Shani, South-East Face

PETER LEEMING

(*Plates* 36–38)

From our bivouac, we watched the orange flashes lighting a western part of the August night sky . . . the result of a Mujahidin rocket attack on Kabul. Over the summer of 1989 the Mujahidin were maintaining a quota of such attacks in order to ensure their supply of weapons from the United States via Pakistan. Wherever our sympathies lie, innocent civilians, as ever, were getting hurt.

Duncan Francis, Martin Oakes and I were perched on a rocky ledge, half-way up the unclimbed 2000m SE face of Shani (5800m) in the Naltar valley, West Karakoram. It was midnight on our first night on the face. We had been climbing since noon, and now we awaited daylight to tackle a rock tower which barred access to the second, main icefield which we hoped would take us to the summit ridge . . .

Shani, Urdu for 'flower garden', is a particularly impressive peak which came to my attention late in 1986, after the first ascent by Roger Everett and Guy Muhlemann by the W ridge (*AJ* 92, 220, 1987). I immediately thought that it would be wonderful to spend five or six days traversing the mountain.

Early in 1989 we contacted the various British climbers who had visited Shani since 1984. We learned that the Naltar valley hosted a variety of wildlife and unclimbed peaks, or peaks with only one ascent; that Shani's SE face had repulsed some strong attempts; and that the 1000m N face was virgin. By the time we left England, the expedition had swelled to 13 people: three climbers, a medic and nine trekkers.

We arrived in Naltar on 28 July, after a dusty three-hour drive by jeep from Gilgit. While waiting for the jeep to be repaired near Nomal, some of us were entertained by a large and handsome family who welcomed us into their largest room. We sat on cushions on a beautiful rug while the head of the family led the songs and dancing. Their spirits were high as they awaited a wedding later that afternoon.

I was struck by the similarity between the Naltar valley and the Swiss Alps, with snow-clad peaks rising from alpine meadows and larch forests.

Next day the expedition lumbered in a disparate fashion up to the Naltar Lakes (3200m). We spent the late afternoon and evening relaxing with the porters, investigating the crystal-clear, trout-filled lakes, and wandering through the ancient birch woodland which hosted a variety of birds such as rose-finches and whistling thrushes.

In Naltar we had hired 30 porters who lived in different villages in the valley. This gave us a glimpse into the philosophies of the Muslim religion, as

the porters were composed of Sunni, Shia and Ismaili Muslims. Our relations with them were excellent, and for me one of the best things about the entire expedition was the friendliness and co-operation of the porters and all the Pakistani people we met.

At about 3pm on the following day we reached our Base Camp, situated at 3700m, at the side of the moraine above the Shani glacier and just above Lower Shani, a summer shieling for goats, sheep and cattle. The cloud was down and it was pouring with rain. Nine out of the 21 days we spent at Base Camp were destined to be like this, and in fact the weather across the whole Karakoram had been bad since May.

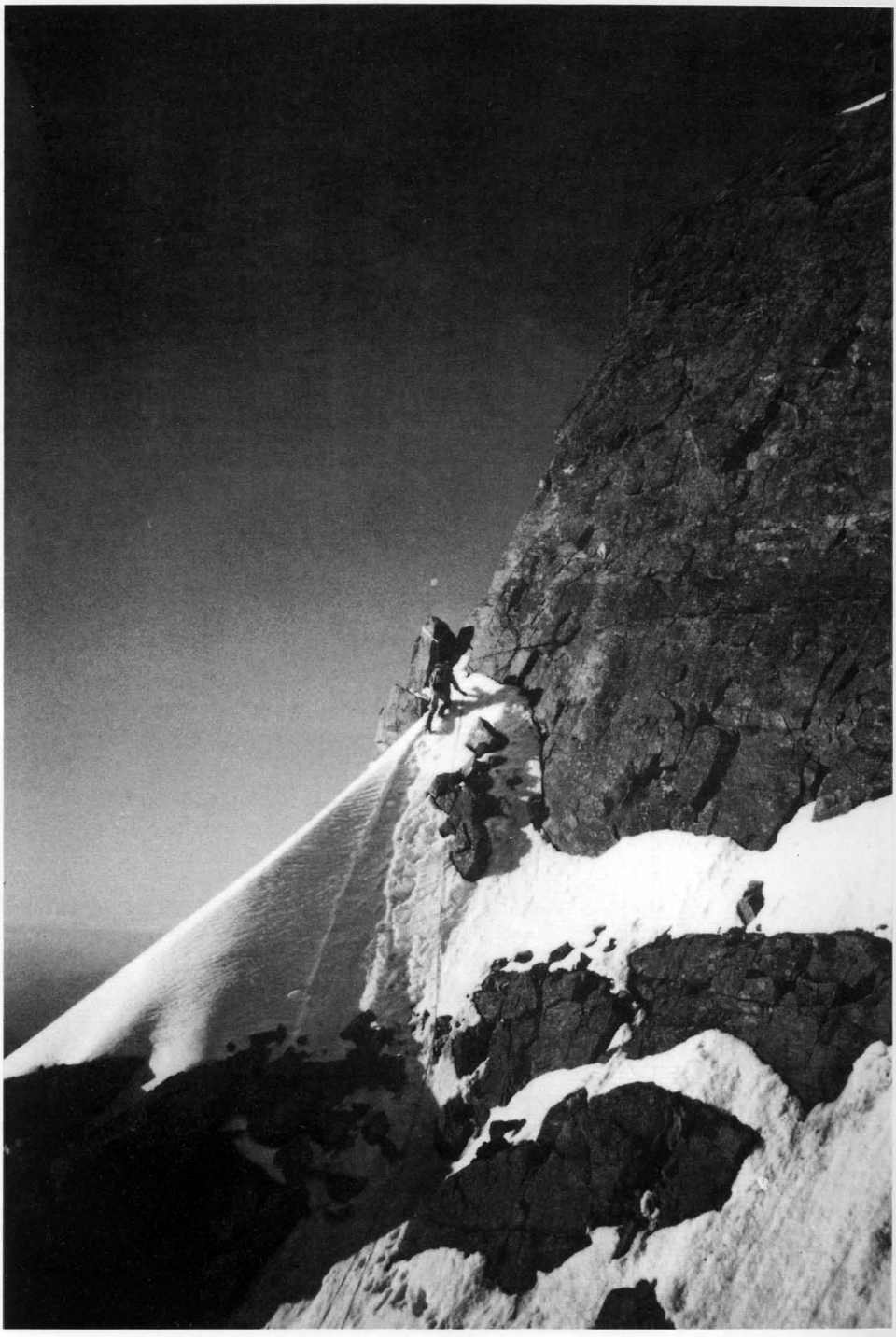
After a few days' rest in Base Camp, Ginny Crowther and I climbed to a bivouac at about 4500m on Snow Dome (5030m), an obvious mountain similar to Mont Blanc. I left the bivouac at 3.30am and reached the summit, alone, about three hours later. I found this an intensely satisfying experience, and was rewarded by clear views of the Batura massif to the north, a storm-struck Rakaposhi to the east and the majestic twin peaks of Shani across the valley. This seems to have been the second ascent of Snow Dome, and Duncan, Martin and others followed a few days later.

Duncan and I also made a number of parapente descents from a ridge about 600m above Base Camp, while we waited for Shani to come into condition. We quickly realized that we would never get the five or six days of good weather needed to attempt a traverse, and the massive amounts of snow on the N side precluded any thoughts of climbing there. We turned our attention to the SE face which dominated the scene from Base Camp. After the periods of bad weather, avalanches poured down the complex ridges and buttresses of the face. Despite this, Duncan and I agreed that our best chance of success would be a rapid ascent of the icefields on the left side of the face. We decided to forgo sleeping-bags, karrimats and spare clothes: we would climb at night and rest during the heat of the day. After a false start, when an intestinal problem kept Duncan at Base Camp, a few of us spent a day carrying the climbing gear across the glacier to the bottom of the route. A tributary glacier below the face, which we had to ascend, was in a very dangerous state – I fell through a snow-bridge at one point – and then the weather broke as we scuttled back to Base Camp.

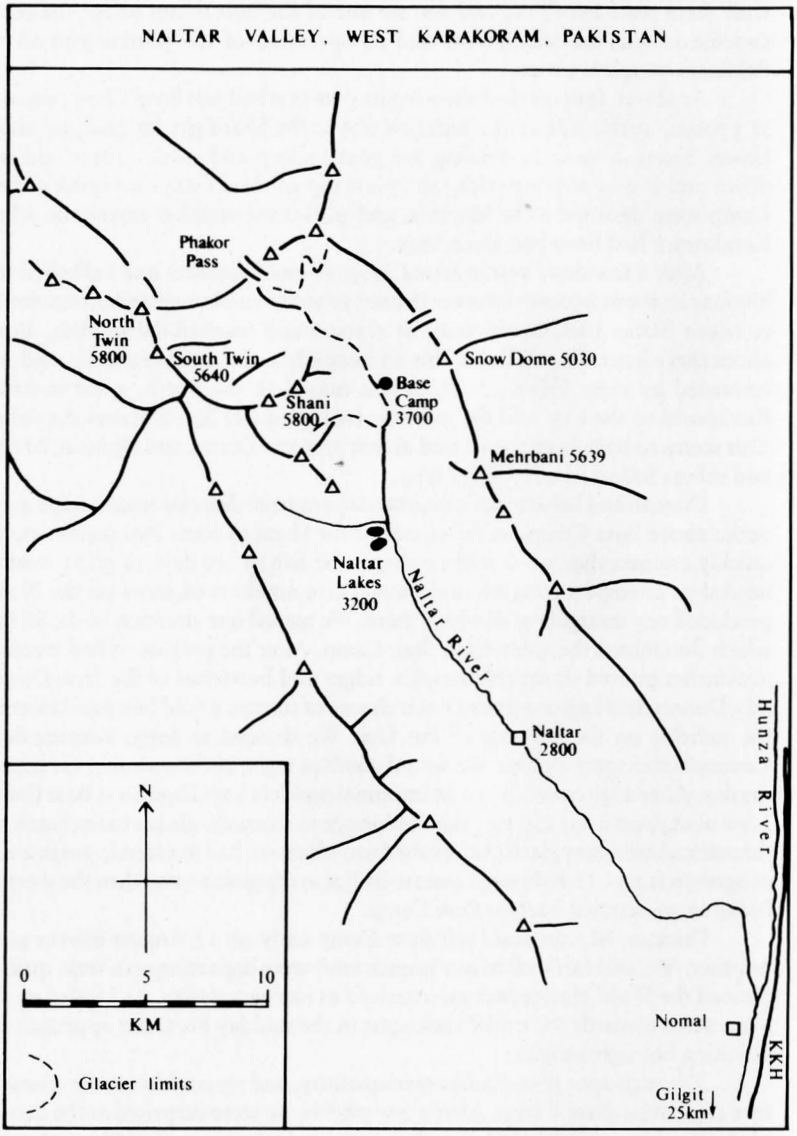
Duncan, Martin and I left Base Camp early on 11 August in very good weather. We said farewell to our friends who were departing on a trek, quickly crossed the Shani glacier and soon arrived at our gear dump. As I toiled up the loose scree towards the initial rock-spur in the midday heat, our approach felt anything but lightweight.

The rock-spur was an unknown quantity, and we couldn't really assess its true angle from Base Camp. After a few pitches we were surprised at the quality of the climbing and the rock, good granite, and it began to feel like a pleasant day out in the Alps. The hardest pitches were 4c, with pleasant, airy belay ledges decorated by wild flowers. Shani was living up to its name.

We found ibex hoofprints all the way up the spur and, until we had passed a line of prints half-way up the first icefield, ibex had been higher on the face than any mountaineer! Perhaps it is only here that these beautifully adapted animals feel safe, despite the ban on hunting since 1970.



36. Duncan Francis abseiling during the traverse around the rock tower, Shani SE face, 2nd day. (Peter Leeming) (p 62)



Based on U.S. Army map NJ 43-14; R.Everett, HJ 43, 1985-86; and A.McNae, British Shani South Face 1988 Expedition Report

By 4.30pm we had climbed the spur and were at the bottom of the first icefield. We rested on the large ledge, made tea and prepared some food. At 6.30pm we moved on to the ice. The angle was easy and we climbed unroped, keeping to the left to avoid the two to three-metre deep avalanche runnels in the centre. As daylight faded, we could see the lights moving around at Base Camp where our friends settled down to supper with Niaz Khan and Safarullah Khan, our cooks from Hunza.

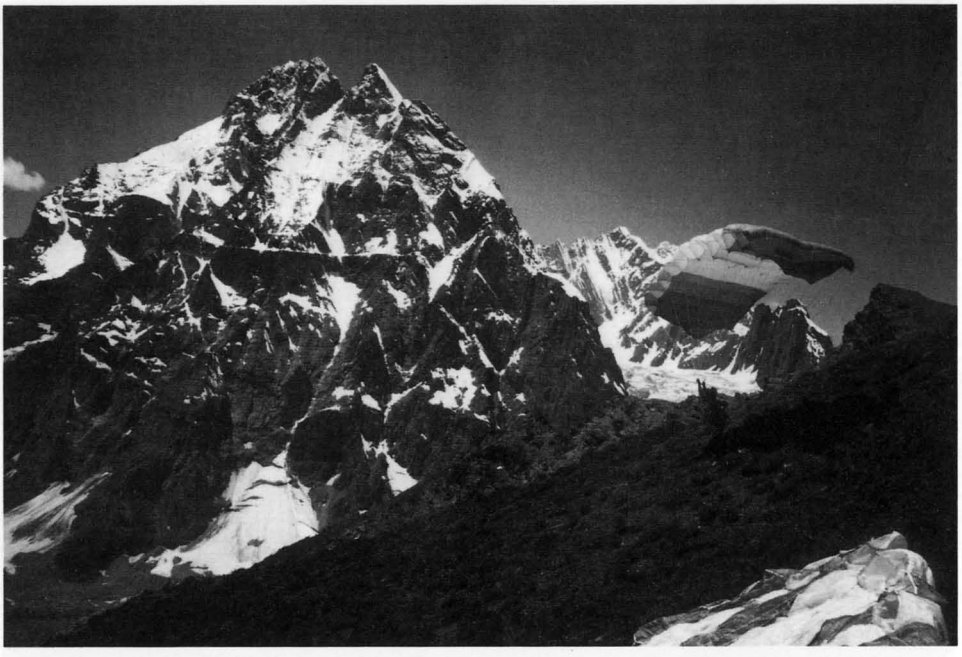
Each of us climbed at his own pace in his private world of ice and torchlight. We occasionally took turns at breaking trail but, apart from asking each other how we felt, we didn't really communicate at all. The icefield narrowed towards its top and it felt like climbing in a couloir with rock buttresses on either side. There was no moonlight and our head-torches didn't illuminate much in the distance. We simply followed the icefield, hoping it would take us up to the ridge bounding the left side of the face. At about 9.30pm we found a few sloping rocks to perch upon for a rest. Duncan had recovered and Martin's ankle, injured in a parapente mishap, was holding up OK, so the climb seemed to be going to schedule.

The temperature had fallen quite quickly to about $-5°C$ as the daylight disappeared, but it never seemed to get any colder than this. Higher up the ice steepened and became more brittle. We climbed through one awkward section and then sensed the ridge was not too far away. Shortly after this we found Duncan sitting on the ridge, the large rock-tower looming above him. It was obviously impossible to climb it in the dark. We could only sit tight and puzzle at the orange flashes in the west until dawn.

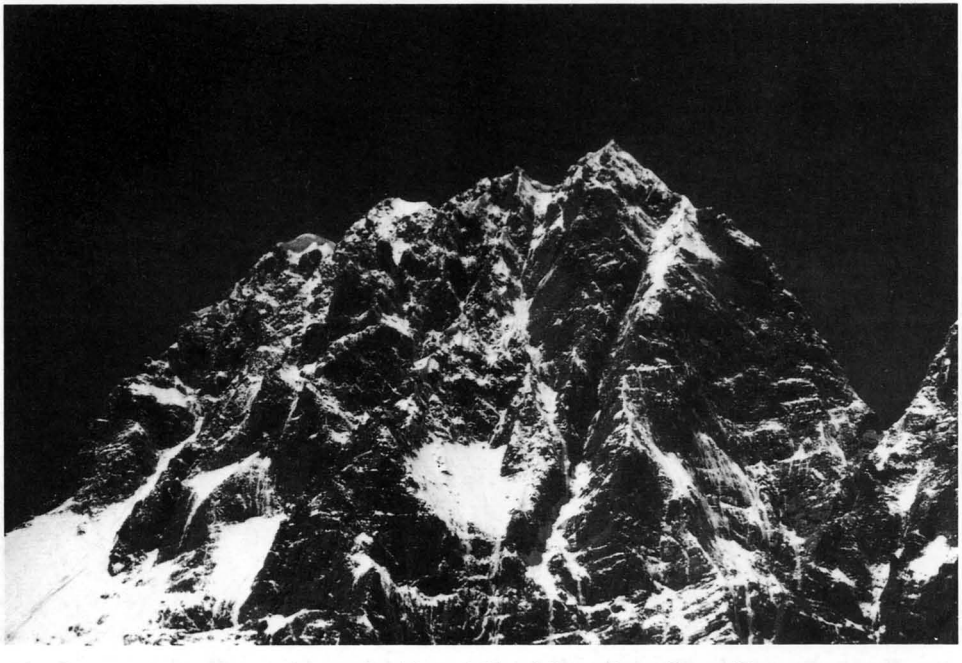
The sunrise over Snow Dome and Mehrbani was as spectacular as our position. The second icefield looked reasonable, once we had established ourselves on it. Duncan led off, taking a chance that a vague and broken traverse line around the tower would lead us to the icefield. Five pitches and one abseil later, we found ourselves on the ice and, with some relief, saw a straightforward ice-slope leading up to the ridge to the right of the tower. We had bypassed one of the main worries of the climb and within an hour we had climbed the ice-slope, still unroped, to a ledge on the ridge.

We spent the day dozing and eating, and gazing up at the second icefield. After some discussion we opted to follow the right-hand of three ice couloirs which we hoped would take us through the summit buttresses to the summit ridge. From our perch, we watched impotently as storm clouds visited each neighbouring peak in turn. Shani and ourselves received three squalls of hail, never very serious but enough to make me apprehensive. Soon the summit of Shani was cloaked in a grey cloud. I remembered that we hadn't come equipped for a long stay on the face . . .

At 5.30pm we moved off again, but the snow was still very soft. We came back to the ledge and waited for an hour. There was no improvement but Duncan's impatience drove him to break trail diagonally rightwards across the icefield. Again the angle wasn't extreme, but crossing the deep avalanche runnels with the constant surge of hail and spindrift down the ice made the climbing quite unpleasant. At around 8pm Duncan and I cut out a ledge in the ice, and when Martin appeared we rested for half an hour.



37. *Duncan Francis makes a parapente descent to Base Camp. Shani (5800m) in the background.* (Peter Leeming) (p 62)



38. *Summit buttresses and summit ridge of Shani from Base Camp* (Peter Leeming) (p 62)

We continued up the icefield, soon climbing up into the cloud and losing sight of the lights of Base Camp, 1200m below. A difficult traverse across ice-glazed slabs took us to a sloping ledge, where we made some tea in a very exposed position. After this we roped up and I led a rising traverse into the ice couloir. We spent the rest of the night climbing steep, brittle ice, wondering when the angle was going to relent. The details are a blur now, as the pitches seemed to merge into each other. Even though we were weaving between rocks protruding from the ice, we could never really find any secure belays or runners as the rock was so compact and smooth.

Duncan and I alternated leads: the two climbers following would climb simultaneously, but I was still conscious of how our progress had slowed. I tried to encourage the others to climb as quickly as possible, but it was not the type of climbing that you could rush. Belays were usually a combination of a snarg and a peg or wire – with two people hanging on them! Duncan cursed my rope, which by now had frozen solid and was quite unmanageable in the belay devices. All in all it was quite stressful climbing: Shani was beginning to show its teeth.

At around 7.30am we could detect that the gloom was lightening, and by 9am it was bright enough to survey the terrain through which we had climbed the previous night, and also to get our bearings. Looking down the ice couloir, we saw all sorts of ghostly buttresses and pinnacles, covered in fresh snow, appearing out of the mist. The ice was still as brittle as ever, and safe belays as sparse, but daylight brought a psychological relief.

We sensed rather than saw the summit ridge, and the higher we climbed the greater the depth of fresh snow. I led an awkward pitch through loose rock before running out of rope and being forced to belay on ice axes just below the ridge. Duncan led through and we anxiously asked him what he could see as he reached the crest.

'We really are up the creek without a paddle,' was the alarming reply.

Duncan elaborated by describing the hollow snow, the wafer-thin ridge and the double cornices. The summit – if it was the summit – appeared to be about 200m away to the west, and not much higher than where we were. The idea of descending from here if we couldn't traverse the ridge was unthinkable, so I set off on the next pitch with an aggressively patient approach.

Within seconds I was totally engrossed in the climbing, clearing snow to find runners, carefully arranging the ropes, testing ice-axe placements and finding the safest way along the ridge. My concentration was great and I felt completely detached from the others. Sometimes an arm or a foot would meet with less resistance than expected, and I would be gazing into the 1000m depths of the N face. Having led three pitches along the ridge I began to feel more hopeful. Duncan led through to tackle a very unstable snow bulge which demanded a lot of energy. We had now been climbing for 17 hours continuously on our third day on the face, and it was a real effort to keep going.

I took over from Duncan again and led up an easier snow-slope to another bulge. The rope trailed uselessly behind me as I worked out how to tackle this obstacle. Martin and Duncan were two shapes in the mist, 40m below. It was easier on the right, but I realized that this formed part of the

cornice over the N face. Further on the left the ground was more stable but more difficult, as it was undercut. Eventually I half vaulted over and half squirmed through the bulge, and hauled out over the top on to the flat snow above. As I lay gasping, I felt that I might still be on top of a cornice, so I crawled further back from the bulge. I knelt up and looked around, and realized that I was on the summit of Shani. The other two soon joined me; it was 11.30am on 13 August 1989.

The mist was as thick as ever and, although Roger Everett had described the W ridge to us, we felt anxious about finding it. After resting for an hour we left the summit, Duncan leading Martin and me downwards. I had a tremendous sense of foreboding about the descent but was so tired that I just followed Duncan without thinking.

About 200m below the summit we found ourselves on a steep snow-slope, lashed by a sudden, violent squall of hail and snow. Duncan disappeared in the mist and we followed his prints, jumping the occasional bergschrund and gradually losing height. We descended diagonally leftwards towards some rocks which we thought might protect us from a possible avalanche. While stopping for a rest as the mist cleared slightly, we glanced back up the mountain to see our tracks skirting the huge icefall that Roger had mentioned.

We continued downwards, our crampons balling up with the wet snow at every step. Suddenly we dropped out of the mist into brilliant sunshine and blue sky. Down below us it seemed that the snow-slope we were on led easily to the Upper Shani glacier which we had to reach. We could see the Twins (5800m) across the glacier in front of us, and we were all relieved that we were in the right place.

However, 20 minutes later we found we had descended into the jaws of a very steep and frightening icefall. Each of us scuttled back and forth across the edge of an icecliff, but the only way out was to reascend the snow-slope in order to skirt the icefall higher up. All three of us were hit by a tremendous lassitude at the thought of this and were soon fast asleep on our rucksacks, only being woken up by the stove boiling over.

Two hours later we were down on the glacier, but the descent had caused Martin's ankle to flare up, and he was now limping badly and often falling in the deep snow. We were still roped together as I led the way down the glacier to the point where we had to climb over a subsidiary ridge to gain the main Shani glacier. Duncan, as ever, broke trail strongly up the 150m ice-slope. On the col we had supper and prepared our bivouac: a small trench scraped out of the snow, lined with ropes and rucksacks. As we had no real bivouac gear, once again we shivered the night away as it began to snow. At 3am the mountains resounded to my bloodcurdling yells as I emerged from a nightmare.

The dawn was misty and grey, and it was very difficult to judge distance and make sense of the glacier's contours. I was perhaps more apprehensive now than at any time during the last three days. The glacier was still blanketed by snow from earlier in the summer, concealing every crevasse. We came to the edge of a 50m icecliff which stretched virtually the whole way across the glacier. Again we had to reascend to avoid this on the west bank. The mist cleared, and very soon it was uncomfortably hot. Duncan and I knew that we should get off

the glacier as quickly as possible, and we tried to encourage Martin to keep up a good pace, although by now he was in considerable pain.

At 9.30am we reached the moraine below the Phakor Pass and knew at last that we were safe. We were all sunburnt and very dehydrated, and after a long drink from some meltwater we scrambled slowly up the appalling moraine above the glacier. At the top I left Duncan to help Martin down to Base Camp. I was keen to be alone with my feelings as I descended the upper part of the Naltar valley. My mind seemed more receptive than before to the beauty of the valley, and I stopped frequently to watch the river chats and leaf warblers.

My lasting memory is of the shepherd giving me a bunch of a beautifully fragrant meadow cranesbill, asking me where I had come from and, seeing me struggling, offering to carry my rucksack. This was really the epitome of the Pakistani people's friendliness: a touching end to a fine adventure.