SPITI, 1956

By P. F. HOLMES

When Trevor Braham and I forced our way up the Ratang Gorge in 1955 [1] we glimpsed such an exciting area that it was inevitable we would return in 1956. Alas, at the last minute, Trevor could not get leave to come a second time. In the event there were eight of us: three porters, three climbers, one wife and one security officer. We managed to secure the services of Rikzen,[2] who counts as a climber, and Sunom again, and they brought with them two friends, also Ladakhis: Angrup and Jolsun. Garry Walker and I were the other two climbers, and Judy, my wife, was to look after medicine and food. Pran Nath was our security officer. When I heard that the Indian Government was sending a security officer with us at our own expense, I naturally began thinking in terms of drowning him in the first nullah we came to. Easy to stage an accident. In the event, P.N. proved so helpful and pleasant that I relented.

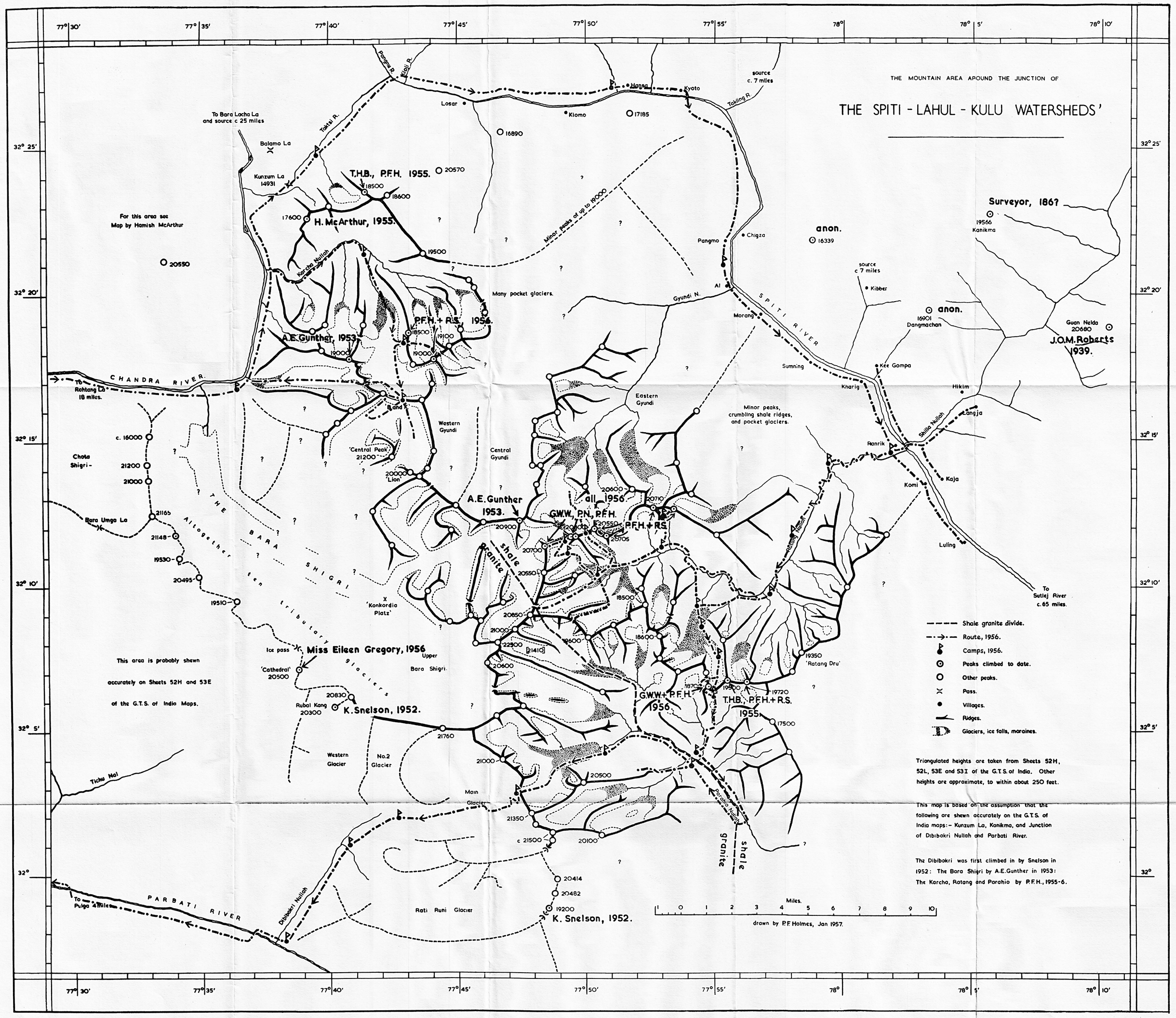
The walk over the Rohtang La and up the Chandra has been fully described by Trevor and Hamish McArthur in their articles [3]; suffice it to say that we reached Shigri Meadow on June 17. Here we set up a temporary base camp while a detour was made to explore the Karcha Basin. This had never been done before, largely, I suspect, because no one could be bothered. P.N. and Garry were both ill, so Rikzen and I set off with two porters. For five days we suffered while the weather turned from bad to terrible. But there was no time to waste, so we pushed our way through deep snow and bad visibility to open up five new passes; in addition Rikzen and I climbed two peaks, both on June 20. The ascent of the first peak, 19,200 ft., was made in a severe storm; we were cold and miserable, and we could see nothing. On the descent Rikzen fell 400 ft., slipping when in the blizzard he mistook ice for snow. No damage, just a sensational head-over-heels tumble. In the evening it cleared a little, so we got our own back on the weather by climbing a minor rock peak of 18,500 ft.

We moved to what I call the 'B. and K. Pass' (*B*ara Shigri and *K*archa) the next day. I hoped to make an attempt on 'The Lion', for from its summit we should be able to see right across the unmapped Gyundi. But the weather deteriorated still further, from terrible to impossible, so with great difficulty we retired to Shigri by way of our

[1] See *A.J.* 61. 296.

[2] I make no apology for this spelling. Trevor Braham and Hamish McArthur have their own ideas, but this is how it sounds to me.

[3] See *A.J.* 61. 296, and *A.J.* 61. 279.



1. Heavily drawn-in ridges were observed from at least three different places. Dotted ridges were observed once or twice, but are not certain.

2. The positioning of peaks can be taken to be accurate to within 400 yards or so. Heights to within 250 feet either way.

3. The map is based on the assumption that the following points are shown accurately on Sheets 52 H, 52 L and 53 I of the G.T.S. of India: Kunzum La, Kanikma, and the junction of the Dibibokri Nullah with the Parbati River.

4. It will be seen that the Survey Maps are generally accurate in the placing of triangulated peaks (the only possible exception is 20570): but wholly inaccurate in the drawing of ridges and watersheds north of the Main Himalayan Divide. To the south of the Divide the Survey maps seem to be very accurate indeed.

5. It seems that the peaks of the Shigri—Tos Nal Watershed must have been observed from the south by the surveyors; if they had been observed from the north there could not have been such a large error in the mapping of the Shigri Basin. Now there are four major peaks above Shigri Meadow. It would appear that only two were put on the map because only two can be seen from the south. Hence the addition of peaks 21000 and 21200 on my map.

6. The northern and eastern boundaries of the Shigri Basin are now definite. The western boundary was only observed once, and though it was possible to place the main peaks the ridges have been taken from the Survey Map. It seems to be accurate.

7. Peak 20570, a few miles from the Kunzum La, presents a problem. On the Survey Map it is shown as being on the Karcha-Taktsi Watershed. There is a peak in the right place, but it does not seem to be anything like 20570 ft. high; while a peak a few miles to the north is much higher. But the identification of peak 20570 must remain uncertain. If the peak which I show as 19500 is 20570 then the other must be well over 21000 ft. This seems unlikely.

8. Careful checking of the angles and figures taken *in situ* have shown that my original estimate of 24000 ft. for the peak where 21410 is shown on the map was hopelessly out. 22500 is much nearer the mark. This still leaves 22500 as easily the highest peak in the area, and observations from many sides, over two years, confirm this. Only one reading was taken when its height was originally triangulated, and this seems to have led to an appreciable error.

9. Anyone going to this area should make a point of climbing the Central Peak, 21200 (from the south), 22500 (from the west), 20570 (from the north) and 21760, if a route can be found.

10. With passes from the Bara Shigri to the Parahio, Ratang and Gyundi, and with passes between all three of these last valleys, endless permutations of round trips are possible. Though it should be remembered that some of the passes are high and can only be crossed by laden porters if fixed ropes are in place and they are properly equipped.

11. The spelling of place-names in Spiti seems to be optional. I have seen Al given as 'Ul', 'Ull', 'Hal' and 'All'. Langja and Hikim should be exchanged on the Survey Maps.

January 1957.

P.F.H.

fifth new pass, which led us past the southern foot of A. E. Gunther's first peak of 1953.[4] Incidentally, from ' B. and K.' I had a fine view between storms of a high peak which at the time I took to be Gunther's second peak. In fact it was nothing of the kind ; Gunther had only seen it from a distance. A fine granite peak, it is higher than anything else in the immediate neighbourhood. I have given this ' Central Peak ' a provisional height of 21,200 ft., but it may be higher.

What a pity about ' The Lion '. The area around it must remain a blank on my map, for the ladies[5] are not too sure of this ground either. I had also hoped to climb peak 19,500 on the Karcha-Taktsi Divide, but this too was abandoned because of the weather. On the Survey Map, Sheet 52H, this peak is marked as 20,570, but it does not appear to be so high, while there is a much higher peak a few miles to the north. If, however, the Karcha-Taktsi peak is 20,570, then the other must be well over 21,000 ft.

Once back at Shigri we hurried on, over the Kunzum La and down the Spiti Valley. Two weeks were spent collecting ammonite fossils, renewing old friendships and visiting Kee Gompa and the Nono. Then, with the help of twenty-two Spiti coolies whom P.N. cajoled into carrying for us, we started up the Ratang.

The journey up the Gorge could not have been in greater contrast to our 1955 endeavour. In three short easy days we covered the same ground as had taken four long and arduous days the year before. This difference was due to an almost uninterrupted series of snow bridges, which meant that we could avoid all the difficulties. Also the water was much lower, so when the snow bridges failed us we could make fordings without much danger. June, early July and October are the only months when these easy conditions prevail ; anyone intending to go up the Ratang should remember this.

On July 8 base camp was established on ' Sunom's Meadow '.[6] On succeeding days camps were established at 16,000, 17,500, 19,000 and 20,500 ft. as we pushed up towards the head of the valley. Walking up the Ratang provides a series of startling changes. The first six miles from the Spiti River are the Gorge—a barren waste of twisting contorted rock folds. Once through the Gorge dwarf juniper and plentiful grass, colourful birds and a profusion of flowers give the impression of a sanctuary. The impression ends abruptly above the Meadow. Beyond it grey screes, dirty moraines and finally sheet ice prevail.

From the camp at 20,500 ft. we climbed two minor peaks, ' The Twins '. Then on July 15 a party of four walked up a peak of perhaps

[4] See *A.J.* 59. 288.
[5] Mrs. Joyce Dunsheath led a party of four ladies to the Bara Shigri in 1956.
[6] See *A.J.* 61. 307.

20,700 ft. At the time we thought it rather higher, but since returning I have been working on angles and other data which downgrade it 700 ft.

From this summit we had a good view of what I thought might be 21,760, but it was nothing of the kind, as we were to learn to our cost a few weeks later. My guess was based entirely on the fact that this was the highest peak near the head of the Gyundi-Ratang Watershed. I should have known better. The Survey Map hereabouts is based on nothing more than guesswork. This slightly higher peak, not quite 21,000 ft., turned out to be Gunther's No. 2 Peak.[7] Rikzen and I thought in terms of climbing it the next day, but again bad weather intervened. The ladies had made the second ascent a few weeks previously.

To the south-west we could see a large ice basin. Not surprisingly we were unable at the time to identify it, for our ideas on the local topography were still running along the lines laid down by Sheet 52H. It was, of course, the Bara Shigri.

To the west we could see the huge Central Peak, standing high above its neighbours, and most of the Upper Gyundi. The latter is in reality three valleys, not one, and these meet in a terrific gorge some miles downstream. The same gorge that Trevor and I had had so much trouble with.

Most rewarding of all was the view to the south, where a mighty peak towered over us. I gave it a provisional height of 24,000 ft., but this was wildly out: 22,500 ft. is much nearer the mark. Even at this height it is appreciably higher than anything else hereabouts. What turned out to be 21,760 was just behind, and it is certainly lower. Peak 22,500 is where 21,410 is on Sheet 52H; Survey Records[8] show that although two readings were taken to determine its position (which is shown accurately), only one was taken to determine its height. Undoubtedly, as in the case of the more famous Shilla, this led to an appreciable error. It is surprising that the Survey of India authorities allowed heights which had been determined by only single readings to stand as 'triangulated heights'.

For though Sheet 52H of the Survey Map is accurate in the positioning of its 'triangulated' peaks (except perhaps for 20,570), some of the heights given are wildly inaccurate. And the ridge drawing can only be regarded as the result of fertile imagination.

Garry, P.N., Sunom and Jolsun now retired to base camp to recuperate; Rikzen and I pushed up a side glacier to place a camp on an easy pass (at about 19,000 ft.) which led to the Gyundi. That night we slept with out feet in the Ratang and our heads in the Gyundi, for the pass ridge was quite sharp. We thus penetrated into the

[7] See *A.J.* 59. 288.

[8] *G.T.S. of India*, vol. VII, North-West Himalayan Series, Dehra Dun, 1879

Gyundi. Next day we climbed peaks of 20,500 and 20,705 ft. The ascent was made tiresome when we were overwhelmed by a small avalanche. Down we went, in a flurry of snow, falling 500 ft. or so in all. We were both very cross, for it meant an extra hour's hard work. From the summits we had more views across the Gyundi. Then back to base camp.

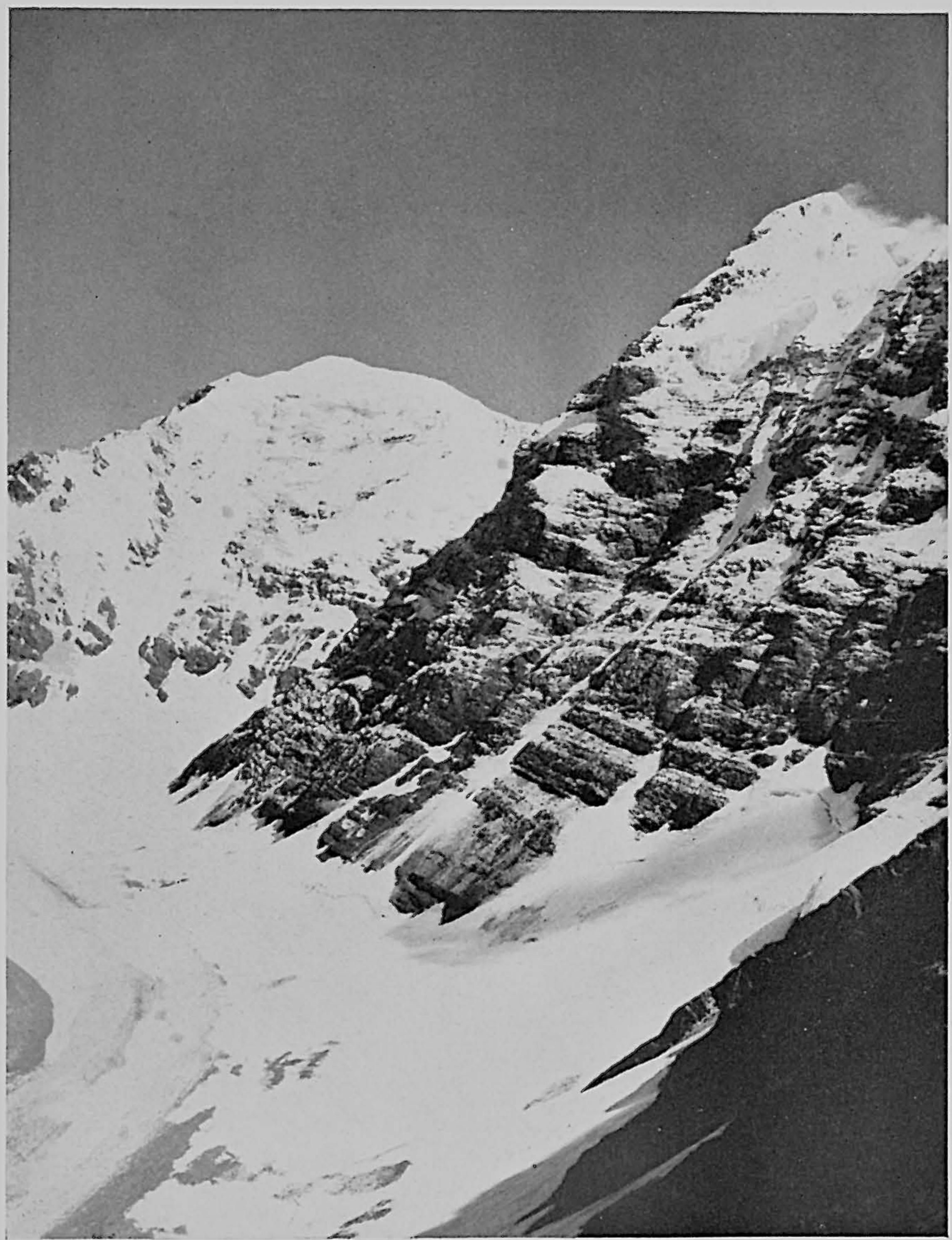
From the first we had intended to return to Manali, not by the circuitous 100-mile trek through Spiti, but by pushing straight across the Main Divide, into the Parbati. This involved crossing into the Parahio first, for we knew there was no likely way from the Ratang; once in the Parahio we could cross one of the three passes discovered by Kenneth Snelson and party in 1952.[9] Getting into the Parahio meant finding a reasonable pass for laden porters. Garry and I went off to find one. That day was the longest Himalyan day I ever wish to have. Starting at under 15,000 ft., we ascended and then descended a total of 7,000 vertical feet, we climbed a new peak of 18,700 ft., and we crossed two new passes, one from the Ratang to the Parahio, the other back. We were away fourteen hours in all. Neither of our two passes was really a 'pass' at all. Both were steep, both involved climbing, both were prone to frequent stone-falls. But they were the best available.

On July 26 Rikzen and I were installed in a high camp below the final precipice of 'The Ratang Tower', 20,750 ft. At the time I thought it might be 21,410, for it was certainly the highest peak along the Gyundi-Ratang Watershed; but of course I was wrong. We had hoped to climb it by way of the gentle-angled 'Skyline Ridge', but closer inspection (from a peak of 19,000 ft. climbed that evening) showed this to be out of the question; vertical on one side, very steep on the other, and topped by a cornice so fragile it seemed to be transparent, it was just the sort of ridge I like to avoid. We were left with a choice between the rocky East Ridge or the icy Main Face. We went to bed undecided.

A large stone-fall as we approached the mountain the next morning warned us off the East Ridge. The Main Face was very steep, but not difficult with crampons. When we had reached half-height and were beginning to feel the exposure we narrowly avoided getting swept away in a large avalanche, and this scared us off the Face onto a series of rock islands. We reached the East Ridge a few hundred feet from the summit. This ridge was remarkably airy, and when we were forced left, over a nasty void above the dark glacial cwm 3,000 ft. below, we were fully able to appreciate it. The only way up was via a 15-ft. overhanging crack which was unpleasantly smooth. The crack went with jamming, but although it was only a hard Welsh severe, it seemed quite desperate at the time.

[9] See *H.J.* 18. 110.

LOOKING SOUTH FROM PEAK 21710. DIBIBOKRI PYRAMID IN CENTRE, THE WEDGE PEAK ON RIGHT.



PEAK 21760, LEFT, AND DIBIBOKRI PYRAMID, RIGHT, FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.

From the summit we had our first really clear view. We could see right into Tibet, Ladakh, Lahoul and Bashahr. Only to the south, where the monsoon clouds lapped against the peaks of the Main Divide, was our view obstructed. Our Abney level told us we were a little higher than Guan-Nelda, 20,680, some twenty-odd miles away. I was unable to identify Shilla for certain, but I feel it is the lower bump, and therefore nothing like 23,000 ft. Incidentally, there is a wonderful area of unexplored territory to the north and east of Shilla. But alas, the ' Inner Line ' rules it all out of bounds.

This was our tenth and last peak. Next we began the return. The first ' pass ', into the Parahio, was crossed with difficulty on July 30. Then down into greenery and woods before turning southwards towards our second crossing. We hoped to cross the easternmost of the three passes available, for this led in a few hours to the main Parbati Valley.

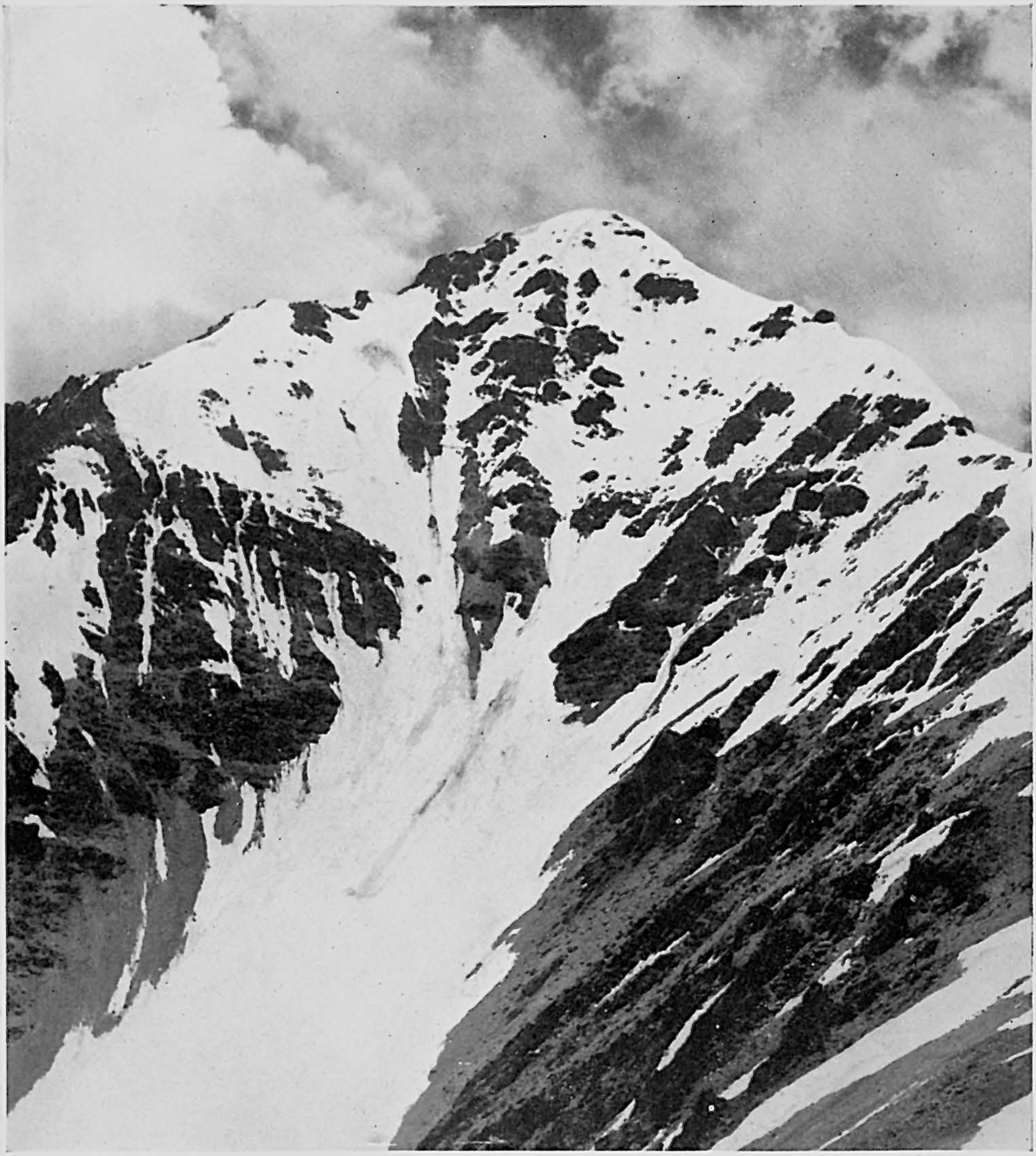
In 1952, when climbing in the Dibibokri Basin, Kenneth Snelson and Jan Graaff had crossed or reached the crest of altogether three new passes over the Himalayan Divide. These passes, they had thought, led to the main Parahio Valley. When in 1955 Trevor and I saw ' a fairly obvious pass . . . at the head of the Parahio glacier leading over the watershed . . . ' we had naturally assumed it to be one of Snelson's passes. We were making for this pass now.

We were approaching its top at 4 p.m., after an eight-hour day. We were carrying extremely heavy loads—the porters 120 pounds, the rest of us seventy. It was bitterly cold, a fierce wind was driving bullets of hail into our faces ; a storm was about to break. We had enough food for one more meal, but we knew it was only a few hours down the other side to where we could buy food from guddee shepherds.

We reached the top at last and looked over, searching for ' steep but feasible slopes ' which led ' to the warmth and luxury of a valley camp '. We were at the top of a 3,000-ft. precipice. Something was alarmingly wrong.

Morale hit an all-time low. The boys were too tired and too cold even to think, and Sunom moaned that now we would surely all die together. It looked as if he might not be far wrong. Retreat was unthinkable—we had not enough food. To stay where we were, sitting out a storm which might last for days, was inviting annihilation. Somehow we must get down the cliff.

While Judy and Garry ruthlessly threw away the last vestiges of luxury I descended alone to recce for a route. We were in luck. I found that by doing a huge ' Z ' across the cliff face I could reach a reasonable ledge 600 ft. below. Better still, the ledge was out of the wind. Mustering our forces we began the descent. The rock was rotten, and underlaid with ice. The exposure was alleviated by the



PEAK 21710. EAST RIDGE ON LEFT, 'SKYLINE RIDGE' ON RIGHT. THE ROUTE WENT UP THE COULOIR TO E. RIDGE.

[To face p. 462.

THE LEDGE ON THE 'MOST FRIGHTENING ROCK WALL' ON WHICH A NIGHT WAS SPENT. DIBIBOKRI PYRAMID BEHIND.

mists swirling about us, but a slip could not be considered. The fate of the boulders we knocked loose—three or four bounces and then a long silence until there was a crash far below—was all too certain.

We reached the ledge in ninety minutes, put up our small tents and crowded into them. The storm broke around us.

Next morning it was clear, and we could see what had happened, for there, not a mile away, was Snelson's Dibibokri Pyramid.[10] We were descending the 'most frightening rock wall' above his Main Glacier.

The Survey Map was to blame for our predicament, for the sections to the north and south of the Divide bear no relation to each other whatsoever. We too were to blame. For 'although it would help hardy explorers who visit unknown regions to have a proper map', one should know better than to rely on such maps as there are.

It took us four days, not four hours, to reach the Parbati. We went rather hungry. Indeed, we became so weak in that short time that I wondered how Slavomir Rawicz had survived his 'Long Walk'.[11]

The timely appearance of a stray goat at 14,000 ft. saved what was rapidly becoming a desperate situation. We did not even have a knife sharp enough to cut its throat. Poor goat, we had to strangle it.

Back at Manali, a week later, I asked Sunom, who had been most certain at the time that we would die, what he now thought of the second 'pass'. 'Oh,' he replied airily, 'I've often crossed passes much higher and much more difficult than that. Why, it was nothing.' Only his laughing eyes gave him away.

The expedition had been fairly successful. We had collected three hundredweight of ammonites (sent back with the ponies from Spiti); we had seven thousand photographs to sort through, including many flash shots of the colourful interior of Kee Gompa; we had crossed a number of passes and we had climbed a few peaks; we had answered the outstanding topographical questions in the area.

Almost all the credit for our success must be given to our magnificent Ladakhi boys. Without them we would have been lost. Sunom is a fine European-style cook and an irresistible comic; Angrup is a cheerful man-around-camp; Jolsun is the strongest man I have ever seen (he swims across nullahs! he can pick up a hundred-pound load with his teeth!); all three are excellent load-carriers.

Rikzen is in a class by himself. As the result of two seasons' climbing he had become a first-rate mountaineer. I felt happier climbing with him than I ever have with anyone else. He is utterly loyal. Indeed, his only fault is that he will push himself too hard.

Ladakhis will certainly replace Sherpas locally. They work as hard

[10] See photograph, *H.J.* 18. 110.

[11] See *The Long Walk*, by Slavomir Rawicz (Constable, 1956).

if not harder, they are less sophisticated and more willing, and they are entirely trustworthy. With training many of them will develop into strong climbers. Though not every one can be a Rikzen.

Note on Food and Equipment

1. Any expedition to Spiti must be almost entirely self-sufficient. The people of Spiti live at a subsistence level, and they have no food to spare. Except, occasionally, sheep, for which they charge too much, unless one has as good a bargainer as P.N. with one. Chang (barley beer) can also be purchased, but as changs go, Spiti chang is poor stuff.

2. Spiti days are usually very hot, often over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, even at high altitudes. Nights can be bitter, even in the valley. Clothing should cover both extremes.

3. Ropes are sometimes necessary to safeguard nullah crossings, especially in July, August and September. We took 700 ft. of rope for fordings and climbing, but only used it once, when we fixed ropes on the first ' pass ', from the Ratang to the Parahio. Most of the rope is still there. Rikzen and I never once used ropes for climbing, to save time and energy. On neither of the falls would they have helped, and they could have been dangerous. Time in the Himalayas is often so restricted that moving singly can at best be but an occasional luxury. And I have never yet understood the point of being roped when moving together over difficult ground ; there can seldom be time to find a suitable belay if a slip occurs. Naturally, on major peaks at high altitudes and on difficult ground, ropes, fixed or otherwise, may be essential. Not so on minor peaks where one is in a hurry to get up and down in one day.