

SNOW LAKE, 1956¹

BY D. H. GREENALD

IN THIS prosaic age of mountaineering, Conway's romanticism seems strangely out of date. Yet, from the summit of the Hispar Pass the accuracy of his description is striking: the upper basin of the Biafo glacier is indeed a lake of snow. As a climbing centre it sounded ideal. The map made by Shipton and Mott in 1939² showed a cirque of mountains at about 20,000 ft. surrounding the 'lake'. It seemed a good idea to knock them off one by one—it would be like climbing from the Oberland Concordia hut, except that the climbs might take two or three days instead of one. Campbell Secord managed to find us a photograph of the highest, called appropriately 'Snow Lake Peak' (21,630 ft.). It was a beautiful mountain on which we might spend the whole of the first week.

To climb in a Himalayan playground was at first our only aim, but even a cursory reading of the literature made it impossible not to think of exploration. From the Shimshal valley to the north the Vissers had tried to ascend in turn the outlandish Virjerab, Yazghil and Khurdopin glaciers. In no case had they succeeded, but in 1939 Shipton and Scott Russell had climbed out of the Snow Lake to a col from which they looked down into the last-named glacier. We planned to cross this col and wander pleasantly for a week or so in the unknown country on the other side. An enterprising party might even force a route down to Shimshal. When these projects were completed and we came home down the Hispar, we would linger near its mouth to have a good look at Disteghil Sar. All this was to be accomplished on classical Tilman economy lines, with the added refinement that no climbing porters would be employed. Fortunately, in the event, we weakened on the last point to the extent of taking two inexperienced Baltis. Even so, six weeks seemed a prodigal amount of time to spend on these plans. To while away the odd moments, therefore, our doctor arranged a programme of physiological research. This was concerned with the action of the adrenal cortex in acclimatisation. On off days it involved

¹ The L.S.E. Himalayan Expedition: a private expedition helped by grants from the Mount Everest Foundation, the Medical Research Council, and the Central Research Fund of the University of London, to whom grateful acknowledgment is made. The members of the party were Jim Durbin, Denis Greenald, Mrs. Gwen Greenald and Dr. Edward Williams. Capt. Zafar, Pakistan Army, acted as Liaison Officer.

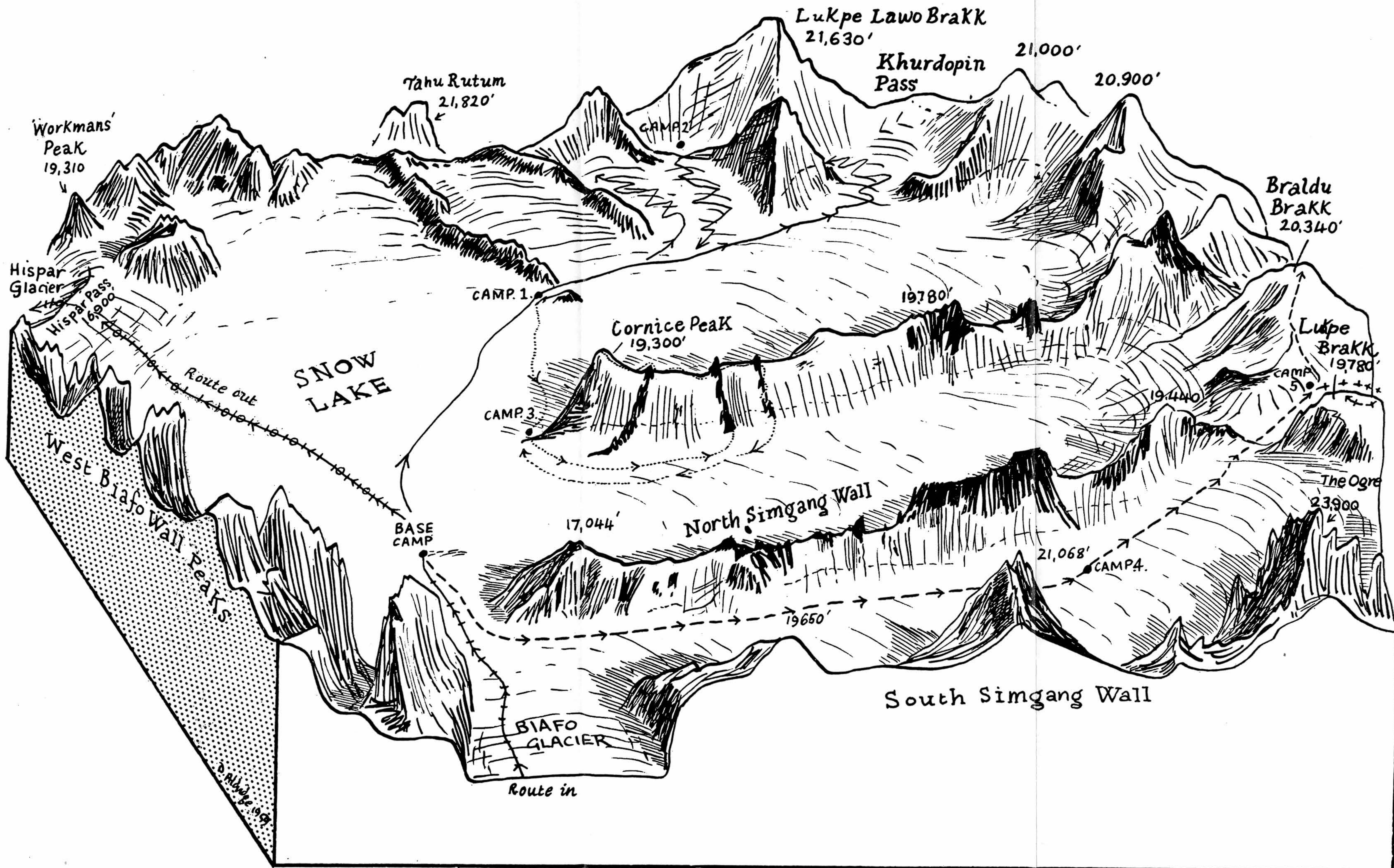
² *Geographical Journal*, July–Sept. 1950.

us in chewing so-called tasteless wax and spitting into little plastic bottles, whilst an even odder ritual had to be followed in the mornings immediately on waking. This required the manipulation of watch, thermometer, a bottle of black fluid, sellotape, not to mention the notebook and pencil in which to record the results. To do this at 3 a.m. by candlelight, before breakfast, before a climb, called for self-discipline.

At the beginning of July we left the warm hospitality of the Goodwin brothers at Rawalpindi, and made the exciting flight up the Indus gorge to Skardu. From here to Askole the route is well known if not exactly a beaten track in all places. Everybody said it would take five days and everybody was right. Moreover, they were not the kind of days we had sensuously anticipated—a few brisk hours' walk in the cool morning and camp for the day. Instead we marched from dawn to dusk, first staggering like legionnaires over the sandy wastes of the Shigar, and later making enormous detours where the swollen Braldu had covered the usual path. Four miles or so east of Askole we left the main Baltoro trunk road and turned northwards into the terminal moraines of the Biafo. Once the ice had been reached on the second day progress might have been very rapid on this vast but otherwise innocuous glacier. Speed however was dictated entirely by the bargaining skill of our porters, particularly the independent contingent lately recruited from Askole, so that it was not until noon on the fifth day that we finally dumped our loads at the corner of the Snow Lake where the Sim Gang meets the Biafo. The midsummer heat of the march and the strain of managing the coolie band had left us exhausted; it was with intense relief that we paid off the forty men and watched them disappear down the glacier.

Nothing however could mar the magnificence of the scene before us. We could see the monster Ogre across the Sim Gang; ethereal fairy peaks rose beyond the snowy Hispar: but dominating everything were the giant aiguilles of the West Biafo Wall. Three monoliths in particular held our gaze; they soared in one unbroken sweep of granite for 2,000 ft. or more straight from the glacier; surely these faces will not be climbed. The Snow Lake Peak itself was not visible from base camp, but half a mile further up into the névé basin its distinctive outline was immediately recognised—a symmetrical pyramid with twin summits, framed by two smaller peaks like pawns protecting a king. Between and on either side of these descended three ice-falls, each of which could give access to the West ridge, the only one which seemed to offer a reasonable route to the summit.

Camp I was now set up about a mile from the nearest of these ice-falls. It was some five miles from base and on hard snow a pleasant two-hour walk across the dune-like surface of the glacier. The weather up to now had been perfect but no sooner had the tents been pitched



THE NAMES ARE NOT OFFICIAL ; CORNICE PEAK IS THAT CLIMED BY MR. AND MRS. GREENALD ; BRALDU BRAKK IS THE FIRST, AND LUPKE BRAKK THE SECOND, OF THOSE CLIMBED BY MR. DURBIN AND DR. E. S. WILLIAMS.

than a storm began which lasted for three days. The route from base was never quite the same again; from now on we were continually hampered by heavy snowfalls. From our vantage point the most westerly ice-fall looked easy enough. It ended at a high plateau which would enable us to outflank the more northerly smaller peak and get straight on to the West ridge. In fact, it rose some 2,000 ft. and its upper third was gashed by outrageous ice cliffs between which we wallowed in waist-deep powder snow. About 200 ft. from the top we gave up convinced that this was not a reasonable way for large loads and untrained porters.

There were still two ice-falls left but unfortunately neither of them led directly to the West ridge but ended at a steep col below it. The obvious way to tackle the col was from a saddle linking the two peaks which defended the Snow Lake Peak. Both ice-falls led to this saddle: the one going directly up between the two peaks was steep—the other, winding round the back of the right-hand peak was long. On a memorable day Gwen and I ascended the long ice-fall which had no difficulties and descended the short one which was full of them. Great bergschrunds kept us away from the sides whilst the centre was a rotting chaos of lurching séracs, uneasy snow bridges and gaping crevasses. As a snow storm began half-way down the descent took on a nightmare quality, and like blind men in a maze we groped our way from one cul-de-sac to the next.

By painful elimination the way to Camp II was now clear: the long way round, five miles from Camp I and 2,000 ft. higher. Its position on the saddle at about 18,500 ft. was superb, commanding a view right down to Base Camp and the mammoth aiguilles of the West Biafo Wall, whilst behind, the South-west face of the Snow Lake Peak rose in one unbroken fluted snow slope to the twin summits. Behind also, at the head of a sheltered cwm was the curtain of snow and ice which barred our way to the West ridge. It was steeper than we cared to admit and some 600 ft. in height, but if it could be climbed we were certain that the summit could be reached. On August 20, with Camp II well stocked, Jim, Gwen and I made our effort. We left at 3 a.m. and climbed in the shadow of a full moon on the coldest day we had had. Hopes were high for a fine day but dawn revealed a tell-tale sea of dirty grey cloud seeping up from the south-west.

We crossed the bergschrund by the only available bridge and began to climb diagonally to a band of rock some 200 ft. higher. The condition of the slope was appalling, about a foot of rotting snow-ice rested on the hard stuff beneath. For safety we fixed a miscellany of our spare bits of rope and line, but the placing of each piton was a major operation and progress was slow. It took eight hours to reach the first rock, by which time it was snowing hard, and we had reached the end

of our strength. It was clear that the col could be climbed, but that it would need much preparation and a third camp would need to be carried to the top. We turned, grasped the 'Thank God' handrail and got down somehow to the security of Camp II.

Here we were confined for three miserable days whilst the blizzard continued and our hopes of the Snow Lake Peak waned. To cap our misfortunes, Ahmad, our porter, became ill and convinced himself that he was about to die. Certainly his cough was desperate and his tongue a ghastly sight. We gave him an empty porridge tin to spit into and a random selection of pills and sat out the storm to the accompaniment of his monotonous wailings to Allah.

At last the sun shone again and we began the task of getting him down to Edward at Camp I. In the deep soft snow it was heavy work and we needed two intermediate camps before everything was ferried; there Ahmad immediately recovered. Edward himself had spent a cheerless five days there, for Zafar, our liaison officer had most inconveniently abandoned that camp, taking with him Asgar, the other porter and the only stove.

It seemed incredible, but we had spent almost four weeks on our attempt on the Snow Lake Peak. The bad weather, and Zafar's limited conception of his role, had hindered our efforts. It was nearly time for Gwen and me to go home. To go without a summit was unthinkable and we made plans to snatch one from the south side of Snow Lake. Earlier in the month we had climbed with Jim to the lower summit of this peak by the easiest of three rock ribs which descended its West face. The way to the true summit was barred by an unpleasant cornice immediately before us and a steep gendarme just below the summit. Gwen and I now decided to try the centre rib which, though much steeper, would bring us out further along the summit ridge and so avoid the offending cornice.

We wasted no time and in the evening of the day we had arrived at Camp I we set off across the Snow Lake to a tent which Jim and Edward had left for us earlier in the day. We waited until dusk before starting hoping that the crust would then be hard. Unfortunately it wasn't and neither did the moon rise soon enough to light our way. It was rather eerie groping and shambling that three miles in the dark, and little short of a miracle that we went straight to the tent. The climb next day went beautifully. The ridge, broken at first, gave way to good clean granite slabs and grooves, with some pitches that were hard enough. At 9 a.m. we reached the foot of a steep snow slope and by noon were on the summit ridge. We lunched, ditched our rucksacks and moved off with a jangling of crampons and pitons. Much to our relief none of these aids was necessary. The snow continued good, the final gendarme was dangerous but not difficult and a few more knobs

of rock and a final bank of snow brought us to the summit cornice at 3 p.m. The complexity of the mountain scene defied our intelligence, for we could now for the first time look beyond our familiar neighbours of the Snow Lake. In the north Kanjut Sar reared up like a great wedge of cheese, but we tried in vain to decide which was K2 and the Muztagh Tower which lay somewhere in that turbulent landscape.

We were quickly back at the rucksacks, and instead of going back the same way we decided to traverse along the cornice to the snow dome reached on the previous climb. We did this warily, moving one at a time with a piton belay at the end of each run-out. In an hour we breathed easily again and began the descent of the far ridge. The shadows creeping up the West face met us as we reached the bottom of the rock, and in gathering gloom we ran down the remaining snow slopes to the barely visible tent. Next morning we packed everything up and went down to base where the whole party was now reassembled. Our climb had been snatched only just in time—in the afternoon it started to snow again—and two days later we two and Zafar crossed the Hispar Pass on our way home.

Meanwhile Jim, Edward, and the two Baltis had been busy. Camp I had been completely evacuated and a dump of food placed some eight miles up the Sim Gang glacier. Shipton had once suggested that we might attempt Bobisghir (21,130 ft.), which lay over the watershed of this glacier some twenty miles from our Base Camp. It seemed a remote hope that the two of them could climb a mountain so far away in the ten days which remained. However, it would be interesting to have a look and in any case there were two mountains of about 20,000 ft. close to the Lukpe La, either of which might be feasible. In two marches they covered the 16 miles and the 3,000-ft. climb to the summit of the Lukpe La. It was clear that Bobisghir was out of the question from this side but the peak (20,340 ft.) to the north of the pass looked distinctly hopeful, with a long ridge curling gently in a horseshoe directly to the summit. 'No harder than Snowdon in winter' was their reaction. Next day they followed it for three hours but were turned back by an ice slope not noticed from below: like everything else in the Karakoram this was longer, steeper, and more difficult than it looked. The day was not wasted, for they were able to work out an alternative route on the South face, via a central rock rib and snow traverse to the summit ridge. Next day they climbed the mountain by this route—not without a struggle. A final short rock pitch brought them exhilarated to the summit—at 20,340 ft. the highest reached by the expedition. They descended by the same route, roping down a gendarme somewhat precariously on the climbing rope, and reached the camp on the Lukpe La at 6.30 p.m., thirteen and a half hours after leaving. After a day's rest they packed up the gear and sent the two porters down with

it to the camp on the Sim Gang, themselves climbing the 19,780-ft. peak south of the pass. Snow conditions on this north-facing slope were excellent and they had a straightforward enjoyable trudge to the summit.³ The weather was now breaking up again and with all possible speed they raced back to the Base Camp at the Snow Lake, counting their blessings for the six clear days which had made possible their successful sortie.

By September 9 a tent had been placed on the Hispar Pass and all the gear moved to a dump at its foot. Ahmad and Asgar, the two Baltis, who had served the party so faithfully moved off home down the Biafo, and Jim and Edward prepared to wait for the porters whom we were to send from Hispar village. In reaching their rendezvous at the Hispar Pass, Jim and Edward were benighted after ascending the ice-fall in a blizzard.

The project of traversing both Hispar and Biafo glaciers had been for us one of the main attractions of the area. Conway, the Workmans and various members of Shipton's 1939 expedition were the only travellers over this seventy-mile stretch of ice until recently Desio in 1954 and a Japanese party in 1955 also completed the traverse. Gwen, Zafar and I found that it took five slogging days to cover the forty miles from Base Camp to Hispar village. After the first exhilarating marches on the ice the going, whether amongst the interminable moraines or on the crumbling hillsides was always, as Zafar said 'horreeble'. Particularly was this so whenever one of the great tributary glaciers met the main Hispar stream from the right, for here the ice was convulsed and all mistakes were paid for dearly in sweat and toil.⁴ At Hispar we intended that Zafar should return with porters to meet Jim and Edward, but we hadn't the heart to insist on this. Rather dubiously we agreed to send a dozen villainous Hispar men alone. Once the principle had been agreed we left Zafar to make the best bargain he could and somewhat foolishly set off by ourselves to Nagir.

At first the path was idyllic, winding along beside the rushing river; we bivouacked early in a sandy hollow by some scrub pines and promised ourselves a leisurely stroll the next day. It seemed obvious that as we neared Nagir the going must get progressively better. Unfortunately the reverse was the case and on the next day the gorge narrowed and the path went straight into the torrent. It was unthinkable to traverse the rocky bluffs along the side without a rope but it was equally impossible to see an alternative. We were arguing about what to do next when two figures came bounding along from Hispar.

³ Here good tracks of Abominable Snowman were seen.

⁴ These difficulties, except those on the tributary glaciers, can be avoided by joining the ancient lateral moraines immediately after crossing the Kani Bazar glacier.

We tagged along behind—straight up the hillside for about a thousand feet until faint traces were found. Here it was obvious that we should be left behind unless some re-arrangement of loads were made. The Hispar men were travelling light, carrying only drums, and we understood that they were going to play at a dance that evening in Nagir. Two packs and five rupees were accordingly handed over for two side and one kettle drum. Thus the strange party proceeded, traversing for hours high above the river, kicking and hacking steps in the hard-baked mud, clinging precariously to the unstable scree. At last we descended to the river bed crossed a rickety plank bridge and continued on the opposite bank. By this time Gwen and I were swaying with fatigue—we had now been marching for a week on iron rations. Nagir however was now in sight and our musicians had obviously no intention of disappointing their public. The last obstacle filled us with despair. A glacier came in from the left and we had to cross its dirty snout and climb a thousand feet to the green fields. It was dark as we plodded the remaining two miles to the Mir's palace, and sank exhausted on the Rest House verandah. Half an hour later we were eating the meal of our lives in the Mir's best drawing room. He entertained us royally and treated Gwen with great respect as the first woman to enter his domain by the 'back door'. We rested a day in this beautiful oasis and then finished our journey by horse and jeep to Gilgit.

Meanwhile Zafar was on his way to Nagir and the porters were making their own way to the Hispar Pass. It says much for their integrity that they arrived precisely according to schedule, even though it was snowing hard. Edward and Jim, in addition to the discomforts of the route, had also to contend with the porters. They had no complaints about their ability to do the job: they were strong, sure footed and prepared to march for long periods without rest. Their physical toughness however was matched by an equal psychological toughness and they were clearly resolved to exploit the situation to the maximum. Yet although they plagued our friends unmercifully for extra pay, rations, equipment, etc., nothing was actually stolen. At Hispar a great wage dispute took place before the entire population of the village, and extortionate rates had to be agreed in order to get the men to move down to Nagir. Here the authority of the Mir was re-established, and much to the horror of Jim and Edward four of the ringleaders were promptly arrested. Their punishment showed evidence of an enlightened penal policy: each man was required to carry five gallons of paraffin back to Hispar.

The long trek was now almost over: Jim, Edward and Zafar rode as we had down the Hunza gorge on horse and jeep to Gilgit. Here Edward remained to continue his lone journey along the Indus back to Skardu in order to complete his studies of the Balti people. His

scientific work throughout had been far-ranging. Besides the main programme of physiological research and his interest in anthropology, he had taken measurements of barometric pressure at known altitudes, measurements of glacial change, and had collected samples of soil for microbiological study. It is these studies, together with the distances travelled, which constitute the achievement of the expedition. If our names are not emblazoned in the hall of Karakoram fame, we can always identify ourselves, not without pleasure, as those sterling characters Male 1, 2 and 3, and Female 1, in ' Digital Palmar Sweating ', *British Medical Journal*, 1959, Vol. i, pp. 199-201.⁵

⁵ See also *Brit. Med. J.*, 1959, Vol. i, pp. 197-8, and *Nature*, Vol. 181, p. 1527.