

TWO JOURNEYS IN SWAT KOHISTAN

By JAMES MILLS

IN January 1960, when I arrived in Pakistan as a student of the Staff College, Quetta, Swat was unknown to me. Not unnaturally my attention was drawn exclusively to the stupendous marches of the Karakoram and Hindu Kush and already I had decided to visit them in the two weeks of the mid-course break. My plans soon centred on Dobani, a most accessible 20,000-ft. mountain, only two days' march from Gilgit, which, in 1958, I had often studied from the long ridge of Rakaposhi.

As a beginning I invited Ronnie Wathen, who was then living in Karachi, to join me and together we drew up lists of equipment and food and sent orders to England. By March the party was completed by two young Pakistani officers, Lieutenants Durrani and Khurshid Ahmed. They had little experience, but were desperately keen to learn and the Quetta region, with its mountains rising to over 11,000 ft., was an excellent training ground.

Our plans were progressing well when in May the expedition suddenly fell apart; I developed a hernia and Ronnie Wathen took an unexpected offer of more congenial employment and decided to return to Eire. Durrani and Khurshid were fortunately undeterred; with typical determination and enthusiasm, which recognised no problems, they pursued the original plan and in July, while I spent my summer leave convalescing after the operation, they besieged Dobani. At about 17,000 ft. a barrier of very steep ice posed serious technical problems and prudently, for they had no previous experience of greater mountaineering, they temporarily gave the mountain best. But with the job unfinished, and wiser after their first encounter with a big peak, their letters were full of urgent plans for the three of us to return to Dobani.

I would not be fit enough for any serious mountaineering until the end of the course, in December, and because, in winter, flying, the only means of getting to Gilgit, is virtually discontinued there was little chance of another attempt on Dobani. Closer at hand, although still almost a thousand miles away, but accessible by road was the little-known Swat Kohistan. It was to this region of fertile valleys, pine woods and snow mountains, lying between Chitral and the Indus, that I then turned my attention.

The earliest known account of Swat is, like so much of its history, one of war. As Arrian records, in 327 B.C. Swat was the scene of the final

operation to secure the flank of the Alexandrian armies before the momentous invasion of India. This Alexander achieved when, after a characteristic series of swift, savage battles, the campaign culminated in the capture of the rock fortress of Aornos close to the Indus in lower Swat.

We later learn of Swat as a thriving centre of Buddhism through the writings of the old Chinese pilgrims who passed through the country on their way to India between A.D. 403 and A.D. 752. They all enthusiastically describe the fertility of the country, the pleasant climate and the plentiful crops as well as the hundreds of flourishing monasteries. It was one of these ancient travellers, Hsüan-tsang, who wrote of Swat in Sanskrit as Udyāna—the Garden. But by the end of the eighth century, Buddhism was in decline; later to be swamped under the surging tide of Islam.

Centuries of internecine tribal warfare followed until Swat, as we now know it, was united under the rule of Miangul Gul Shahazada and peace finally came with the recognition of the state by the British government in 1926.

Now his son Jehanzeb rules as Wali; an autocrat, but an enlightened one, and Swat, although a feudal anachronism, within the Republic of Pakistan, continues as an independent state. And the people of Swat, proud of their hard-won autonomy, are content that it should remain so.

Swat has always been closed territory to Europeans and even as late as 1947 only selected officials were allowed into the State and then only by invitation of the Wali. Few, if any, went north of Kalam, and so our knowledge of that area is slight. Certainly, the region of Indus Kohistan, east of the valley and the watershed, is virtually unknown.

The mountaineering history of Swat is brief and recent, beginning shortly after the war when Holdsworth, then a schoolmaster in Peshawar, climbed Mankial, 18,750 ft., near Bahrain. Two more schoolmasters, the New Zealanders, Berry and Tyndale-Biscoe, followed in 1957 with successful ascents of Falak Sar, 19,415 ft., believed to be the highest mountain in the State, and one of the Batin peaks. Two years later, Jon Stephenson, a member of the Trans-Antarctic Expedition crossing party, then at the University of Lahore, also attempted Mankial, but was defeated by deep snow. The rest of the mountains are unvisited and mostly unseen.

My time after the course was limited to about a fortnight between Christmas and January 14, when the ship left from Karachi for England, and therefore a reconnaissance seemed essential. Fortunately the October break at the end of the third term of the course afforded the opportunity and also the chance to get fit again. Neither Durrani nor Khurshid was free to come and I was glad when Major Mohammed

Shuaib, a fellow student at the Staff College, offered to accompany me, for he had made several treks in Chitral and the north and being a Pathan spoke Pushtu, the chief language used in Swat. Even so the journey would have been impossible in seven days had not the Pakistan Army and Air Force flown us to and from the grass strip at Kabal, near Saidu Sharif.

In five all-too-brief days, Shuaib and I had reconnoitred the unseen flank of Falak Sar, which offered a tough-looking route, and the Paloga Pass. There was also an intriguing fragmentary glimpse of a peak, between Matiltan and Kalam, that looked higher than Falak Sar. These few days were more than a reconnaissance of peaks and passes, they were a delight of colour and Alpine freshness after the burnt barrenness of Quetta. I brought back with me an amalgam of impressions of clear tumbled rivers, cool dark curtains of pine forests, fierce surging rock and dazzling snows.

I had seen a people and a way of life much the same as the explorers of half a century ago had first encountered: now, as a result of fifty years of mammoth European expeditions with their locust hordes of porters, to be found hardly at all in the Himalaya. To deprecate the spread of modern civilisation, to peoples unprepared for its revolution, is merely an emulation of Canute; a forlorn stand against the flood of time and change. But to travel in the past, even briefly, in a region such as Swat Kohistan, is a rare and memorable experience. Next year it would be different and in a few years unattainable.

Shortly after my return to Quetta two more subalterns presented themselves at my home and soon impressed me with their enthusiasm for mountains and mountaineering. They were Abdul Waheed and Nisar Ahmed, or 'Gabby'; both friends of Khurshid and Durrani.

During the next two months, whenever I could spare the time, for on the last term at the Staff College one is under considerable and carefully calculated pressure, I took them out climbing in the surrounding mountains. It was not long before I invited them to join Durrani, Khurshid and myself in the winter journey.

The expedition was to be a training one; the basic objects being to give my Pakistani companions experience of greater mountaineering and to introduce them to the organisation and conduct of an expedition. Our mountaineering aims were to make the first winter ascent of Falak Sar or, if more information was available, to reconnoitre and make an attempt on the unknown peak I had seen in the autumn.

Planning was fairly simple. We had the food and equipment originally ordered from England for the summer and the Pakistan Army loaned tents and other kit. There were only travel arrangements to make and leave to be obtained. Unfortunately Durrani who was on a long course, could not be released.

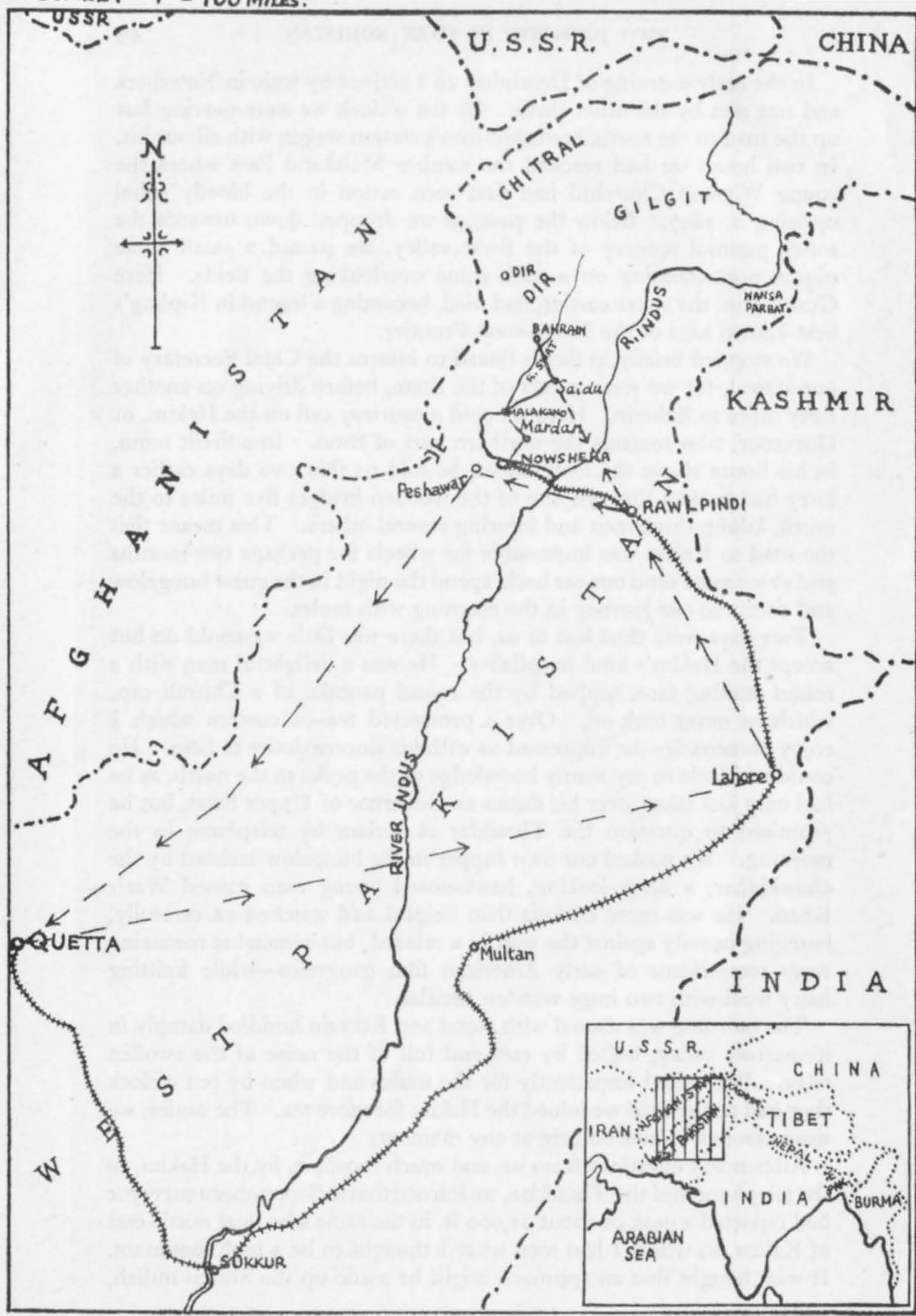
In the early morning of December 29 I arrived by train in Nowshera and was met by the other three. By ten o'clock we were moving fast up the road to the north, crammed into a station wagon with all our kit. In two hours we had reached the sombre Malakand Pass where the young Winston Churchill had first seen action in the bloody tribal uprising in 1897. Below the pass, as we dropped down towards the softer pastoral scenery of the Swat valley, we passed a small stone piquet post standing on a rock spine overlooking the fields. Here Gunga Din, the water carrier, had died, becoming a legend in Kipling's best-known saga of the North-west Frontier.

We stopped briefly in Saidu Sharif to inform the Chief Secretary of our arrival, for we were guests of the State, before driving on another forty miles to Bahrain. Here we paid a courtesy call on the Hakim, or Governor, who controls the northern part of Swat. In a firelit room, in his house above the main street, he told us that two days earlier a lorry had broken through one of the wooden bridges five miles to the north, killing three men and injuring several others. This meant that the road to Kalam was impassable for wheels for perhaps two months and so we must send our car back, spend the night in the guest bungalow and continue our journey in the morning with mules.

Two days were thus lost to us, but there was little we could do but accept the Hakim's kind hospitality. He was a delightful man with a round smiling face, topped by the round pancake of a Chitrali cap, which he never took off. Over a protracted tea—a custom which I enjoy immensely—he impressed us with his sincere desire to help. He could add little to my scanty knowledge of the peaks to the north, as he had only just taken over his duties as Governor of Upper Swat, but he promised to question the Thesildar at Kalam by telephone in the morning. We cooked our own supper in the bungalow assisted by the chowkidhar, a fierce-looking, hawk-nosed young man named Wazir Khan. He was more curious than helpful and watched us carefully, lounging heavily against the wall in a relaxed, but somewhat menacing way—reminiscent of early American film gangsters—while knitting hairy wool with two huge wooden needles.

The morning was dismal with cloud and Bahrain huddled damply in its narrow valley, lashed by rain and full of the noise of the swollen river. We waited impatiently for the mules and when by ten o'clock they had not arrived we joined the Hakim for more tea. The mules, we were assured, would be here at any moment.

After many questions from us, and much recourse, by the Hakim, to the telephone and the Thesildar, we learned that in September a surveyor had reported a peak of about 21,000 ft. in the same area, just north-east of Kalam, in which I had seen what I thought to be a high mountain. It was thought that an approach might be made up the Shuhu nullah,



THE APPROACHES TO KOHISTAN

which made the news even more intriguing, for it tended to confirm still further my autumn reconnaissance. The lure of an unknown peak was irresistible and the others were equally enthusiastic to discard the more certain chance of success on Falak Sar for a gamble on this sudden new adventure.

An hour later the three mules arrived shepherded by a wicked gnome of a man and a small boy. Loading the animals took a long time and it was nearly noon when we stepped out up the plashy road to Kalam. The rain continued throughout the day, but towards evening, higher up the valley, it changed to snow. We trudged on through the soft, whirling flakes meeting no one on the lonely road. The hostile barking of dogs as we passed through the villages made me feel unwanted and furtive; only enemies and fugitives were abroad on nights like this. It seemed a very long twenty-five miles before we reached the rest house above Kalam.

The late arrival of the porters and a lengthy wrangle over wages resulted in another start at midday. But it was a gloriously sunny day, the snow sparkled, the sky was clear, there was a magnificent view of Falak Sar framed in the valley and time did not seem too important.

Two hours later, when we stopped for lunch on the road to Ushu, I was not so happy. Cloud prevented any views of the unknown mountain and none of the porters knew of a route up the Shuhu nullah. After long, patient questioning of the locals, at various points along the route, we pieced together from the confused, involved and often contradictory answers, the information that the Shuhu nullah track was bad and should be avoided. There was, however, another from Matiltan, which met up with it at a high summer pasture known as Khan Shai. Beyond this, they said, was a high mountain.

We pressed on hopefully to Ushu, where more enquiries produced a friendly bewhiskered elder of Matiltan who offered to show us the route. By now the light was fading and I asked the old man to take us to Matiltan where we could spend the night. With a remarkably sprightly gait he led us out of Ushu, down a steep nullah, across the stream and up the steep hill into his village.

We were met by one of his ancient friends and together they offered us the hospitality of their homes. Feeling rather ill-mannered I was forced to decline, explaining that I was training the three young officers and wanted to give them practice in putting up the tents under good conditions before we began the ascent. They both gave surprised exclamations and shook their heads uncomprehendingly. Obviously as a Farenghi I was entitled to be a little mad, but hardly so stupid. When I told them that I would be most grateful if they housed the porters, they accepted delightedly; happy to help in some way.

They left us with the loads in a level, snow-covered field in the middle of the village. For Khurshid, Waheed and Gabby this was the first introduction to the routine of setting up camp and living in small tents. It took a long time and the moon had risen before we finally settled down for the night.

They had a good deal to learn in these next few days, apart from the techniques of greater mountaineering. There was the whole business of living under expedition conditions; of understanding the rations, cooking, the routines and drills of selecting, making and striking camp, the hundred-and-one small precautions, measures and skills which make life bearable and possible under the worst conditions. All these things were far stranger to three young Pakistanis than to three uninitiated Europeans, in a country where life for the upper classes is cushioned by servants. I knew that all three were used to being waited on hand and foot—literally—boots put on and taken off for them, sometimes virtually dressed and undressed; tooth-paste laid on brushes, and assisted with almost everything in their personal life. They had done little cooking, many of the expedition foods they had never seen or heard of and even the opening of some of the tins presented new problems. Already I had, in the previous two days, made them familiar with rations and shown them how to cook the simple breakfast and supper. Tonight was their initial instruction in the tricky art of cooking in a two-man tent and so I took this on, giving Gabby and Waheed the chore of melting snow.

Striking camp was a continuation of the lesson of the night before and it was a commendable effort to begin the day's march at 9.15 a.m. For two hours we made steady progress up the steep, wooded mountain-side. Gradually the snow grew deeper until, when we began to traverse a gully to gain a spur beyond, we were floundering along up to our knees. At this point I thought it appropriate for the sahibs to take over the lead and the labour of making the track. This was welcomed by the porters with great shouts and grins and giggles of appreciation. Sitting on their loads they kept up a barrage of encouraging cries as we slowly made a deep channel across the gully and up into the woods clothing the spur.

It was hard work; the snow was never below our hips and the angle was unrelenting. We changed the lead frequently, but our advance was pitifully slow. Every so often we were brought up under the walls of snow piled against fallen tree trunks, sometimes 2 or 3 ft. above our heads. It was a major effort to overcome each one. We made a brief halt for lunch in a small clearing, but the weak sun did little to dispel the cold and we were soon forced to go on to keep warm. Throughout the long afternoon we ploughed on upwards; the porters, during their long waits, stripped bark from the trees and lit fires. At five o'clock, when

I called a halt, they dumped their loads and were off quickly, grumbling about the cold and our lack of charity with extra clothing. They hoped to sleep the night in some shelter farther down and as they straggled away through the trees I wondered if we would see them again.

Still in the dark wood with the slope stretching away above we stamped out a tent platform and made camp. The temperature was falling fast and I was glad of the previous night's practice when Khurshid quickly produced order in the tent and I was able to burrow in out of the cold. Waheed and Gabby were cooks for the night and provided a very good quick meal. Obviously the most important lessons had gone home. At least we were making good progress in some directions, if not on foot. Perhaps, I thought, as I drew my sleeping bag over my head, we may have a sight of the peak tomorrow.

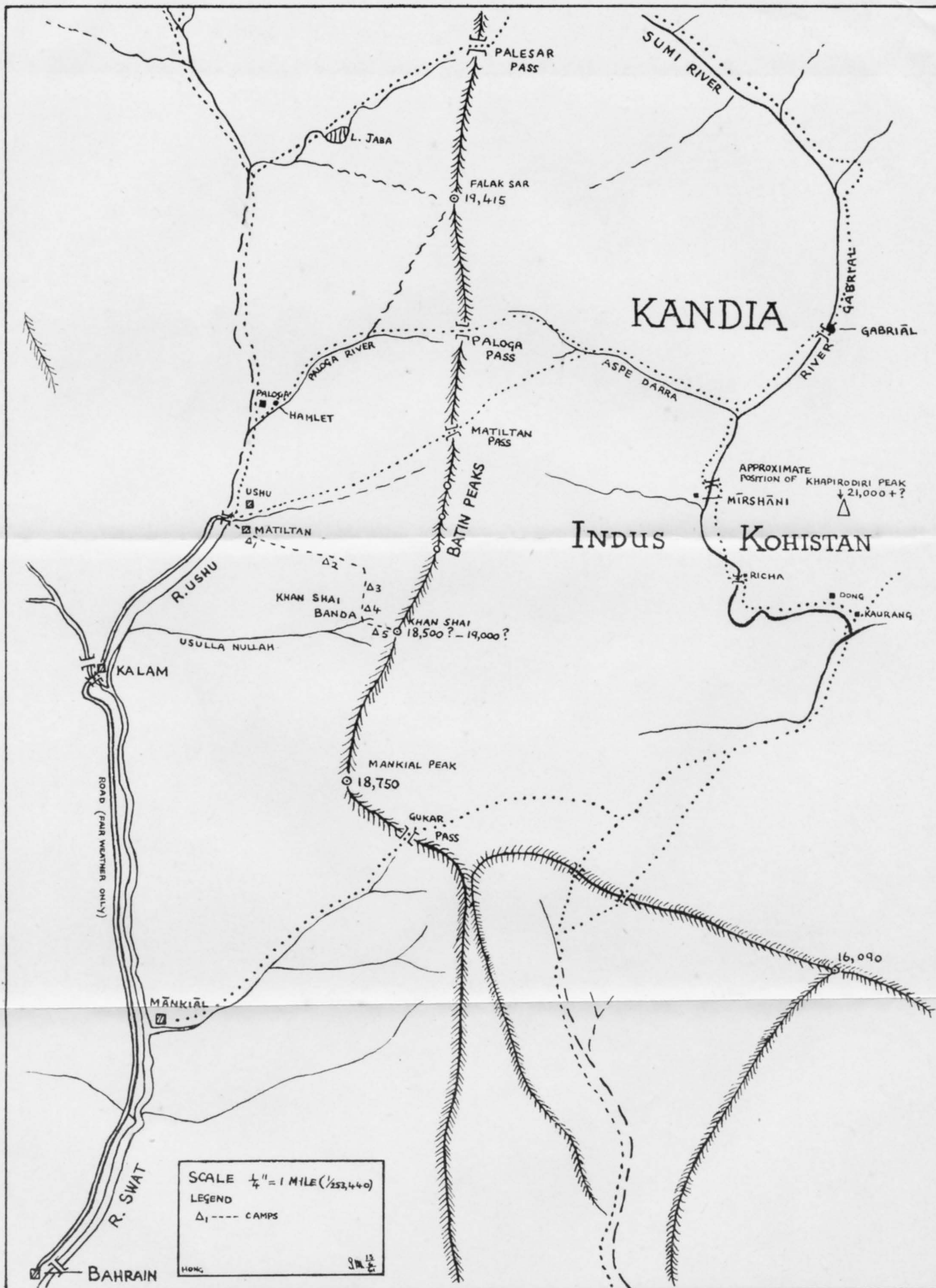
The porters arrived somewhat late in the morning—which was not surprising with no means of telling the time—but at least they were all present. Slowly we wound our way out of the wood and found ourselves at last above the tree line. Far away on our right there was a likely looking col and I traced a route to it up the smooth slopes ahead and along a protracted traverse.

All day we toiled on the treadmill of track making; the snow accepting us, in places, up to our armpits. We tried one technique after another. Once the porters took over, with Benares Khan leading, and explaining, 'You are men and we also are men, so we will help you. We too will try.' But our progress was barely perceptible; at best two yards a minute.

Later in the afternoon, during the long traverse across the great plastered slopes, we moved under the constant threat of avalanche. At one heart-stopping moment there was the sudden dull thump of windslab avalanche and a vast section of snow dropped a few inches beneath our feet. We went on cautiously; the porters now nervous and forced on only by Waheed's mixed volleys of encouraging cries and sarcastic taunts.

The col seemed far away when we set up camp and there had still been no sight of the peak. When the porters left they warned of avalanches and after they had gone I sensed an air of doom about the place and felt uneasy. There was a vague hopelessness about our journey. What if there was no peak? What if the gamble failed? How much more certain an attempt on Falak Sar would have been. I was worried too about the effect of this boring, exhausting labour on the other three, but they were cheerful and had accepted it with a certain show of Muslim fatalism. But I did not want their keenness and élan to be dulled and blunted by the sullen test of these passive, unchallenging, unending steeps.

It was colder that night—24 degrees of frost—but we slept well and awoke to another clear day. As arranged, only two porters came; the



SKETCH-MAP OF SWAT AND INDUS KOHISTAN

wolfish, dashing Benares Khan and the quiet, shy Mahmud Khan, the others having gone down to wait until recalled.

There was a light, chill wind which drove the drift downhill, whispering sinisterly in the silence, as we struggled on through the white morass. After about an hour we topped one of the succession of ribs and saw, lying back, a square-topped tower of a peak. It looked high and a long way off. I felt an immense relief; all uncertainty was gone. This mountain would be, for the others, the realisation of their training and hopes. And for me it fulfilled my responsibility and my promises to them. If it was not *the* peak, from that summit everything should be revealed to us. At least we now had an objective on which we could fix our eyes and our will.

A few yards farther on we met tracks which crossed ours and went on higher. Khurshid, ever the romantic, announced quite decisively that the Abominable Snowman was about. I was sceptical, but they were quite large and the creature had walked on two legs. Later in the valley we saw a large monkey making similar tracks. But what would these animals want so high up in the mountains in the winter? While this kind of question goes unanswered, and tracks appear suddenly on remote heights, the mystery will remain and nourish the legend.

These tracks, and the sight of the peak, relieved the boredom of the long slog to the col. It was well after midday before we waded the last few yards into one of the group of deserted huts which was the *banda* of the Khan Shai.

After lunch, while the other two and the porters returned to the last camp for the remainder of the loads, Gabby and I pushed the route on across the rising flanks of the col. Conditions were suddenly much better and we made what seemed to be amazingly fast progress in snow which was only knee deep. By late afternoon we had reached a point near the foot of a rock-fringed gangway which led up the steep flank of a long ridge. Here we turned back. From earlier observation we knew that when the top of the ridge was gained it could be followed to what appeared to be a higher col. From this a narrow steep ridge seemed to rise towards the block of the summit, which was now hidden from view.

The hut was an obvious Base Camp and in some ways, from a purely social point of view, preferable to a tent. But if it was larger, it was also much colder. The fire that was kindled, in one corner, spread no hint of warmth through the hut and the thermometer near my bed continued to register a frosty 17° F. Even the hoped for flicker of homely flames was subdued by clouds of acrid, choking smoke. So we sat there, by the light of a few guttering candles, weeping and sniffing, deep in sleeping bags, be-gloved, hatted and down-jacketed, cherishing the illusion of comfort afforded by four walls and a roof.

After supper we discussed the plans for the final stages of the climb. It was simple enough; the four remaining days gave us just enough time—with good weather—to set up the one or two camps required and make an attempt. My main object was to get two of the others—Khurshid and Waheed—to the top first.

The next day, by mid-morning, we were on the ridge having followed the line of the gangway after climbing the steep wall at its foot. Steadily throughout the day, with the two porters following, we struggled on, fighting for every foot of height against the soft billows of snow and the gradient of the ridge. Our hopes, of establishing a camp on the upper col, faded as one false crest succeeded another and the ridge still rose in an infinity of whiteness. From time to time we measured our height against Falak Sar, now clearly visible in the north, and judged it to be between sixteen and seventeen thousand feet. Late in the afternoon, after a final thrusting surge by Khurshid had petered out on the top of one more featureless step, we made a dump. I decided that there was little advantage in establishing a camp here and as there was also a danger of avalanche we retreated to the *banda*.

The following morning, two hours after renewing our struggle upward from the dump, the angle of the ridge fell back and we had our first sight of the summit. On easier ground and harder snow we swung right, still following the crest and by the lunch halt we were in sight of the col.

By four o'clock the camp on the col was established and the porters had left us. It was cold—15° F.—and we were soon snuggled into our sleeping bags, sipping a reviving brew of tea. Outside a light snowfall, driven by a stiff breeze, rattled against the tents.

The snow continued intermittently and the wind rose in force, rushing at us in great gusts of rattling noise, making the tents dance and jerk, then retreating into silence before the next onslaught. We continued to eat, drink and talk, all the while keeping an ear cocked for the wind, but there was not much that could harm us. For the first time on the climb I knew once more the unique atmosphere of utter remoteness of a high mountain camp; the sense too of being very close to the heart of the mountains and yet a trespasser in the realms of their essential solitude and mystery. There is also a curious thrill of defiance, underlying the comforting sense of security, which comes from the shelter of a sound tent and the warmth of a sleeping bag, as one lies in the darkness listening to the cold, threatening voice of the elements outside.

At about nine o'clock in the evening the snow ceased and the wind died away and we fell asleep encompassed by a great silence.

We emerged into a brilliant day. The temperature during the night had fallen to 2° F. and now it was only 8 degrees higher, but we could not have deserved more perfect weather. We climbed steadily away

from the col, up broad slopes showing signs of windslab avalanche, to the base of the summit ridge. It swept up steeply—60 degrees in places—billowing in great waves of snow and lapping round rock slabs. Without pause we continued, taking the lead in turn and it was gratifying and reassuring to see how well the others moved; how carefully they belayed and controlled the rope. A sudden drop, followed by a 20-ft. snow wall, an exposed move round an awkward piece of rock, and I led onto a flat platform. Here, just below the summit, we halted for lunch.

There was a great deal of guessing about our height. The peak was certainly nowhere near 21,000 ft. We seemed to be as high as the 18,700 ft. summit of Mankial, but it was a long way off and Falak Sar, which would have provided a useful check, was clouded over. Nearer at hand it was depressing to see that two of the spires of the Batin group were higher.

Gabby led up the final ridge and I followed last. On the summit was a cairn. We were not the first. The New Zealanders? Or surveyors? The early jubilation died away, submerged under a wave of disappointment. I tried to provide some consolation by saying how much more difficult and severe was a winter climb. But there was no substitute for an untrodden summit. Even the view into unknown Indus Kohistan was denied to us by cloud.

'Look,' said Gabby suddenly, pointing across the deep valley at our feet. A spreading mass of cloud, like a great ship in sail before the wind, rolled majestically away from the snows on the other side in Indus Kohistan. Slowly, as if this moment had been intended to entrance our small audience, a superb ice-draped peak was revealed. Through the higher veils of floating mists we could just see the soaring lines of its upper ridges fusing into a piercing summit.

The awesome dangerous beauty of the mountain mesmerised me and drew me inexorably towards it. With a distinct effort of will I tried to examine my emotions and this fascination objectively.

Self knowledge? Challenge? I rejected them: reasons so hackneyed and misused that they now had the hollow sound of the banner cry, 'Because it is there'. No, there was something more fundamental.

Then what was it that impelled me across the gulf towards the peak? With the shock of sudden recognition I knew; it could only be an immense consuming curiosity, which acted as the mainspring of adventure and the desire to know. To know what it would be like to ascend those ridges, to stand with all space about me between ice and sky. And then to know what was beyond. Yet still I was unsure. The very simplicity of the answer, its ingenuousness, made me doubtful of its truth.

I looked at my companions. They were silent; held irresistibly by the compelling attraction of the mountain. Under the sway—I was sure now—of the same emotions and longing which gripped me. Their disappointment was gone: forgotten. From the summit of their first peak they were looking at the face of the unknown; caught up in the exciting mystery of the mountain world. And they would go on. That was all the success I asked from the expedition.