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# Looking Back

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JOHN HUNT

## Beyond Gulmarg

Exploring the Pir Panjal in the Thirties

(Plates 80–82)

Most visitors to Kashmir will be aware of the popular holiday resort of Gulmarg, which lies about 50 miles west of Srinagar on the forested slopes which flank the southern edge of the Vale of Kashmir. Situated in the deodar forests on the northern flanks of the range, Gulmarg has long provided a haven for visitors seeking a cool retreat from the glare and heat which prevail at lower levels during the summer months. But probably very few of them, even today, are familiar with the highlands above and beyond Gulmarg. For trekkers in summer and for skiers during the late winter and spring, the Pir Panjal range is a paradise. Its high rolling uplands, with several summits rising to around 15,000ft, extend for 100 miles along the western borders of Kashmir. Three thousand feet above the village and the forests, a vast slope of open pastureland, the Khilan Marg, sweeps down to the tree level from the steep rampart of ridges and gullies on the northern flanks of Apherwat (13,943ft), one of the higher peaks. Throughout the winter and until early May, this area lies beneath some ten feet of snow.

The early years following the First World War marked the beginning of downhill competitive skiing. At that time, British skiers led the world, and it was not long before enthusiasts serving in this outpost of the British Empire had found a centre for their sport: the Ski Club of India was formed at Gulmarg in 1929. But Pejanpathri, the pastoral highlands beyond the Khilan Marg, an 'empty quarter' known only to shepherds in summer, was still waiting to be explored. In January 1931, as a junior subaltern about to embark for service with the overseas battalion of my regiment, such a prospect was beyond my imagination. I was astonished, therefore, a few days before my departure for India, to receive a telegram from a brother officer who had preceded me a few months earlier, which read: 'BRING YOUR SKIS'. This was glad news indeed.

The state of euphoria in which, only two months after I had reported for duty in Lucknow, my friend John ('Tiger') White and I walked up the track leading to Gulmarg in early April, may easily be understood. We had persuaded an indulgent Commanding Officer to grant us a month's leave of absence for an enterprise which, he was given to understand, would provide us with experience relevant to our military duties. Little did he

(a man who regarded polo and big game shooting as no less relevant) know what we were about to embark upon! We were walking through a veritable fairyland of forest still burdened with snow. We were the only visitors in the village, our only companions a Kashmiri cook and two porters.

We climbed further, beyond the forest, to base our activities at the Ski Club of India's mountain hut, high up on the Khilan Marg and close to the foot of Christmas Gully, a steep couloir which provided a route to the main ridge some 900ft higher. My friend, whose nickname was the very antithesis of his nature, was a delightful Irishman whose favourite pastime was to engage in endless 'blarney', preferably while lying in bed. He had also earned the more appropriate title of 'Charpoy' White. While he was excellent company in the hut, he lacked my own exploring zeal and could only summon up the energy to accompany me on two occasions during our stay. I realised that the risks of solo ski touring in that uninhabited vastness were considerable, but the sense of freedom, the chance to learn the basic needs of survival, and the thrill of adventure and discovery – all these made a compelling appeal.

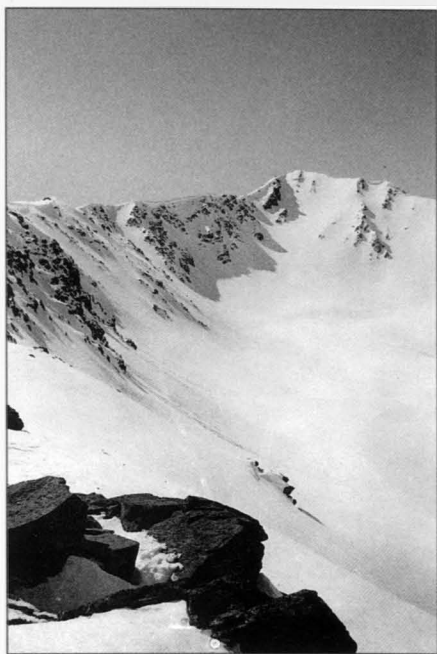
I had a great deal to learn. The first lesson was where *not* to site a tent in the event of heavy snowfall. I had decided to set up my Whymper tent near the top of Christmas Gully, under the shelter of an enormous boulder. This would save me time and effort in plodding daily up the couloir to reach those shining uplands beyond the summit ridge. Hardly had I settled in when a violent storm blew up, the tent was submerged under the weight of snow and I retreated to the hut. The bad weather continued for three days, and when I next climbed up to my camp site the Whymper tent had simply disappeared. Even with the help of our two porters, equipped only with enamel plates, it was four hours before we located it, packed six feet beneath a cast-iron surface of hail stones. I moved it to a ledge on the ridge, some 300ft higher up, and began to explore the land from that better vantage point.

Each run provided a descent of about 4000ft on a perfect snow surface – a hard crust, slightly melted by the early-morning sun. Conversely, the return journey, whether to my tent or to the Khilan Hut, made enormous demands on my stamina. As the day progressed, the heat became intense and the snow would become increasingly soggy. Despite my skis, I would sink deeper and deeper into the melting snow and each step upward involved an exhausting effort. I quote from my diary an account of one such journey:

... I began ploughing away with the greatest labour through the trees on the east flank of the ridge. It would be pointless to describe the terrific strain of this journey back on skis through saturated snow, which weighs a ton and sticks like treacle. I found my way back in four weary hours, utterly done up and suffering acute pain in my eyes. But never has cocoa tasted so good!



80. Above Gulmarg: John Hunt (R), 'Charpoy' White and companions at the Khilan Hut, Pir Panjal, in 1931. (John Hunt collection) (p191)



81. Apherwat, 4250m, one of the higher peaks in the Pir Panjal range. (John Hunt) (p191)



82. John Hunt's 'Whymper' tent pitched in Christmas Gully, Pir Panjal, 1931. (John Hunt) (p191)

I was very ill-equipped for living in those conditions. In my tent I had two blankets, but no sleeping-bag or mattress; nor did I possess a stove. Typical of the nights spent at my high camp is another diary entry:

... I did not sleep much. The evening meal had not been particularly appetising owing to the difficulty of making a wood fire in the snow. I found the snow platform fearfully cold and hard.

I was learning the hard way! But there were rewarding memories to offset such toil and trouble, such as the unforgettable moment when, from the summit of Apherwat, I gazed in wonder at the Karakoram peaks and Nanga Parbat. Little did I dream that, four years later, I would attempt the ascent of one of those giants: Saltoro Kangri. A different, no less memorable experience was shared with my Irish friend:

... Arriving at Point 7910 at 11am, we made our way smoothly down to the nala. Spring was on its way. We came across snow-free patches bright with crocuses and primulas; the air was redolent with the scent of pine needles. What a glorious combination! To start the journey amid the winter snow, and finish in the warmth and budding life in the valley.

A year later I returned to the Khilan Hut with another companion, Richard (Ricky) Thomas, a fast-speaking Welshman, who was very different from my laid-back Irish friend. He was a ball of energy and a bold and brilliant skier who, a year later, was to take part in the famed Arlberg-Kandahar ski race at Mürren. In fact we found no trace of the hut. Another exhausting dig was required before we came upon its shattered remains, smashed to matchwood beneath an avalanche which had swept down Christmas Gully.

However, I was anxious to explore the even more remote Pandanpathri, south of the Ferozepur nala, which is dominated by Shin Mahinu (13,943ft), the highest summit in the Pir Panjal. Once again, I was destined to do so alone, but in a quite different set of circumstances. As Ricky and I struggled through the forest below the Khilan Marg, making our way towards the Ferozepur nala:

... I was carrying my skis on this difficult ground, which was partly bare of snow; but Ricky insisted on keeping his on. I turned to tell him that I could not see a way down. At that moment, he skidded on an icy patch of snow, and in a flash was sliding down a steep slope of pine-needles towards the gorge on our right. Reaching the end of the slope, where it fell away on a cliff, his skis caught on some bushes and turned him head downwards – and he fell over the brink.

There followed an awful silence, and I began to panic. Leaving all my gear, I made my way, clinging insecurely to branches, to a point where I could see over the edge. There he lay, quite still, stretched out face downwards. I shouted several times, but he did not stir. Searching around, I found a possible way down and, somehow or other, managed to climb down into the gorge. When I came on him, what was my relief to see him half sitting up, gazing dazedly around, very concussed and talking gibberish. But he was alive and apparently without structural damage, though he complained of pain in his back.

The problem was how and where to get help. We could not go back the way we had come; the only chance was to continue down the narrow gorge in the hope of getting safely into the Ferozepur nala. Leaving all our equipment, we started down, myself supporting Ricky over my shoulder.

It was indeed a nightmare journey, plunging through the snow crust, trying to avoid falling into the stream; not knowing whether we might be stopped by impassable ground. But somehow we did get down that gorge and struck the path by which we reached Tangmarg; it must have been a journey of about six miles. I put Ricky to bed in the Dak bungalow and phoned for a car. I left him in hospital at Srinagar, and returned wearily to Gulmarg.

So once again I was on my own. This time I pitched my tent among the trees high above the side of the Ferozepur nala, snugly embedded in the snow and insulated with fir branches. I had obtained a sleeping-bag and a Primus stove; life was very good. During the next week or so I followed a pleasant routine of leaving the camp at 7am, climbing about 4000ft, then skimming down over the spring snow to reach the tent at around 11am, to read and relax for the remainder of the day. A welcome visitor was a Kashmiri fisherman who plodded up several times, bringing delicious snow trout which he had caught with his trident spear.

My last visit to the Khilan Marg was in April 1935 when, needing to test equipment for the K36 (Saltoro Kangri) expedition, I spent a night beside the new hut – a stout log cabin, sited much lower than the old hut, at the upper fringe of the forest. In the night a fearful blizzard began to blow. My tent was soon buried in snow and I had to spend the rest of the night in the hut. It was miserably damp and cold. Later, in a blinding snowstorm, I packed up and returned to Srinagar.

One of the pleasures of that visit was my reunion with the old chowkidar. It was the last time I saw him, for the following year the new hut, strongly built and apparently safely sited, was overwhelmed by an avalanche, killing my friend and three army officers who were there on leave.