

## HIMALAYAN BYWAYS

BY J. O. M. ROBERTS

THESE are over 220 miles of mountains from Nun Kun eastwards to Leo Pargial; this is the country of Kishtwar and the Punjab Hill States, Chamba, Kulu, Lahul, Spiti and Bashahr, the Kangra Himalaya. The mountains here seldom exceed 22,000 ft., but for their height they are probably as fine as any in the Himalaya, and the approaches are usually short and easy. Their lack of feet has protected them during the last ten years, which have seen so many conquests in other parts of the Himalaya; serious-minded mountaineers can hardly be expected to waste time in a region which is usually described as being suitable for the less ambitious traveller. But last year, left at the last moment without a friend to climb with, I felt far from ambitious and decided to start my two months' leave in Kulu; from Kulu I planned to wander as I pleased, N. to Lahul, E. to Spiti or S.E. to Bashahr and the Kanawar Kailas. My companions were three Gurkhas, who had no experience of mountaineering. One of them, Lallbahadur Pun, soon developed into a very safe and reliable climber, and another, Narbahadur Pun, though too young to go high, did excellent work as quartermaster and cook. The third man, Sanak Gurung, did not approve of snow or mountaineering and had to be encouraged with promises of shikar, which never materialised.

We travelled from Dharmsala in the Kangra valley to Manali by car and lorry. Manali is 6500 ft. up, near the head of the Kulu valley. We arrived there on May 16, and the next day we went up the Jagat Sukh valley with one coolie and a local shikari to show us the way and name the peaks. Early on the second day we reached the spring snow line and pitched our two little 5-lb. tents at about 11,000 ft. The coolie returned to Manali. We had come to try to climb a mountain called Deo Tibba. It is about 20,000 ft. high and almost the only mountain in Kulu honoured with a name. But of Deo Tibba there was not yet a sign. The shikari had told me before that if we wanted to see Deo Tibba we were going up the wrong nala; it lay, he said, up the Hamta, which is a parallel valley to the N. But General Bruce's guide, Führer, had already attempted the mountain from the head of the Hamta in 1912,<sup>1</sup> and I wished to examine the approach from the Jagat Sukh. According to the Survey map the mountain is equally divided between the heads of the two nalas. Failing a direct approach from the Jagat Sukh, I hoped to make a pass over into the upper névé basin of the Malana Glacier to the E. and take the mountain from the rear.

So the next morning three of us set forth up the valley to look for

<sup>1</sup> *Kulu and Lahul*, by C. G. Bruce, 1914.

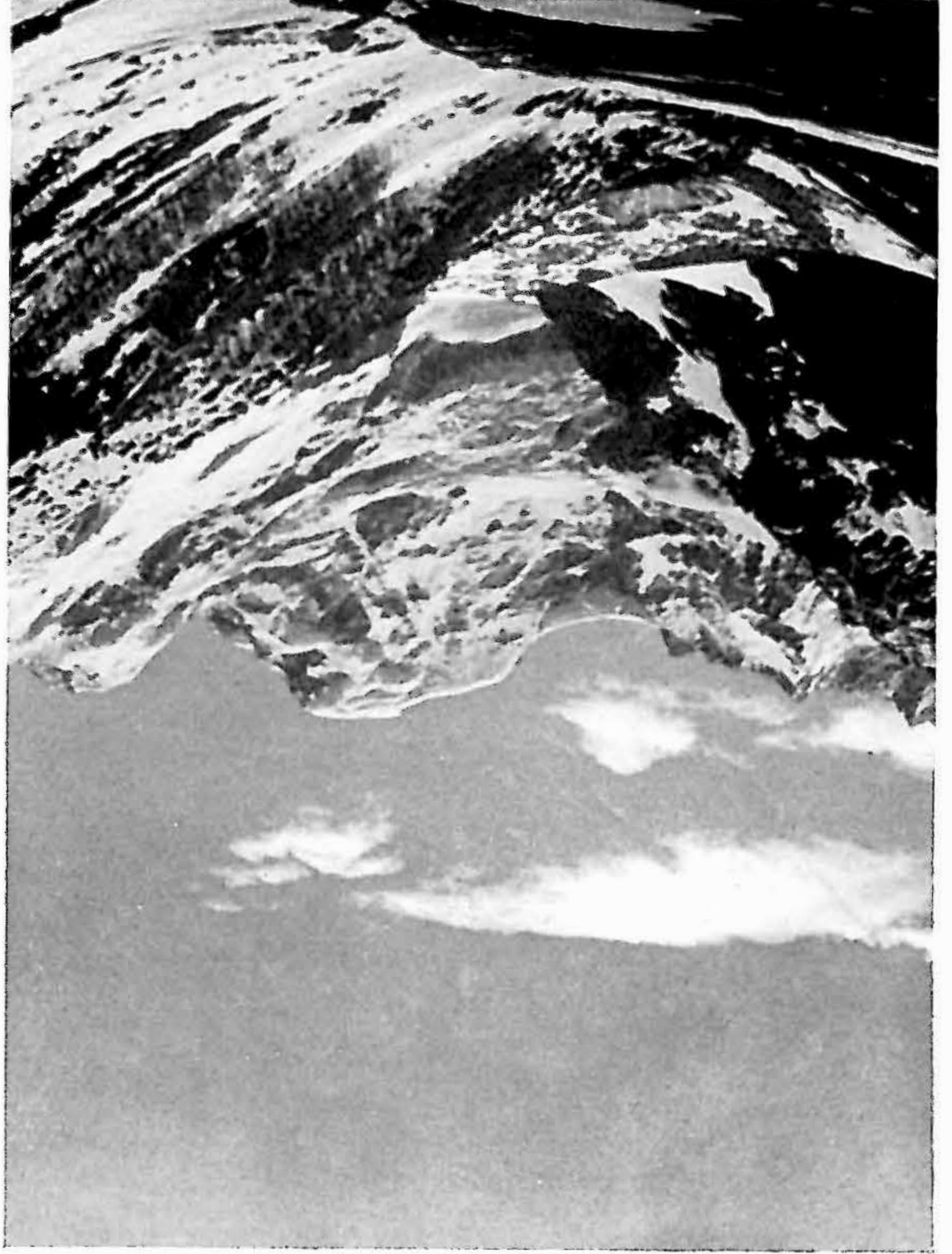
S. FACE OF PK. 20,101 FROM PARBATI GLACIER.

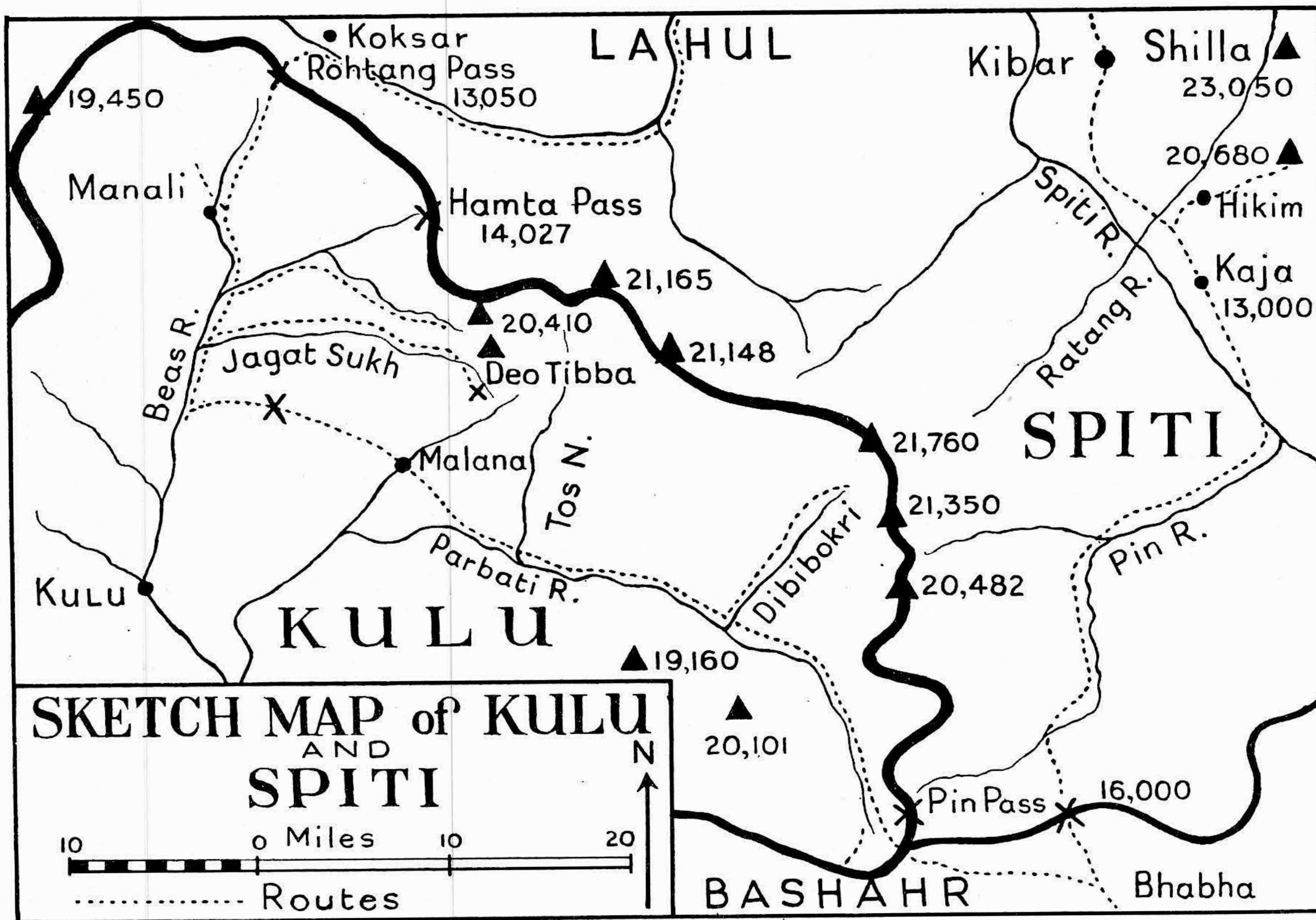
[Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]



DEO TIBBA FROM THE HAMTA VALLEY.

[Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]





Deo Tibba. We reached about 13,500 ft. and a viewpoint from which, through mist and frequent snow showers, we could see the somewhat uninspiring peaks and meagre glaciers which fill the head of the nala. To our left was a buttress of rock and hanging ice, which looked as if it might belong to Deo Tibba, but the summit was hidden. But I saw that a way could be made out of the head of the valley; and deciding to make this our next move, we ran back to camp.

It snowed most of the evening, but the next morning was brilliantly fine, and we pitched a tent at 13,500 ft. Lallbahadur and I stayed with four or five days' food, and the others descended. Later in the day we attempted a small reconnaissance upwards, but at about 2 P.M. it began to snow again, so we returned to our tent. We left at 7.30 the next morning. The going was very easy, but our loads felt very heavy; we were out of training and had to keep sitting down every 200 yards or so. After three hours' snow-slogging we reached 15,500 ft. and the foot of the final steep 1000-ft. slope to the col. We had climbed some 200 ft. when it began to snow hard. Soon the slope was running like water, miniature avalanches hissing round our legs. The horizon was coal-black, so I decided to turn back, and we camped at the foot of the slope. It snowed most of the afternoon.

On May 22 we left for our col at 6.30 A.M., travelling light without loads. It was hard work and very cold, but we were up by 8.30 and all the mountains of Kulu were before us. A few feet of easy descent and we were in the Malana snow basin and the sun. Deo Tibba was visible, but I do not think we could even yet see the real summit. A direct way might be made up it from the col, but there was too much new snow about at the time of our visit. The best approach appeared to lie up a large icefall to the N.E. This, I am now convinced, would be the best way to the top. But I am afraid that we did not bother very much about Deo Tibba: there was too much else to look at. To the E. was a great mass of mountains, unclimbed and unexplored; this is the triangle of country enclosed between the Tos and Parbati valleys and the watershed of the main Himalayan range. The peaks were as fine as the pictures I have seen of those of Garhwal, and from here they mostly looked comfortingly unclimbable. We spent the next three hours making a complete circuit of the basin, trying to identify the mountains and valleys on the map. From the southern rim we looked down on the woods and fields of Malana. The descent to the glacier from the col would be quite easy, a good ski run early in the year. Then we walked E. to explore a possible route into the Tos nala, and then N. to have a closer look at the Deo Tibba icefall and the country round the head of the glacier. And all the time the weather was perfect.

We left the basin at 1 P.M. The slope down to our tent was awkward and we descended it 100-ft. rope length by rope length. We packed up and ran on down the valley, reaching camp at 5.30. The results of our little trip had been quite satisfactory. We had made what is possibly a new pass, which, though it is of no practical value to the ordinary traveller, may be of use to the climber in Kulu. I had seen one of

the finest mountain views of my life, and we had discovered what is almost certainly a possible route up Deo Tibba. Having discovered this route, it may seem a little strange that the next day we went down to Manali and the next up the Hamta, still hunting Deo Tibba but leaving behind us the only way to the summit. The truth is that I was tired of trying to climb a mountain which I had never properly seen, and the idea of a return up all those weary miles of snow seemed very distasteful.

Thus we spent the night of the 23rd at the foot of the Hamta, and on the 24th camped up the valley at a height of about 10,500 ft. The scenery all day had been magnificent; the forests and mountains much finer than the Jagat Sukh. Deo Tibba was out of sight from our camp, and next morning, leaving the Gurkhas to wash clothes and rest, I walked slowly upwards by myself. I saw Deo Tibba after half an hour: a grand snow mountain, from here roughly square in face and curtained with great bulges of hanging ice. But by the time I had reached the snout of the glacier I had decided that the mountain was not for us. I could make out only one line of ascent that would be technically possible, to a col to the right of the peak, from where the summit would be a good snow and ice climb. But most of the route to the col would be under the threat of ice avalanches. Bruce speaks of Führer having reached 'two points on the Deo Tibba ridge.' It would be interesting to know how far he got. The whole of this side of the mountain struck me as being dangerous. Thus ended our search after Deo Tibba. The mountain is well worth climbing and should yield easily to a determined assault from the Malana basin.

The next day we devoted to a trip up the Deo Tibba Glacier. We walked for some two miles up its left moraine. I had ideas of a new pass into Lahul, but the head of the glacier is blocked by rock precipices and hanging ice. The Survey map gives the height of Deo Tibba as 19,687 ft., and of a mountain to the N. as 20,410 ft. This mountain is much less impressive than Deo Tibba, and there certainly does not appear to be a difference of over 700 ft. in their heights. We had one more day's food left, and Lallbahadur and I explored the country to the N. of our camp. We were beaten by an ice slope on a 17,000-ft. peak, which annoyed me a good deal, but later in the day, munching chocolate with our legs hanging over a 1000-ft. rock precipice into Lahul, we recovered our good humour. The next day we went down to Manali.

My mother was staying at Manali and we spent five lazy days there, sleeping and eating large quantities of cherries. We were off again on June 3, bound for the Parbati valley and the big mountains we had seen from our pass. From the head of the Parbati I hoped later to cross the Pin-Parbati pass into Spiti. We walked by the 11,500-ft. Chandra Khani pass and Malana village, and on the third day we dropped down upon Manikaran in the Parbati. There are a few small shops here and we bought flour, rice, vegetables and cigarettes. Next day we camped a couple of miles beyond Barsheni village, which is over the river from Pulga, the official stage. Here the mule road ends.



*Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]*

20,000 FT. PEAKS OF THE KULU-SPITI FRONTIER FROM COL AT HEAD OF JAGAT  
SUKH NALA.



*Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]*

PK. 21,760 FROM THE DIBIBOKRI GLACIER.

We engaged two coolies from Barsheni and I asked others if they would be willing to come with us into Spiti later in the month. The headman seemed to think that there would be little difficulty in getting coolies. The crossing of the Pin-Parbati pass involves a night on the snow and is very seldom used by the Kulu men, who are not fond of snow. The last crossing by a European of which I know was by Mr. Shuttleworth, then Assistant Commissioner in Kulu, in 1923. Doubtless others have used it since. The pass is apparently crossed fairly frequently by Spiti men on their way to the bazaar at Manikaran. We dumped two loads of food at Barsheni and went up the Parbati valley on June 7, together with two coolies, a rifle, a shikari and a sheep. The rifle and the food were for Spiti, where little but tsampa was said to be obtainable. I had taken out a big game shooting licence, more with the idea of shooting some meat than of bagging a record head.

Two days later we camped at about 13,000 ft., at the highest juniper in the Dibibokri nala, which is a northern branch of the Parbati. The coolies and the shikari returned to Barsheni and the sheep was killed. Next morning I set off at 3.30 with a very disapproving Sanak. I wished to explore Pks. 21,760 ft. and 21,350 ft., which are the two highest mountains in Kulu, and to discover a more direct route into the interior of Spiti than the Pin-Parbati route, which makes a large détour to the S. We got back to camp in the evening after a long, interesting day. Pks. 21,760 ft. and 21,350 ft. are terrific mountains, almost certainly impossible on this side. Both are roughly similar in shape, pyramids with 6000-ft. faces of slabby rock, plastered with snow and ice. Between them I traced a route up on to the watershed ridge, a possible way into the Ratang nala in Spiti for a small climbing party. But two of the Gurkhas, to say nothing of the shikari, were still quite inexperienced on snow and I could not risk attempting the col with the whole party. There were many mountains of the order of 19,000 ft. around the Dibibokri glaciers waiting to be climbed, but the two big twenty-one thousanders seemed so attractive that I determined to cross at once into Spiti by the Pin-Parbati route and explore them from that side. The new pass, on which I had also set my heart, I hoped to cross with Lallbahadur alone on our way back to civilisation, when the food transport problem would not exist.

So the next day I sent Narbahadur down to Barsheni to engage and bring up the coolies for the crossing into Spiti. We only wanted five men: three to carry our loads and the other two for the coolies' own bedding and food. It would take four or five days for the coolies to reach us, and in the meantime I decided to attempt Pk. 20,101 ft., which I had seen the day before, a fine snow mountain S. of the Parbati.

On June 11, the day Narbahadur descended to the valley, we moved camp to the so-called Kirganga Forest in the Parbati, and the next day Lallbahadur and I went up the glacier which flows down from the N. face of Pk. 20,101 ft. My only distant view of the mountain had been clouded, and now we were too close underneath it to see very much; and the little we could see was largely screened by mist. A big, nasty-

looking icefall blocks the head of the glacier, but we managed to avoid it up steep slopes to our left and camped that evening at about 16,000 ft. The summit was invisible, but I could see enough to decide that our way must lie up the eastern edge of the mountain's northern snow and ice face.

It snowed most of the night and our camp was in the mists when we woke ; later it cleared slightly and we started at 7.30 A.M. We made steady progress for the first four and a half hours, though the snow was very soft and already, at only 17,000 ft., we were sinking in up to our knees. At about 12 o'clock it began to snow and the visibility, always uncertain since the early morning, was reduced to two or three yards. We continued upwards for another half-hour and then, not knowing where we were getting to, sat down and waited for the mists to clear. It only snowed the harder, and as there was no question of camping where we were, we descended to a safe site in the lee of a crevasse some 500 ft. lower. The height of this camp was about 17,500 ft., and, given reasonably fine weather, we still had hopes of reaching the summit on the morrow. We spent a rather miserable night listening to the snow falling and wriggling to keep warm ; in order to cut down the weight of our loads we had brought only light, single-thickness sleeping bags.

I looked out at dawn ; the clouds were low and another storm seemed to be blowing up from the W. So, having neither the food nor the inclination to spend another two days on the mountain, we packed up and descended. The visibility held long enough for us to see our way down to the glacier—luckily, for our ascending tracks had been long obliterated, and I had no wish to become involved in the icefall.

Down in the Parbati it rained continuously for the next twenty-four hours, and I began to fear that a very early monsoon had arrived. For the last ten days now the weather had been bad ; mists and clouds continually blowing up the valley from the W. and the snow high up very soft. The coolies were due up the next day, June 14, but they did not arrive and I began to grow anxious, as we were running short of food ourselves. The morning of June 15 was at last gloriously fine, and in the afternoon Narbahadur turned up by himself. He brought with him the rifle, all our tea and sugar, some 3 lb. of chocolate, two tins of butter and two of sausages, cigarettes, some tsampa and the Meta fuel ; a little flour but no rice, 75 lb. of which and 50 of flour had been left below, together with a good many useless tins and a sick shikari. Almost crying, Narbahadur told me a somewhat incoherent story. Apparently everything had been ready, five loads and five coolies to carry them, when it began to rain. And at the end of three days' almost continuous rain the coolies were demanding high enough wages to ensure that they at least would not be asked to accompany us on this foolhardy adventure across the snows.

So much for the coolies. I could wait no longer and decided to go without them, though the prospect of living on tsampa, sheep and country spirit for a month was unpleasant. The Gurkhas, too, were depressed by the thought of a riceless future, but I cheered them by



promising them as much 'rum' as they could drink in Spiti. So I sent a note down to the shikari with a herdsman, telling him to sell the food and return home, and on June 16 the four of us set off for Spiti.

That evening we camped some five miles up the glacier at a height of about 15,000 ft. I had no fears about the route; it is marked on the map by a comforting dotted line, which turns E. at the head of the glacier, crosses the watershed and runs down into Spiti. A short way above our camp the glacier opened out into a névé basin, and, thinking I could see the pass ahead (it is 15,754 ft. high), I went on by myself to explore. It was no pass, but gave me a view of the possible exits to the E.; of these only one appeared traversable by local men, the test I was applying in searching for the Pin-Parbati. This route ran N. to a broad, gentle col and, although it did not agree with the red line on the map, appeared to be what we were looking for. We carried our loads up to it next day and at noon looked down, not into Spiti but on to a glacier which, as far as I could make out, fills the head of the Shorang gad nala in Bashahr. This was most annoying. We were tired from carrying heavy loads and there was not time to try another of the cols leading out of the basin that day. I was rather depressed that night, as we only had food for one more day and it seemed that we might be forced to retreat ignominiously to the valley.

On June 18 we chose and climbed the least unlikely of the remaining cols out of the head of the glacier. Long before we reached the top I knew that here was no coolie route, but we pushed on. The col was about 16,000 ft. high. We reached the summit in snow and mist and saw a glacier flowing away down a valley to the E., which seemed to conform with the extremely sketchy Pin valley of the map. We went down. The first 1500 ft. were steep and the rope performed several life-saving miracles. The descent was to the right of an icefall, down a couloir of frozen snow. Narbahadur and Sanak spent much of the time on their backs, but never more than two of the party were out of control at one time, and after two hours of somewhat anxious work we slid joyfully down on to the more level slopes below. We thought we had made a way to the N. of the pass; actually we were to the S. of it, and the real Pin-Parbati route must take off much lower down the Parbati Glacier than the map suggests.

The lower part of the glacier was easy and we were off the ice by 2 P.M. We ran on downwards, down a steep-walled valley filled with snow; the mists were low and we could see very little. After two hours we left the snows behind and walked over meadows bright with yellow flowers. There were dwarf birch trees, and I remembered that I had heard that Spiti was a treeless country. Then we saw, far down the valley, a small forest of silver birch and pine trees. It remained to find out what country we had wandered into. It was evening when we reached the first shepherds' encampment. When the snarling dogs had been silenced I approached one of the men. He did not look like a man of Spiti. 'Spiti?' I asked, still hopeful, pointing at the ground. 'Na, Bashahr,' the man said. We were in the Bhabha nala in Bashahr,



*Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]*

LOOKING W. TOWARDS LAHUL FROM LOWER SLOPES OF PK. 20,680.



*Photo, J. O. M. Roberts.]*

NEAR THE HEAD OF THE BHABHA NALA IN BASHAHR.

*[To face p. 239.]*

the country to the S. of Spiti. This was something of a feat. By crossing only one pass we had arrived in the Bhabha from the Parbati, although on the map the two valleys have no common frontier.

We drank milk and asked questions. To the N. the 16,000-ft. Bhabha pass was open to yaks and horses, and Spiti could be reached in a couple of days. Alternatively we could descend to the Hindustan-Tibet road and explore the Kanawar Kailas and the mountains of Bashahr.

We descended to the woods and lit a great fire. The shepherds could not sell us a sheep and our food was nearly finished. The men ate tsampa and I polished off our last tin, sausages, which they would not touch. Next morning we went down the valley in search of food and coolies to carry it. The scenery was very beautiful, finer and more open than Kulu. Our plans were still unsettled when we set off, but in two hours we managed to acquire a sheep, two yaks and a maund of rice, and thus equipped we returned a short way up the valley to camp. Once again we were bound for Spiti.

The yak man refused to be hurried ; we camped at the traditional halting places and usually soon after midday. It took us three days to reach Muth, the first village in Spiti. Here we engaged two coolies and went on down to Sungnum the same afternoon. At Sungnum I kept my promise to the Gurkhas ; Spiti had seemed a little depressing at first, but after three bottles of the local spirit life seemed worth living again. Spiti is brown and treeless and must be very like Tibet, though without the fascination of the rolling open spaces of the Tibetan plateau. The people are Tibetan in character and speak the western dialect of the language. The valleys are gorge-like and rather oppressive. The Gurkhas thought Spiti a horrible country and talked longingly of the green alps and forests of their Nepal.

We walked down the Pin river to its confluence with the Spiti river, and then up the latter to Kaja village, two days' march from Sungnum. There was a Government dispensary at Kaja and we found a Dharmasala-born Gurkha in charge ; Dr. Mohan Sing revived us with the local beer and helped us in many ways, buying food and engaging good coolies. I asked him about the Ratang nala, up which I wanted to go for an exploration of Pks. 21,760 ft. and 21,350 ft., and of the pass into Kulu which I had seen from the head of the Dibibokri. He told me that the nala was usually considered impassable until the autumn, but said he would make inquiries. Meanwhile we went up the Shilla valley to the N.E.

According to the map there is a big mountain up this nala, Shilla, 23,050 ft. high. It is reputed to have been climbed in 1861 by a subordinate of the Survey, who stuck a pole on the summit. I thought a trip up the mountain might give us a good view of the surrounding country. The path kept well above the gorge of the river, to the E. Near Hikim village we saw a fine mountain with a triangular snow face. We had a good man from Kaja with us, and he said the peak was the biggest hereabouts. We asked the Hikim villagers, who also said there was nothing higher behind and that the mountain was called Shilla.

The map, eighty years old, is very sketchy, but this Shilla of the local people seemed to correspond to Pk. 20,680 ft. on the map; in which case the 23,000-ft. peak would be hidden behind it to the N. Certainly the mountain we could see did not look like a 23,000-footer. To clear up the problem I determined to climb it.

The first night we camped at about 16,000 ft. We were near the foot of our mountain but separated from it by a deep gorge, which we spent the next morning circumventing. Rain set in and we camped early. The two coolies collected firewood for us and then descended.

On June 27 Lallbahadur and I left at 5.30 A.M. For the first three hours the going was easy but unpleasant, up steep scree and crumbling rock to a shoulder to the left of our peak. We had hoped for a view northwards from here, but all was hidden in mist and cloud; a storm was blowing over from the Kulu mountains in the S.W. From the shoulder we went up the left-hand edge of the triangular snow face, which is bounded on this side by the E. ridge. For the first hour we made good progress. Then suddenly the snow on which I was standing slid from under my feet; I stopped inside a yard, but it was a timely warning and from now on I had to cut steps. It was tiring work shovelling away a couple of feet of soft snow and then cutting into hard ice; Lallbahadur enlarged the steps for the descent. It was snowing now and we could see very little. After nearly two hours of this work we had made ridiculously little headway and I felt very tired. So I cut across to the rocks of the E. ridge. The rocks were icy and rotten, but we were able to make better progress up the deep, soft snow drifted beside them. At 11.30 we reached a bump which had seemed from below to be the summit. We could see nothing. Possibly we were not on the real summit, but there seemed no chance of the storm lifting, so we began the descent.

The descent to the shoulder was unpleasant. Our ice steps were almost obliterated and the driving snow iced our goggles. A little lower I tumbled into a hidden crevasse, but landed up ten feet down, standing on my head in soft snow. We reached camp late in the afternoon. The problem of Shilla was still unsolved and I wished next day to cross the nala and get a view to the N. unobstructed by Pk. 20,680 ft. But it was raining when we woke, and, as there seemed little chance of the clouds clearing, we went down to Kaja the same afternoon. We took an off day.

The opinion in Kaja was that it would be impossible to go up the Ratang nala so early in the year. The sides of the nala were wall-like, and the continual crossing and recrossing of the river involved in the journey would be impossible until the snow water had drained away. Local opinion in the Himalaya need not usually be taken seriously, but the crossing of turbulent rivers is part of the people's daily life and I decided to respect their advice. From what little I saw of the nala I think it would be very difficult to force a route along the cliffs above the river. Some of the few trees in Spiti grow in the Ratang, and it is frequently visited once the river is passable.

It was now June 30 and I had to be back at Dharmsala in a fortnight. We had had about enough of Spiti, so decided to pay a flying visit to Lahul, which would be on our way home. We travelled light, without coolies, and it took us five days to reach Koksar in Lahul. It rained much of the time. From Kibar I had hoped to make a quick reconnaissance towards Shilla, but again the clouds were low and we could not wait. There was rumoured to be a small shop in Koksar, and, having grown somewhat weary of a curry and rice diet, I was looking forward to changes in the menu ; but there was little new, only potatoes and four miserable little eggs. I had not recovered from this setback when I crawled up the hillside behind the village the next morning. I was looking without enthusiasm for a route up the 19,200-ft. Gyphan, the mountain above Koksar. Only by approaching it from the nala directly N. of Koksar would we have time to attempt the ascent. The upper part of the mountain looked possible, but lower down were precipices threatened with hanging ice. An approach from behind, from Yangling lower down the valley, might give a route to the summit.

Thus foiled, we wrote finish to our climbing and made tracks over the Rohtang for Manali and food. The forests of Kulu were a pure delight. We spent one night at Kothi rest-house, and reached the end of our wanderings on July 6.

Such a succession of failures and half-successes must cast doubt on the soundness of our methods. With good Sherpas or trained Gurkhas more might have been achieved ; but more important than the best of native aid is a friend who understands your objects and seemingly senseless strivings and can give encouragement when enthusiasm is running low. That we tried to go too lightly and too cheaply (the total expenses for seven weeks in the hills, including travel to and from Kulu, came to an average of under £10 per person), and that our feeding arrangements were, purposely, too primitive to be satisfactory, I am also convinced. For any prolonged effort in the Himalaya good food and a certain amount of comfort are essential, but let us not sacrifice simplicity. There is a tendency today for the real objects of Himalayan mountaineering to become hidden behind a brown fog of oxygen, international rivalry, survey and scientific research. Rivalry has already been shifted to the battlefield. Perhaps in time, when the highest peaks have been climbed and the mountains of the world triumphantly reduced to paper, we shall be able to get back in our climbing to the spirit of those days when we first saw Mont Blanc from a railway carriage in the Jura or the snowy line of the Pir Panjal from the Kashmir road.