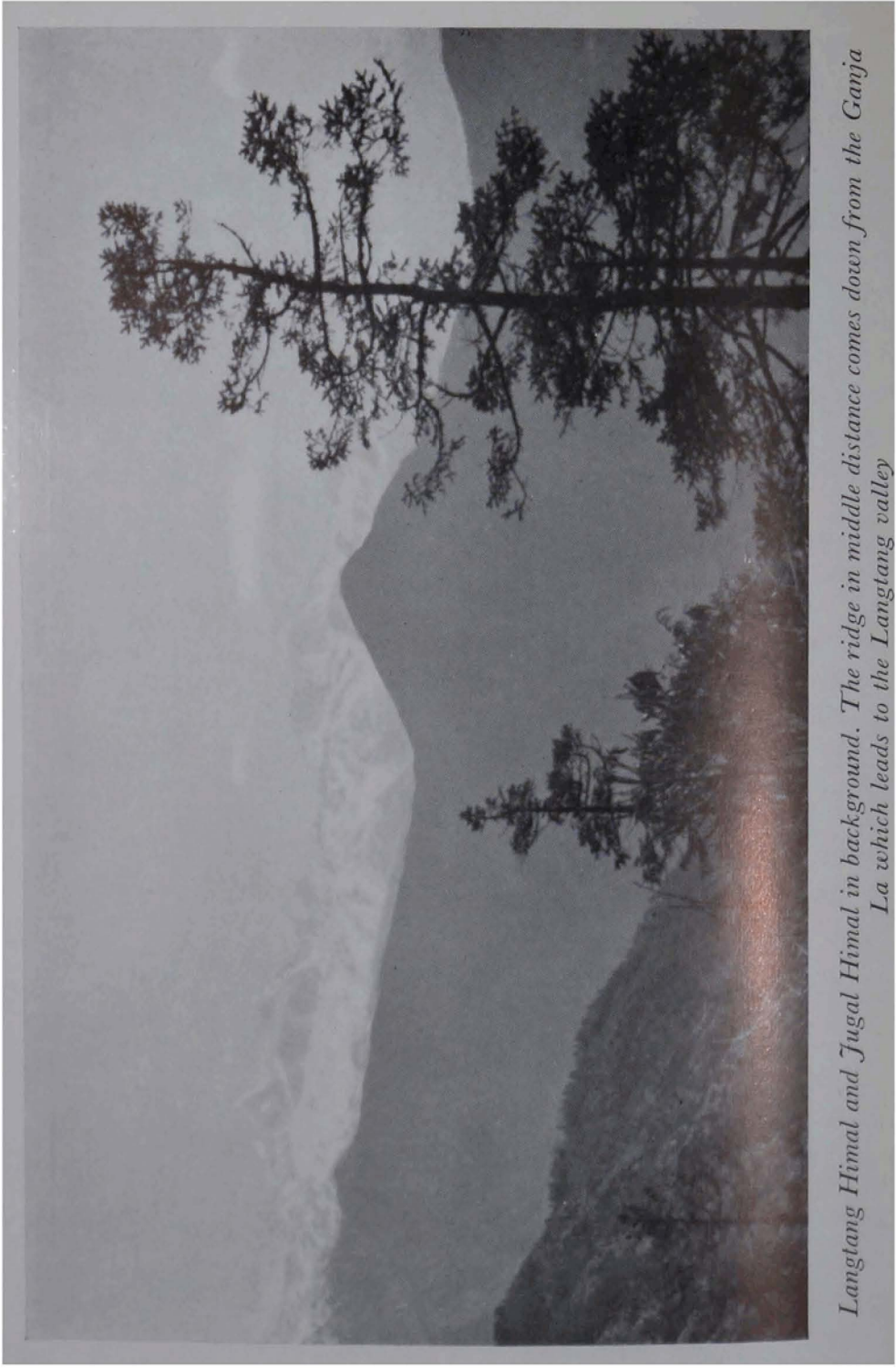
ELLA MAILLART

AT the beginning of April 1951 I landed on the airfield at Khatmandu with the intention of studying some remote Nepalese village as near as possible to the tree-line: its daily activities would in many ways be similar to those of my Swiss village (the second highest in Europe), where the tiny fields are poor and a mere survival exacts much work from the inhabitants. An interesting parallel could be drawn.

Fear of leeches made me choose the season before the monsoon; for my Kodachrome film I also wanted the spring, when the rhododendrons are in bloom. I did not foresee that in March and April the blue sky is often marred by the heat-haze rising from India, affecting the light and spoiling the view. The valley of Muktinath, visited by both French and English, offered me good possibilities, among them girls in colourful costumes. It would take fifteen days to reach that part of Nepal, but I had hardly given my letters of introduction to the Maharajah Prime Minister when troubles upset the capital. The Prime Minister lost most of his power and the few Englishmen living in Khatmandu thought I had only a faint chance of doing as I wished. The Nepalese I met were charming and I knew they would not wish to disappoint me by barring my journey into the mountains—I was told that my entrance visa would have been withdrawn altogether had I not chanced to arrive five hours before the trouble began. The situation remained uncertain, and then my fate fell into the hands of the Home Minister of the Congress party, opposed to the Maharajah's party of the Ranas, or princes: with a sad heart I studied my map, and in order to try and please everybody and everybody I chose the smallest possible tour, to the north-west, in the valley nearest to Khatmandu, and I dismissed the Sherpa I had brought from Darjeeling, since I could never now attain the Tibetan border. I proposed to follow a long ridge to Saone Mani—Mani, meaning 'Jewel', is one of the words in the main Tibetan prayer; used geographically it indicates a Buddhist monument—and from 12,000 feet to drop down some 400 feet to Malemchi and eastwards across the valley to Tarkhe Gyang, two villages on the upper course of the Indravati river, a branch of the great Sun Kosi. Bill Tilman had touched Tarkhe Gyang on his way back from Langtang over the Ganja La in the autumn of 1949. Being over 18,000 feet, the Ganja La is used only in August and September. I intended to climb to the foot of it and, camping there, wait till a clear sky allowed me to film some snow mountains.



Northern Nepal. Terraced fields won from decaying oak forest



*Langtang Himal and Jugal Himal in background. The ridge in middle distance comes down from the Ganja
La which leads to the Langtang valley*

Colonel and Mrs. Proud of the British Embassy were most helpful to a newcomer and gave me details of the track to Saone Mani, and the rest I gathered from the Lama of Bodhnath at the most important Tibetan shrine outside Tibet. This charming and lively man speaks an English of his own; he spends his summers in the tiny hermitage above Malemchi which belongs to him. It looked as though my expedition were to be a mere excursion, devoid of the responsibility of crampons, rope, and ice-axe. Later, when I altered some of my plans, I ended by visiting the sacred Gosainkund, the 'Lake of the Religious', beyond a pass (which seems to be 16,770 feet high) to the north of Saone Mani. The few classical books of Nepal mention this lake: I am probably the first European to have been there, which is why I commit it to paper. Nepalese officials are most orthodox Hindus and they had never allowed foreigners to join the Shiva-ite pilgrimage to the Gosainkund. I did not ask for a permit; indeed, I went there unintentionally, so to speak, when the lake was hidden under an august armour of ice and snow. It was a very interesting tour, especially now that I have forgotten the mad trace of the path that led me up and up only to go down and down—more than once I thought the main result of mountaineering is to make you appreciate your evening cup of tea! Ponies are useless in these mountains—men transport everything for the long caravans one meets, even carrying the old and voluminous, often in slippery gullies with precarious foothold.

I took with me a small tent, a good sleeping-bag, a pneumatic mattress, a petrol primus, a rucksack with three cameras, 30 lb. of Kodachrome 16-mm. film—in all two coolie loads including my big bamboo basket with my cooking-pan, mug, and provisions. These were all bought when at last I was able to set off accompanied by Lieutenant Malla, the best possible interpreter, lent to me by the Army for three weeks, as the Government had not approved my idea of travelling with the Lama of Bodhnath. Milk, eggs, butter, and *tsamba* could be bought on the way; I went to the bazaar for tea, dried apricots, raisins, nuts, rice, and *churia* or local rice-flakes, most useful as a ready meal. My bill came to about £1 sterling—Mrs. Proud presented me with sugar. And then at last we started, with only the weather to worry about, for every day storms were blackening the hills around the valley.

Lieutenant Malla was accompanied by three men—orderly, sergeant, and cook; his army equipment was heavy and he needed five coolies altogether. To the eyes of the Nepalese who saw us he was the 'Sahib' sitting at ease on his spotless camp-bed, under his big double-fly tent, waiting to be served with dinner, while I squatted in my tiny tent, crying over peeled onions, pumping my mattress or cleaning my frying-pan. I had surprised everyone by turning up on a hired

bicycle even when I called on the Maharajah—and I got much fun out of joking with Malla and telling him the new government was going to introduce democracy and considered I was well qualified to demonstrate the inelegant ways to which I was accustomed in the West.

But let us start. I was driven in style in the station-wagon belonging to the British Embassy to the foot of the hills at Sundari Jol, Khatmandu's water-works. Our seven coolies were there, and we began the steep climb to the Shoepuri ridge through tiers of tiny terraced fields, sown with maize and potatoes, the wheat having been harvested. We met many villagers taking goats or kids to the capital, carrying planks, charcoal, bamboo baskets, medicinal plants, or paper made with the bark of the daphne. Bare-legged men with powerful muscles in their hairless calves and thighs, and girls of the Tamang tribe with ample skirts and red necklaces, and coolies like the moving forest in Macbeth—carrying bundles of green foliage for their buffaloes. Next day the panorama was unforgettable: Ganesh Himal to the west, the Langtang peaks and Gosainkund Lekh barring the northern sky and the range of Jugal Himal spreading out in the east confronted me. We followed the ridge to Pati Banjang where our north-south track crossed an east-west path on a narrow saddle, and then on to Gul Phu, where the coolies found shelter from storm in the hamlet and Malla bought a chunk of deer.

The third day's climb was steep, among terraced fields over an area of dying oak forest—tall and stripped bare, the gnarled trunks looked desperate, praying to the sky. Higher up the forest was still alive and more healthy, although the trees looked pathetic with most of their branches cut off. There I saw for the first time a pale-green flower with a cobra-like head which Malla called *banko*, and also a bush with clusters of dark-blue berries, the sour-sweet *jun madro*, or cherries, of the Khumba Sherpas. At Pati Banjang we had been offered *kaphul*, a dark-red fruit like a small strawberry but with a blue stone—*myrica nagi*, a relation of the sweet gale, or bayberry. We came across our first shepherds, camping under tunnel-shaped bamboo mats. One woman sat weaving while we drank our curds. Just above their tiny camp we could see the beginning of the rhododendron forest, where the white blossom was already fading. The coolies were going slowly, and we decided to camp early in the hollow of Karka Banjang. Among flowering bushes of purple rhododendron I camped on a small crest, my tent facing the Himalaya; and near by a tiny kingfisher-blue bird sat on a blood-red cluster of rhododendron—a perfect camp, especially next morning, when the snow mountains were clearly seen, not so far from our ridge.

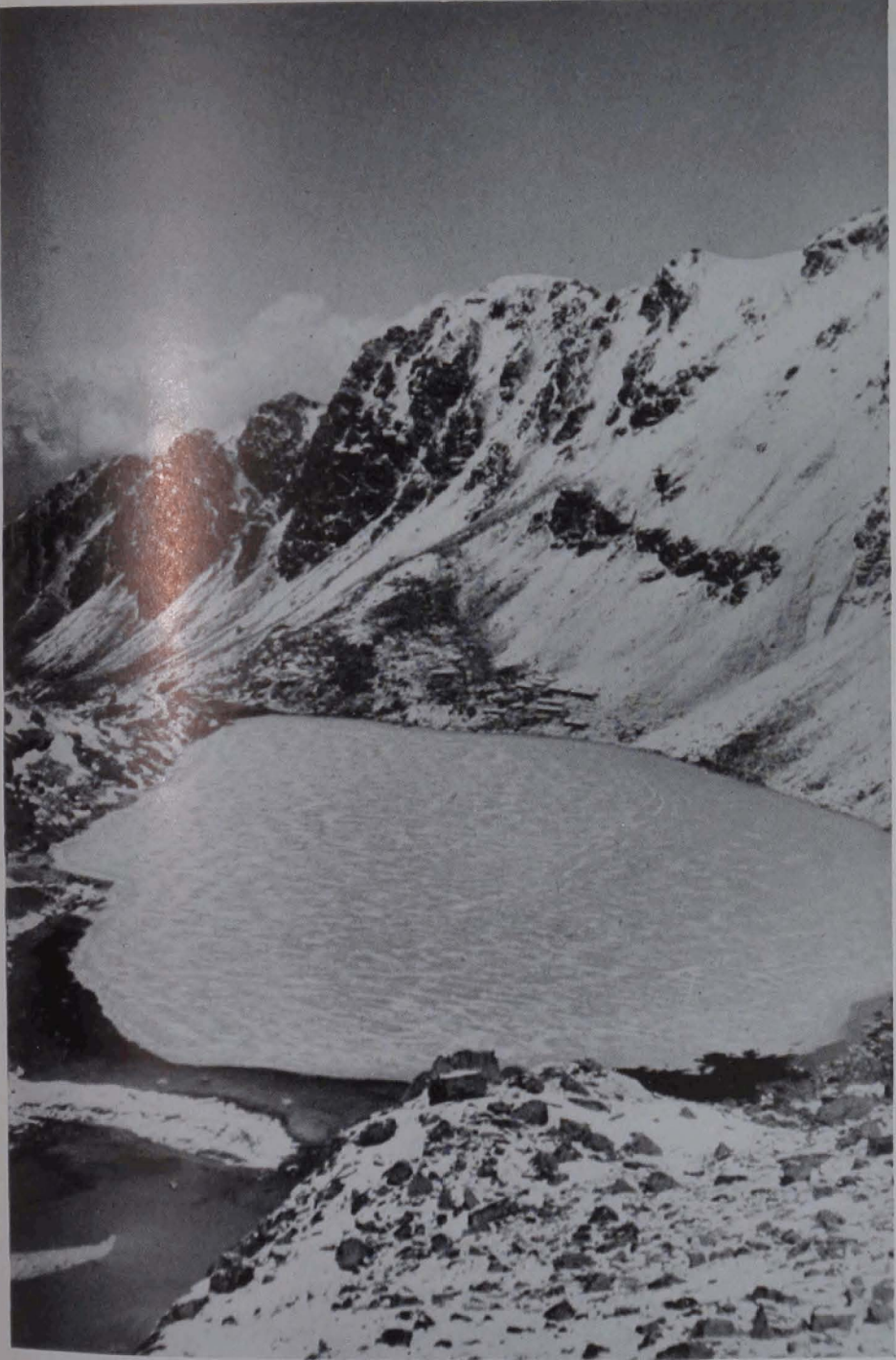
By midday on the fourth day we had reached Saone Mani, 12,000 feet, a chorten on a small, level part of our knife-edged hill, decorated with engravings of 'Om Mani Padme Hum'. It was such a magnificent spot, and the air was so bracing and the proximity of snow mountains so exhilarating that I decided to postpone our descent into the abrupt Malemchi valley, and in the afternoon, with a wild, free wind, Malla and I went higher on our ridge, following a giant's causeway leading to a pyramid of turf. A wild goat looked at us curiously, pheasants rocketed down, we found young bamboo shoots, dwarf junipers, and budding rhododendron bushes growing in sheltered places. Enchanted by our narrow mountain and its wildness, I planned to follow it to the north next day. As far as I could remember from the wall-map studies at the Embassy, the pilgrims' way to the Gosainkund followed our ridge to a pass leading into the remote valley of the marvellous lake. To the south-west, tiny among a few terraced fields, I saw Tarkhe Gyang, the only inhabited spot I could detect in the big valley at our feet. Malemchi was too directly below us to be visible. Above Tarkhe I saw the whole length of the ridge parallel to ours leading up to Tilman's Ganja La—it looked rather tiresome. Why go so far to look for the snow scenes I wanted for my film? I might find them nearer and thus avoid a wearisome climb.

Next day, leaving the cook to look after the camp, we followed a path, deserted at that season, along the top of our narrow hill while moving mist filled our valleys on both sides. Reaching a coomb facing north-west and finding a few stone shelters, we knew we had arrived at Thare Pati; on the ground, barely freed from the snow, tiny potentilla plants looked crushed and dead. We hoped the midday sun would absorb the mist and pushed on. The track was pleasant enough, though now and then it crossed snow-gullies on the north-west slope. Malla enjoyed the snow as much as I did, but Dan-mare, his orderly, had never walked on it and was most careful, even distrustful. Later the snow grew thicker, the slope more precipitous, and the track vanished; far away and below we had glimpses of a path descending to the north-west into a deep and rocky horse-shoe valley. Malla thought that might be the pilgrims' way, but in case we had left it on the other side on top of the ridge we climbed up to be sure, on all fours most of the way. There was no way to any pass up there, but rising above the snow I found the *soon-doope*, a dwarf rhododendron, still brown and dead, but full of an enchanting fragrance. It is used for making incense sticks.

We turned back, intending to explore the north-west gorge next day, but on our return to Saone Mani we found that our new coolies, four girls among them, had come without food, and perforce we had

to start at once for Malemchi. The headman had sent us Topgi, a smiling Sherpa carrying a muzzle-loader. Unlike the bare-legged mountaineers he wore Khatmandu trousers, tight below the knee and wide above, and he carried his town-shoes in his hand—no doubt he had intended to create a good impression, but a huge blister on his heel had forced him to walk barefoot as usual. In the winter Topgi was a hunter of deer, foxes, hares, pheasants. Under his guidance we visited the two villages of that upper Malemchi valley, at 8,000 feet. Even the poorest houses brighten their façades of dry stone by wood-carvings on the three traditional windows, and the shelves and panels of their living-rooms are always decorated with carvings. The Buddhist shrine occupies the main corner by the window, above the low, hard bed-alcove covered with a bright carpet from Lhasa. (This room is on the first floor, the ground-floor is always the stable.) A new guest is at once offered a bowl of the local beer, or *rakshi*, the home-made alcoholic drink, while fresh Tibetan tea is churned with butter in a large bamboo-tube; the open fire is laid on a hollow stone in one corner of the room, and above it chunks of meat hang to be smoked. Karmu, a handsome lass, is preparing an appetising potato-curry. While trying to find out how cheese was made I was surprised to find that the cattle, a cross between zebu and yak, roved the steep forest, and at night were tethered behind thorny hedges to protect them from prowling leopards. The rare pasture-grounds high on the tops of the ridges were not yet covered with grass for them. A clarified butter is produced from curds and after churning a white cheese called *siri* is made: I remembered that in Valais we call that same cheese *sere* or *serac*. Related to the Tibetan, the language of the Sherpa is full of strange sounds. The religion is also similar to the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet. In Nepal rich men can have two wives, like the kings of that country; it was the second, most matronly wife of the Bodnath Lama that I saw being carried on a man's back up and down a slippery and precipitous path.

We visited the sister of our Sherpa in the village of Tarkhe Gyang (Gyang means 'temple'), crossing the upper course of the Indravati river by a bridge of tree-trunks. Ploughing was in operation in the narrow fields where the rye had been harvested, and on a hard-trodden shelf of earth at the entrance to the village a big beam was rhythmically threshing the grain, two men standing on it to use it as a lever. We camped on the wide verandas of the temple to see as much as possible of village life, and there I slept by the side of a 10-foot high prayer-wheel where a tiny butter-lamp burned all through the night: whether to turn the wheel or to look at the first European woman in Tarkhe, most of the villagers came to fill my



Gosainkund sacred lake

room, and much reciprocal staring took place! Later I was invited to visit a number of homes and I soon found myself distributing medicines against malaria, bronchitis, dysentery, and inflamed eyes, for which I was given rice, flour, and eggs in exchange. I was surprised by the cleanliness of well-to-do families, the latrines at the end of every balcony cleansed by ashes, the homespun weaving of Lakpuri our hostess, the natural dignity of many of the women, and the fact that there were nine nuns living in the village. Lamas and necromancers being much in demand in Tibet and Nepal, religious life is part of everyday life, and the villagers often call on the few anchorites who live in their cells high above the village; one of them remained invisible, having shut himself up for three years, three months, and three days, his son bringing him his daily food.

In front of every house stands a mast with a prayer-flag on it, and many shrines and cairns are decorated with the engraved Buddhist prayers. The village headman, No Babu Lama, was unwilling to organize a devil's dance for me, but I was interested to witness the funeral rites performed for the soul of a man who had died just a year before. All day his male relations, the lamas, and the *phumbo* or magician read aloud from the prayer-books accompanied by drum, gong, and cymbal and trumpets of the temple—including the shrill sound of the human thigh-bone, supposed to have power over the demons: wife and son of the dead man were most serious—the efficacy of prayer depends on the attitude of all those who are praying. It was not until late in the evening, when many little butter-lamps were burning in the grand room, that the reading of the prayers was completed, during which time the widow had given a banquet to most of the villagers, the women being served apart. I watched the many courses with impatience—as soon as it was over the villagers had agreed to show me their ring-dance, usually performed at night, and in vain had I tried to make them start earlier so that I could film them in daylight, Topgi even adding ten rupees' worth of spirits to the general supply, but the sun was well below the western ridge when they started their complicated shuffling, accompanied by the repeated refrain '*Sseu! Phombo . . . Sseu!*' Afterwards, before leaving the village, I pushed open the doors of the dark temple-hall to see for the last time the red and gold lacquer of the carvings on the thick, square pillars, the painted banners hanging from the ceiling, moving slightly in the air scented by the burning butter-lamp, and the frescoes depicting the Buddhist pantheon on the old walls.

Filled by desire to see more of the main Himalayan range I climbed back to the 14,000-foot Thare Pati through a fairy-tale, unspoilt forest. My aim was to reach the sacred lake, where the

god Shiva had struck the rock with his trident and the water issuing from the three springs calmed the fever he had acquired from drinking the Poison of the Universe. The coolies could not come far through snow, with no fuel and no huts on the way; Topgi knew the path well—he always took that way when fetching sheep from Kyirong in Tibet. I lent him socks and snow-goggles and the orderly lent him shoes; only one coolie was needed to carry food, blankets, and my tiny tent. They would sleep under the rock at the foot of the pass.

As we left the main camp a thick mist settled down on our world and we tumbled down the side of the mountain where we had stopped before. In every gully we disturbed a couple of pheasants and we saw many traces of musk-deer. I shall never forget the nine successive ridges we had to climb and descend again before we reached the bottom of the gorge. It was then midday, and we cooked some rice, while the mist turned into rain, hail, thunder, and snow; by five o'clock I gave up and pitched my tent, while the three men crouched sadly under their rock, burning tree-trunks, too depressed to prepare supper—as I learnt next day—while my primus cooked soup, eggs, and Ovaltine in the cosy tent; to be able to sit cross-legged for hours on end is the greatest blessing in camp life!

Next morning Topgi and I took three hours to reach the pass, after leaving the small valley of Kang Zemu, starting up a steep and narrow moraine where a few bushes still grew and patches of pink primula sheltered below rocks. Soon came open ground, boulders, turf, and small ravines, and white snow melting fast on black rocks. Thare Pati could be seen high up on the ridge barring our world to the south. To start with, the blue sky had been dark and cloudless—would the mist reach us before we could enjoy the view from the pass? I could not hurry as we were already above 16,000 feet. The hot sun was so strong I took my jersey off, but a few minutes later I put it on again quickly—an icy blast from the north had hit me suddenly, freezing me as thoroughly as if I had stepped into a deep-freeze factory. That Tibetan blast was true to type, and explains why so many pilgrims die in summer when they reach the pass and encounter the two opposed winds. Sherpas call the pass '*Balmu Shissah*,' which means the 'dead Newari woman'. It is probably 16,779 feet high, and leads into a small valley running down towards the west; to the north and behind the rocky range just above the lake rises the group of white peaks surrounding the Langtang Lirung, near the Tibetan border (23,771 feet).

Our progress was impeded by thick snow—on nevé-like patches one could walk well and slide down fast—Topgi was surprised to see me 'skim the snow', as he called it later—but we were often up to our

hips when passing black rocks. After the first perfectly round lake, deep under the fresh snow of the night before, we came to a second and a third, equally round and as deep in snow, till at last, from the top of an abrupt knoll some 500 feet high, the great oval of the sacred Gosainkund appeared below us like a steel-grey shield. It filled the whole shelf of the valley and there seemed to be a vast gap beyond it where, far away, sombre clouds were lapping the peaks of Ganesh Himal. There, all alone, half-way between earth and sky, lies this sacred place, isolated, silent, and unruffled like a mind purified by perfect concentration. Down and down we tumbled, till a few tiny flags strung between bamboo poles indicated the slit in the rock that gives birth to the miraculous waters—we drank of them and washed our faces with joy and felt at peace with the world. A few marks near the mouth of the lake showed where the big shelters are that the pilgrims use in the summer: that human imprint looked strange in such a desolate world. In August the lake is probably of a rich gentian blue; in May the sheet of ice in the silent landscape is wonderfully soothing. I was told that the path going down to the west along the Trisliu Khola is even worse than the one we took.

At half-past eleven, after an hour's climb, we were back at the pass and the mist was now billowing up around us, threatening all photographic activities. If we hurried we might still join the main camp that evening at Thare Pati, so I went down south as quickly as I could, so shaken by jumping from stone to stone that I made detours to try and get turf under my feet. Reaching our camp of the night before at one o'clock, I saw the coolie trying to cheer up Topgi the Sherpa, who was sick—I also had begun to feel queer inside, though I had eaten nothing but the bread cooked by Malla according to Tilman's recipe! I am sure our sinking feelings were due to having come through the fog too fast, and an hour's rest was necessary while I shared eggs and rice with Topgi, suffering from a splitting headache—depressed and lonely, the coolie had eaten nothing so far.

By 2 p.m. we were climbing back to our main camp, negotiating once again the nine side-ridges on the route, and I had to laugh when I saw Topgi dancing with joy, his headache forgotten, when he found a hen-pheasant caught in the snare he had prepared the day before. By the time I had conquered the long pitch of round boulders below Thare Pati I was really tired; it was nearly seven o'clock, and never before had I longed so much for the mug of tea that the sergeant brought to me some 100 yards below the camp.

After the pure snow-breezes of the heights the thought of the

pre-monsoon heat in Khatmandu was detestable and we went back as slowly as we could. Once we slept near a few cows in a clearing above Gul Phu. At sunset the shepherd performed a rite for his animals, killing a chicken over a sacred diagram drawn with pinches of flour—in the middle of the night, as I was trying to sleep despite the exasperating barking of dogs, I heard him yelling over and again ‘*Shoo—ya!*’ A leopard was prowling around and had just killed a goat belonging to a shepherd some 200 yards away, just where, the evening before, I had hesitated, undecided whether to pitch camp or not. ‘Tilman never hesitates and always sticks to his first decision’, Malla had said to me. And I had remarked: ‘Shall I be like Tilman, a real leader, and remain in this clearing without changing my mind?’ Malla did not care: in the end I moved on, I don’t remember why. Had I been like Tilman I might have seen the leopard!

The last camp was pitched on the north side of the Shoepuri ridge at Chiba Danda, and soon after sunrise, after a last look at the pure beauty of the lordly Himalayas, we returned through the mutilated woods to the overpopulated valley of Khatmandu.

Those three weeks in the mountains cost me under 140 rupees:

two coolies, only for marching days	.	.	.	54 Rs.
one Sherpa guide, seven days	.	.	.	35 Rs.
Eggs, milk, flour, butter	.	.	.	10 Rs.
Tips to dancers, soldiers, guide’s family	.	.	.	40 Rs.

In Khatmandu I was told it was 12 miles to Pati Banjang, 10 miles to Gul Phu, 8 to Saone Mani, and 4 miles down to Malem-chi village—all rather approximate. I could not time my stages since I stopped so often and had to wait so long for the sun before I could film. Though the mileages on the stages were small, the marches were slowed by the steepness of the track, which often looked like the course of a dried-up torrent. Coolies carrying 100 or 120 lb. probably found it easier to go straight down with little dancing steps, making a pathway this way. The track is often erratic enough to make any Swiss gape with wonder; there is no dynamite available to get rid of rocky spurs—it is also possible that these Asiatics, men and women alike, are so strong that they do not see the necessity for a rational path intended to save effort.

I have no hesitation in saying that the success of my tour, including the many interviews with villagers, was due to the intelligence and charming manners of Lieutenant Sher Bahadur Malla.