PEAKS OF THE SISSU NALA BASIN, LAHUL HIMALAYA

By NICHOLAS WOLLASTON

Robin Platts and I arrived in Delhi in the middle of July 1954, he from Japan and I from Australia. Neither of us had ever climbed in the Himalaya and neither was a member of the Himalayan Club. We had ideas of going to Garhwal because we understood it to be a district where two ill-equipped and inexperienced people could find modest climbing among some of the finest mountains. But our time was limited to the weeks when the monsoon is at its height and our hopes of reaching the top of anything were slender. So were our finances.

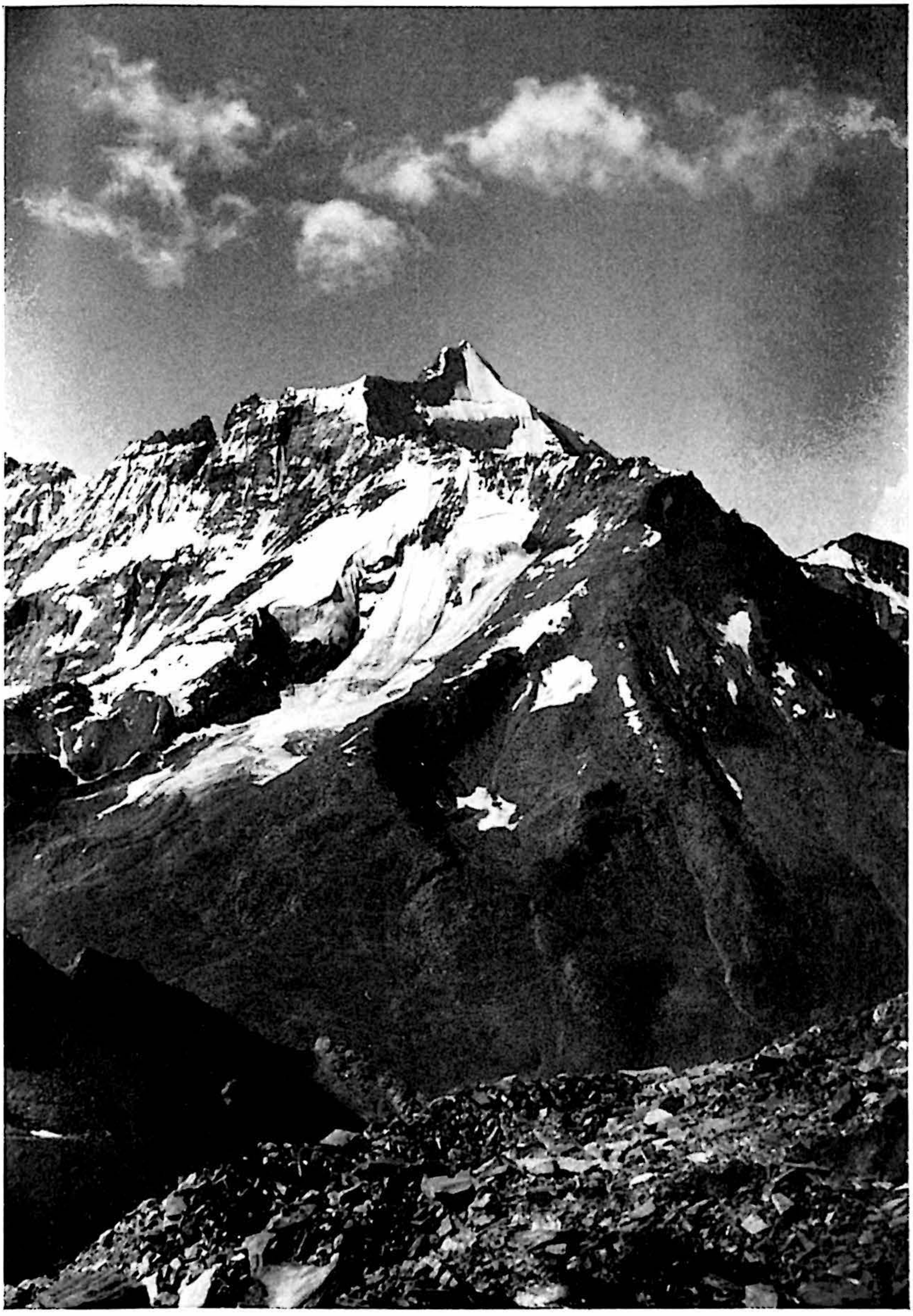
In Delhi we fell among friends. Our gratitude to the local secretary of the Himalayan Club and to the members to whom he sent us for counsel cannot be expressed. Their kindness to a pair of strangers in providing both advice and equipment was overwhelming, and a few days later we started on the train and bus journey, not to Ranikhet, but to Manali, the village at the head of the Kulu valley. There, through the offices of the indefatigable Major Banon, we hired six ponies and two porters, and on July 28, after a night at Kothi rest-house, we crossed the Rohtang pass north into Lahul.

The mountains of Lahul, lying north of the Pir Panjal, form a triangle of peaks surrounded by two rivers, the Chandra and the Bhaga which spring from opposite sides of the Bara Lacha La, and which meet below Kyelang to form the Chenab. They comprise a wild region, barren of cultivation with some fifteen peaks over 20,000 ft. high. From the Kulu valley they are reached by two passes, the Rohtang 13,050 ft., and the Hamtah 14,027 ft. which drop into the Chandra valley.

These mountains are peculiar in that the monsoon barely reaches them. The clouds which roll up the Kulu valley are stopped by the Pir Panjal. It is because of this dryness that these mountains are comparatively unglaciated, and present a rockier appearance than the ice peaks of Spiti to the south-east. It was for this reason that Lahul had been recommended to us and as evidence of the soundness of the advice, during the seven weeks we were away from Manali we never once got wet until we had crossed the Hamtah pass southwards into Kulu on our return.

It is possibly owing to their lack of magnificent Himalayan snows that the Lahuli mountains are so unexplored ; it certainly cannot be due to inaccessibility. The only climbing expedition to visit them was in 1939 when a party of international students went to the Milang *nala*, a tributary of the Bhaga on the west side of the triangle, and climbed all the peaks round the *nala* head.

From the Rohtang pass we first saw Gepang. As soon as we had heard about it, in Delhi, we had wanted to see it ; and as soon as we



GEPANG FROM NORTH.

[*To face p.* 62.

saw it, we wanted to climb it. It is the highest mountain, 19,259 ft., in the south-west part of the triangle, a splendid Gothic peak complete with a goddess on top and a legend about a yak who tried to reach her but was turned to stone halfway up. However, we decided to leave Gepang till later and in the meantime, directly across the Chandra valley from the Rohtang, was the Kulti *nala* which seemed, as we looked into it, to offer a way into the centre of the triangle. We crossed the Chandra and by dint of some diligent pathworks on the part of Robin, who is a Sapper captain, and as much cajolery as we could muster from the twenty words of Hindustani at our disposal we persuaded the pony-boy to chivy his beasts about four miles up the Kulti. There, at a little over 12,000 ft. and with another mile to the main glacier snout, we pitched our three tents and sent the ponies back to Manali. We had hoped to climb the glacier to its higher reaches and then attempt one of the mountains at its head, but closer acquaintance was not encouraging. The snout itself was steep and constantly peppered with stones from flanking cliffs, while of these two cliffs, that on the right, the east, was impossibly precipitous and the other, although climbable, was constructed of such loose rock that we did not feel justified in taking up it two porters who had never before been on a mountain.

Half a mile down the *nala* on the east side there seemed to be a route that would lead on to a tributary glacier and thence to the higher snows ; and this proved to be so. Two days later we were camped at 15,000 ft. at the north-west corner of a large snowfield which drained into the Kulti *nala* through the gap up which we had come. The north side of this basin consisted of a continuous rock ridge culminating in the east in a jagged mountain of forbidding features. To the east was a col which we supposed led into the Purana Koksar *nala*, and along the south and west sides was a line of rock and snow peaks joined by a high ridge. The exact topography of this basin we never ascertained, partly because its floor was convex and we never climbed high enough to see the whole rim at once and partly because we made the mistake of trying to relate the Survey of India half-inch map with the ground it was supposed to represent. During the four days we spent there we both suffered from a curious indolence brought about, I think, by the sultry heat and our lack of acclimatisation. I suffered from a stomach chill too, so that we were forced to return to the valley before we had intended. Apart from walking across to the far side of the snowfield, we had one good climb to a col between two of the peaks on the south side. If one of them was the point marked '18,445' on the map we must have reached 18,000 ft. and I lay there gasping both at the height and at the stupendous display of mountains stretched before us. That was our seventh day from leaving Manali which, together with our crossing the Rohtang on the second day carrying heavy rucksacks, probably accounts for my malaise. It was also the day on which I saw a line of footprints loping away across the snow, but I neither photographed them nor measured them and I am beginning to think now that it was all an abominable dream.

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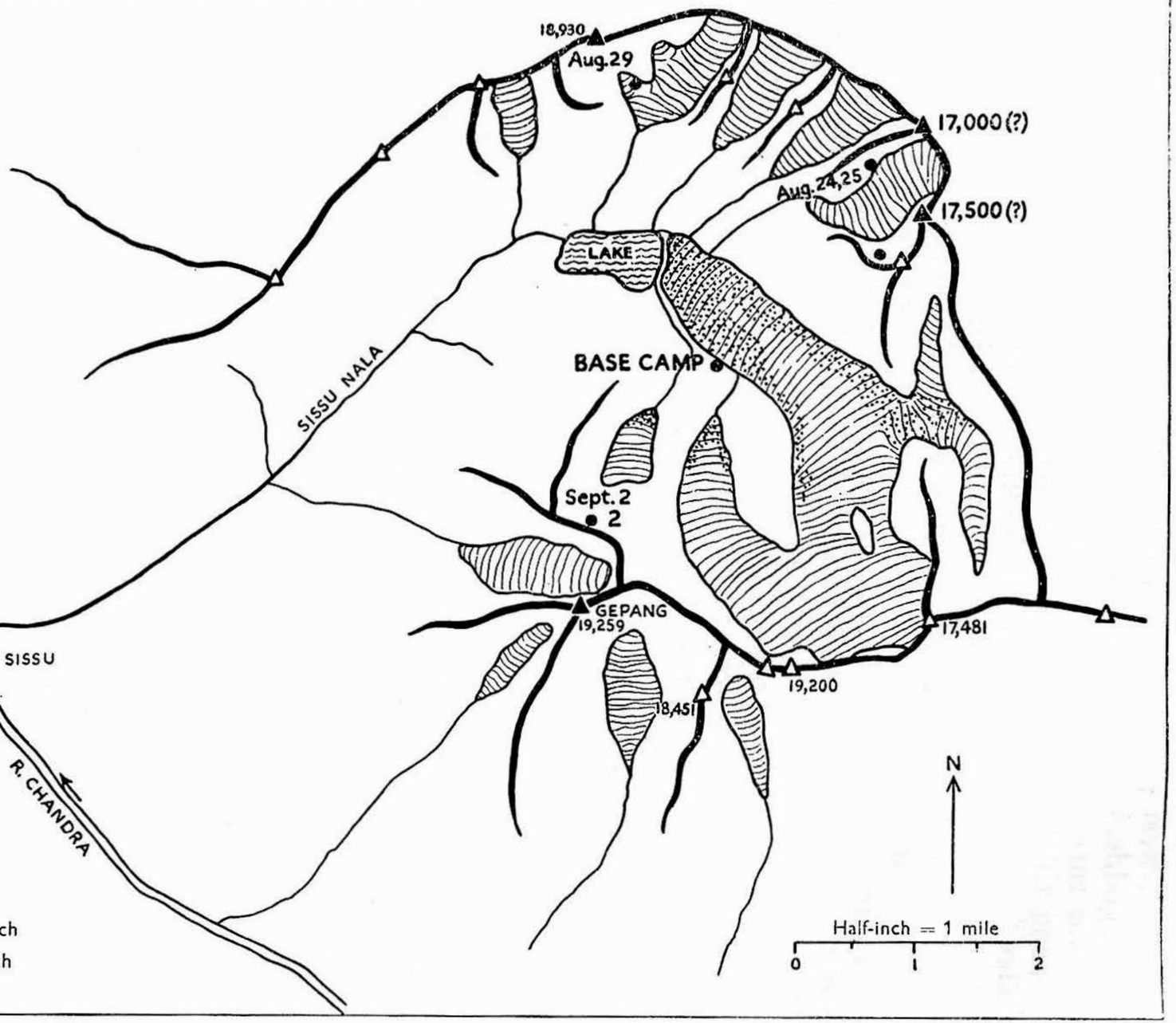
by Nicholas Wollaston



Survey of India Sheet 52 H/SW. Half-inch
Sheet 52 H. Quarter-inch

It was a pity to leave the Kulti *nala* so soon, particularly as we had failed to reach the higher parts of the main glacier which is fed from the snows of a line of 19,000 ft. peaks. If I had been fit we might have achieved more, for except on one grey day we were treated to glorious weather. The nights were cold and bright and the days were sunny, and in fact it was so clear that the planet Venus was quite distinct to the naked eye even at high noon. For me, apart from the disappointment, the pleasure of going down the *nala* was something to revel in. After the sterile world above, with its relentless heat and cold, it was sheer delight to smell again the earth and grass and flowers, to breathe the first whiff of sheep and goats, and to stumble upon the first stream of proper bubbling water, so unlike the horrid glacier streams of melted ice and snow.

Back in Koksar we hired five ponies and having dismissed one of our porters on the advice of the other we trekked eight miles down the Chandra to Sissu. Our remaining porter, an elderly man from Simla called Barsa Ram, stayed with us throughout and became our trusted guide and friend ; he might well have become our philosopher too, had we been able to understand any of his language. Although he had never before been higher than the Rohtang pass, with us he cheerfully carried heavy loads up to 17,000 ft. and slept several nights at that height. We soon learned patiently to suffer his habit of alternating half-hour bursts at great speed over even the roughest country with twenty-minute rests to smoke his pipe, for it was deep in his nature to do everything in fits. Later, when he and Robin and I had to share a small Meade tent, Barsa Ram would sleep hard and loudly for a couple of hours and then, with much noise and pother, fight his way outside to cough into the snow for ten minutes, as though he were having a rest from the tiresome business of sleep, before struggling back among the blankets.

Gepang then became our main objective. An attack from the Sissu *nala* up the north ridge seemed the only possibility and there were other mountains that could be climbed from the same base. But before climbing again we were keen to see a little more Lahuli country. We therefore made a dump of all our food and tents half a day's march up the *nala*, paid off the ponies and started down the Chandra with Barsa Ram. Above Sissu there is only a little cultivation in the valley and above Koksar there is none. But lower down, the face of the land is altogether less grim ; there are patchworks of barley and millet fields, and scattered villages of flat-roofed cottages all set about with willow trees. Fourteen miles below Sissu the Chandra meets the Bhaga and about four miles up the latter is Kyelang, the largest village in Lahul, but even here there are few signs of prosperity and the plight of the people in the winter, when the Rohtang is impassable for three months, must be miserable. The happiest people we met were the *gaddis*, the nomadic shepherds who spend three months of the summer in the Lahuli mountains and then drive their flocks south to the Kangra district for the winter. They wear homespun kilts and wrap long goat-hair ropes round their waists, and they sit on the rocks whistling

to their sheep and playing whimsical airs on their flutes, just as shepherds should. After two days at Kyelang we returned to Sissu on August 15, Indian Independence Day, crossing the 15,000 ft. ridge between the two valleys while the monastery drums rumbled through the mountains in celebration.

In Sissu we engaged two extra porters, one a lama from Ladakh who was delighted to take a holiday from his sacerdotal duties to earn a few rupees, and set about the task of carrying our baggage to the head of the *nala*. If we had found more porters we should have been able to establish our base camp within two days, but, as it was, the last load did not arrive at the *nala* head until the sixth day. It was a magnificent site, with Gepang peak just visible to the south and next to it, eastwards along the ridge, an impressive double-headed mountain, presumably that marked '19,200' on the S.I. map, although later we adjudged it to be three or four hundred feet lower than Gepang. Actually there seems to be ambiguity about the identity of Gepang ; even its name is sometimes spelt Gefang. From the road a few miles above Kulu the double peak can be seen over the Pir Panjal and the natives call it Gepang, as does anybody crossing the Rohtang pass from which it is more conspicuous than the higher peak two miles to the west. This latter peak, however, is the mountain marked 'Gepang Goh, 19,259,' on the half-inch map and dominates the Chandra valley from Sissu to Gondla and beyond, where the people unhesitatingly call it Gepang. It could be argued that the whole ridge is Gepang, but that, too, is given a name on the map, Laguche Dhar, although we never heard anybody use it. We decided to attempt the higher, western summit on the assumption that it was the true Gepang, and also because the double peak seemed quite unclimbable from the north.

On August 24 and 25, from a camp on a small glacier to the north of the *nala*, we climbed two mountains, the first about 17,000 ft. and the second, the next eastwards, about 17,500 ft., approached by its west snow ridge and down by a snow gully on the south-west face. The northern and eastern flanks of both these fall into an ugly moraine-covered glacier which flows north-west into the Milang *nala*. On August 29, from another camp, we climbed a fine pyramid-shaped mountain to the west, going up by the south ridge and coming down by a thin rock rib on its east face. Its snow summit can just be seen from Sissu village and we took it to be the point marked '18,930' on the S.I. quarter-inch map, although we found the maps were seldom accurate. In height it is a worthy second to Gepang in that area and the view from the top was the grandest I have ever beheld. Far to the north-west lay Kashmir, and to the north-east, close and stark, the Milang peaks backed by the red cliffs of northern Lahul. To the south, across the black Chandra valley, stretched the wall of the Pir Panjal, and south-east rolling away across the world, the mountains of Kulu and Spiti and beyond, peaks and glaciers, crests and troughs, like waves upon the ocean. But Gepang was our cynosure, looking from there like a noble elder brother to the Ober Gabelhorn, tall and white and very lovely.

On September 2, after a day of reconnaissance and a day of rest, we started up Gepang's north ridge with Barsa Ram. At about 16,000 ft. the ridge narrowed to a thin rock wall beset with towers which we passed on the left. Then it turned east, almost horizontal for about half a mile, separated from the main mountain by a deep glacier, as far as a battlemented castle beyond which it turned south again up a snow arête. We pitched our tent halfway along the horizontal section at 17,000 ft. overlooking the north-west face and up to the summit. Next morning, at an hour so late that I am ashamed to mention it, we left Barsa Ram and, traversing below the castle walls, started up the snow arête. The lower part was steep and hard and although we wore crampons we cut steps for about 150 ft. Higher, the angle eased a little and, except for one place where a crevasse with an overhanging upper lip straddled the arête, we moved quite quickly. At the top we landed on the connecting ridge between Gepang on our right and the double-headed peak on our left. We turned right, horizontal for about 300 yards with a deep cornice on the north side, and then started up the final snow ridge. There again, although it was probably not necessary but certainly made for more comfort, we cut steps, and after five laborious rope-lengths reached the shoulder about a 100 ft. below the summit. A breathless scramble up old yellow snow melted into knee-deep runnels brought us to the top, seven hours after leaving camp. Clouds from the south had been collecting all day and we were robbed of the view across the Chandra and over into Kulu which we had hoped for; but windows in the mist drifted past us to the north, and through one of them appeared our ridge and, far down over the glacier, our little tent with Barsa Ram beside it waving a sleeping bag at us. So was the goddess wooed and the unhappy yak avenged.

On the way down we were glad of the big steps we had cut, as the snow was then soft, and we reached our tent an hour after sunset. Next day we avoided the narrow part of the lower ridge by hurtling, one at a time, down a snow gully direct on to the northern glacier. We never saw any stones falling but it was an uncomfortable place.

We had thought of climbing the snow mountain, 17,481 ft., at the south-east end of the *nala*, but in the last few days the route we had planned had been swept by avalanches, and the north-west ridge would have taken too long. So we decided to give up mountaineering and return to Manali by the Hamtah pass. At Sissu we hired three ponies and trekked past Koksar and up to Chatou, and then into the Chatou *nala*. As evidence of the amount of food we had eaten, whereas we had left Manali at the end of July with six ponies, two porters, and heavy rucksacks on our own backs, for our return in September we managed to strap all our baggage on to three ponies. In the Chatou *nala* we spent an idle day gazing at the north-west precipice of Andrasau 20,410 ft., and the hefty comfortable heap of Deo Tibba, 19,687 ft., bulging behind it. On September 13 we crossed the Hamtah pass and dropped down into the clouds, and further down into the rain.

During our seven weeks in Lahul we travelled through some wonderful country, explored two *nalas* and climbed our first Himalayan peaks, albeit modest ones. But it was not so much the magnificence of the scenery or the magnitude of everything (' double it ' became our inevitable axiom, whether it was the estimated distance to a summit or the time we should take to reach it, or merely the amount of spaghetti for the evening stewpot) that impressed the memory. Those were things that we had expected, although of course we suffered all the proper pangs of excitement in discovering them for ourselves. Rather was it the grinning faces of the Lahuli peasants who stopped us on the path to ask the time as though they were seriously concerned with such modern trappings as hours and minutes ; the excitement when we reached a village and the word was passed that we had a medicine box amongst our baggage ; the trains of mules bringing bales of wool and skins from Tibet, scarlet tassels hanging from their harness and bells ringing about their necks ; the lovely girls of Kyelang spinning as they walked ; the pellucid springs welling from deep holes in beds of greenery, to bubble merrily down the mountain side ; the meadows of pink polygonum and forget-me-nots, and scores of flowers of which I wish I knew the names of half ; the eagles and the white-capped redstarts ; the *gaddis* with their sheep and shaggy goats ; Barsa Ram's *chapatis* and our struggles with the primus ; and the early mornings waiting for the sun to rise behind a mountain ridge and strike our camp with warmth. These, and countless others, were things that can never be recaptured in the black and white of photographs.