

A NATURALIST IN THE NORTH-WEST HIMALAYA

BY

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PART II

(With two sketch maps and two plates)

(Continued from p. 354 of this volume)

I

MANALI

The valley of the Beas narrows at Manali, hemmed in by steep forested slopes. To the north it widens out into a boulder-strewn waste that extends to the foot of the great wall of mountains, ten miles away, which separates Kulu from the desolate high plateau of Lahoul. Down the valley, above where it bends to the east, are the big hills beyond Jagatsukh, and up the Manalsu Nala, which joins the main valley at Old Manali village, are views of the snow-covered peaks that are the source of the river Ravi.

The Kulu Valley, as Himalayan valleys go, is prosperous and much of its floor and lower slopes is closely terraced for the cultivation of rice and barley, and there are many orchards, for it is famous for its fruit especially those that are native to more northern climes. Other northern trees too do well, for the European oak, the linden (*Tilia europea*) and the Spanish chestnut flourish near Manali village.

Along the riverside grow tall alders (*Alnus* sp.) and the occasional poplar (*Populus ciliata*), while the lower slopes of the hills are covered with plantations of deodar (*Cedrus deodara*), and in the more open places with the scrubby growth that is usual at this altitude in the north-west Himalaya — — *Spiraea sorbifolia*, *Spiraea canescens*, *Berberis*, *Crataegus*, *Indigofera*, *Rhamnus*, *Cotoneaster*, roses and the holly-leaved oak (*Quercus dilatata*). Above the deodar plantations the forest is mostly of spruce (*Picea morinda*) with a scattering of horse chestnut (*Aesculus indicus*) and walnut trees (*Juglans regia*) and a thick undergrowth of ferns and mixed herbage of balsams (*Impatiens* sp.), dead nettle (*Lamium album*) and wild carrot (*Chaerophyllum villosum*), whose root is a favourite food of the black bear. Around 9,000 ft. it is common to find areas where planes (*Acer* sp.) grow to the exclusion of most other trees, and the vivid green of their young leaves makes a pleasing contrast to the sombre hues of the conifers. Above the spruce the dark-leaved Narkanda pine (*Abies pindrow*) becomes the predominant tree, to give place at 10,000 ft. to the mountain oak (*Quercus semecarpifolia*), where an abrupt transition to an alpine type of vegetation takes place. From 11,000 ft. forests of birch (*Betula utilis*) and shrubberies of rhododendrons (*Rhododendron campanulata*) stretch to the treeline at 12,000 ft.

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I had gone to Manali with great hopes of catching, if not any butterflies that were new to my collection, at least many that would be valuable additions to it. In this I was sorely disappointed for in spite of a profuse and varied vegetation I saw no more than 42 species in all, and apart from catching fine series of *Heliophorus oda*, *Heliophorus bakeri*, *Heliophorus androcles* and *Erebia shallada*, and one or two bedraggled comma butterflies (*Vanessa egea*), I collected no species that the most fertile imagination could describe as anything but very common.

However, my series of *H. oda* and *H. bakeri* were of interest. Although I do not possess the wet season forms of these butterflies in which the difference between them is greater, that between the spring forms is small; *bakeri* lacks discal lines and an orange-flushed area on the under forewing, characters which are present in *oda*. This, in conjunction with the facts that I found the two insects flying together and that some of them displayed characters intermediate between the two, leads me to suspect that *oda* and *bakeri* may merely be forms of the one butterfly and not distinct species.

I was, however, more than compensated for my disappointment in Manali's butterfly life by the richness of the flora, which, though I am no botanist, I found to be of absorbing interest, especially that of the alpine region.

There was an easy route to the high altitudes up Khanpari Tibba, the mountain that rises abruptly just behind Manali. My first ascent was made in early May and took me no further than a steep little meadow at 9,000 ft. where spring had hardly begun and few flowers were yet to be seen except a scattering of white gypsophila (*Gypsophila cerastioides*) and strawberry blossoms (*Fragaria vesca*), purple thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*), golden *Ranunculus hirtellus* and the inevitable little blue gentian (*Gentiana argentea*). A week later I penetrated higher onto the extensive meadowland marked on the map as Gumhana Thach (*thach* being the vernacular for a grazing ground) behind the rocky steeps that mark the end of the first and hardest part of the ascent, to find that it was still under snow. At its lower edges among the trees *Primula denticulata* was in flower and among a fine display of the white racemes of valerian (*Valeriana wallichii*) were early growths of the strange *Trillium govanianum*, the three-leaved lily with a curiously spider-like yellow and purple flower, a close relation of the rare English herb paris.

My next ascent was at the end of May when the snow had receded from the lower parts of the meadow up to nearly 11,000 ft., but even yet flowers were scanty. *Primula denticulata* was now in full bloom, as was *Trillium govanianum*, a small purple fumitory (*Corydalis diphylla*) and the bright golden stars of *Gagea lutea* (the Star of Bethlehem). There were, too, some early anemones and a small, sweet-scented, leafless, flowering tree (*Viburnum foetens*). Where the snow had just melted, everywhere were visible the collapsed tunnels of Royle's vole (*Alticola roylei*). To judge from their abundance, the winters of these little animals are far from idle for they criss-crossed and wound about the surface of the ground much like the galleries constructed by certain species of white ant, but on a much larger scale. This vole scoops out a narrow channel along the surface of the earth and employs the earth so released for lining the upper part of the tunnel which is bored through the snow. Inside these, one imagines, the winter is spent



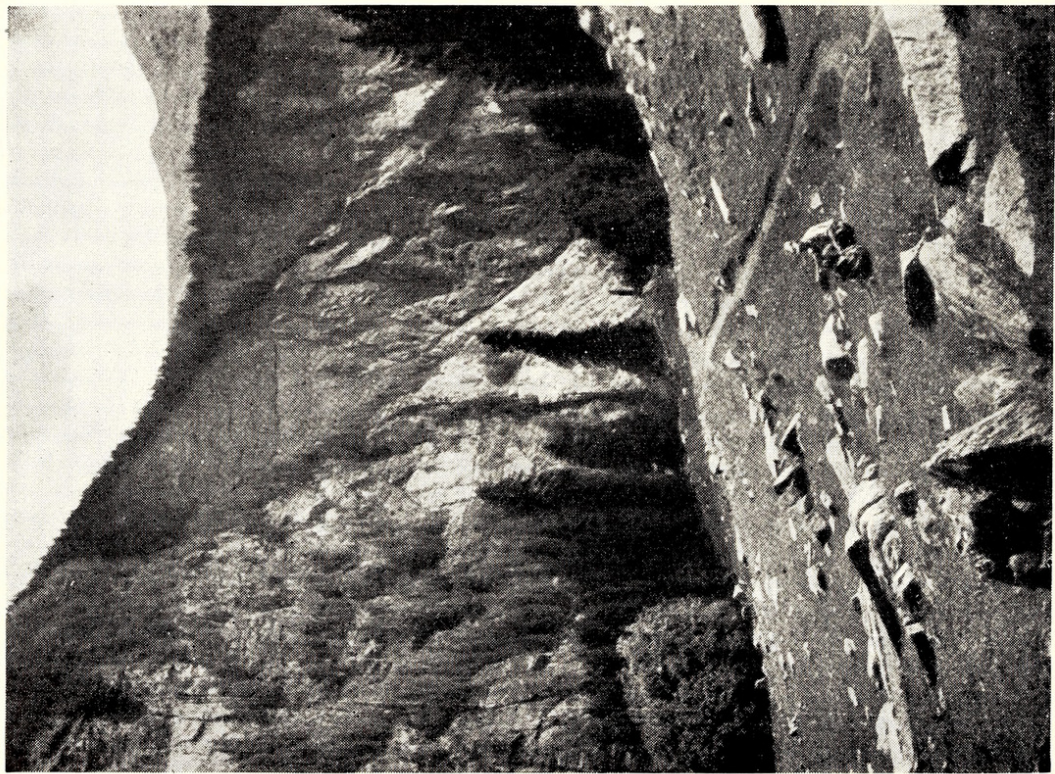
The Hamta Pass and Chhatoru, 18,344 ft.



Photos

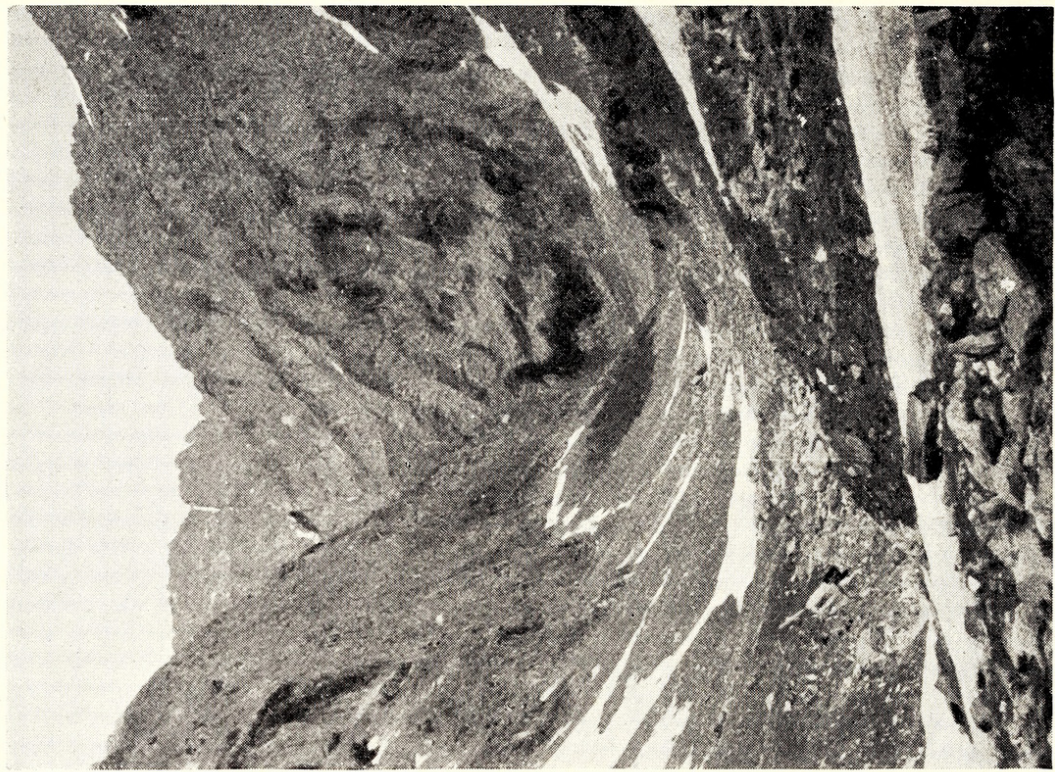
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View to the Rohtang Pass from Khanpari Tibba.



Photos

The Hamta Nala.



Author

Ibex country—Hamta Nala.

scuttling to and fro feeding on the roots, seeds and grasses come across during the excavations.

I trudged through the snow to the top of the ridge leading to the final slopes of Khanpari Tibba, where I sat down and ate my lunch. The view was superb for I was encircled by snowy peaks. To the north it almost seemed as if I looked down onto the Rohtang Pass (13,050 ft.), ten and a half miles away, where the track of early travellers to Lahoul could be marked in the snow as a thin black line winding across the long gentle ascent of its summit. To the east was the great mass of ice-capped Dev Tibba (19,687 ft.) and, close beside it, the magnificent precipices and ice-falls of his greater, though nameless, brother. Again to the left was the pillar-shaped peak behind Chhatoru and the approaches of the Hamta Pass, and a little nearer the vast chimney of Indar Kila standing like a huge obelisk on the mountainside.

After lunch I began to return at a run down the steep snow slope that I had so carefully ascended. I soon learnt that this was a mistake for the snow was harder and more slippery than I had realised and before I could prevent it I was embarked on an involuntary glissade travelling at ever-increasing speed. Almost from the first I knew that I should inevitably collide with the trunk of a birch tree some 50 yards down the slope, and I remember turning over in my mind in an entirely detached way what would happen to me if I broke an arm or leg in this remote spot. The next I knew was that I had left the ground where the incline suddenly grew steeper and was flying, first through the air, and then through a rhododendron bush, which, I suppose, slowed me down somewhat, to glance violently off the birch tree and come to rest six feet lower down up to my waist in snow. I picked myself up with care and was surprised to find myself intact except for a few minor bruises and scratches. Thereafter I proceeded with great caution.

My final ascent was made on June 9th, the season when the cherries are ripe in the Manali orchards and the forest is lovely with the lilac of irises (*I. nepalensis*?). Beyond the old village the rare tiger-lily (*Heimerocallis fulva*), a favourite garden plant, blooms among the rocks, and the lily of the valley (*Ophiopogon intermedius*) and the little dark blue and white *Mazus rugosus* flowers on the shady banks. Among the long grass can be found the curious climbing lily, *Polygonatum cirrifolium*, with the tendril-like leaf tips and drooping white flowers, and in the hedgerows the brilliant blue vetch, *Parochetus communis*.

But in case it should be thought that all the flowers at Manali are things of beauty it must be mentioned that this is also the season of the inflorescence of that most unpleasing of plants, *Sauromatum guttatum* of the Araceae. Imagine a leafless growth with an erect, narrow column, or spadix, prolonged into a long, tapering, dark-purple appendage, surrounded at its lower end by a sheath, or spathe, of a sickly yellow hue, heavily blotched and spotted with purple, whose upper part is open, bent back and spreading. Imagine, too, that this loathsome object fouls the air for yards around with a most disgusting odour, and then the reader will have a fair impression of the plant.

Two hours saw me at the foot of the meadowland where a pleasing sight met my eyes, for it had become a garden wherein flowered a profusion of white and blue anemones (*A. obtusiloba*), golden *Ranunculus hirtellus*, *Trillium govanianum*, and nodding heads of purple-chequered fritillaries (*Fritillaria roylei*).

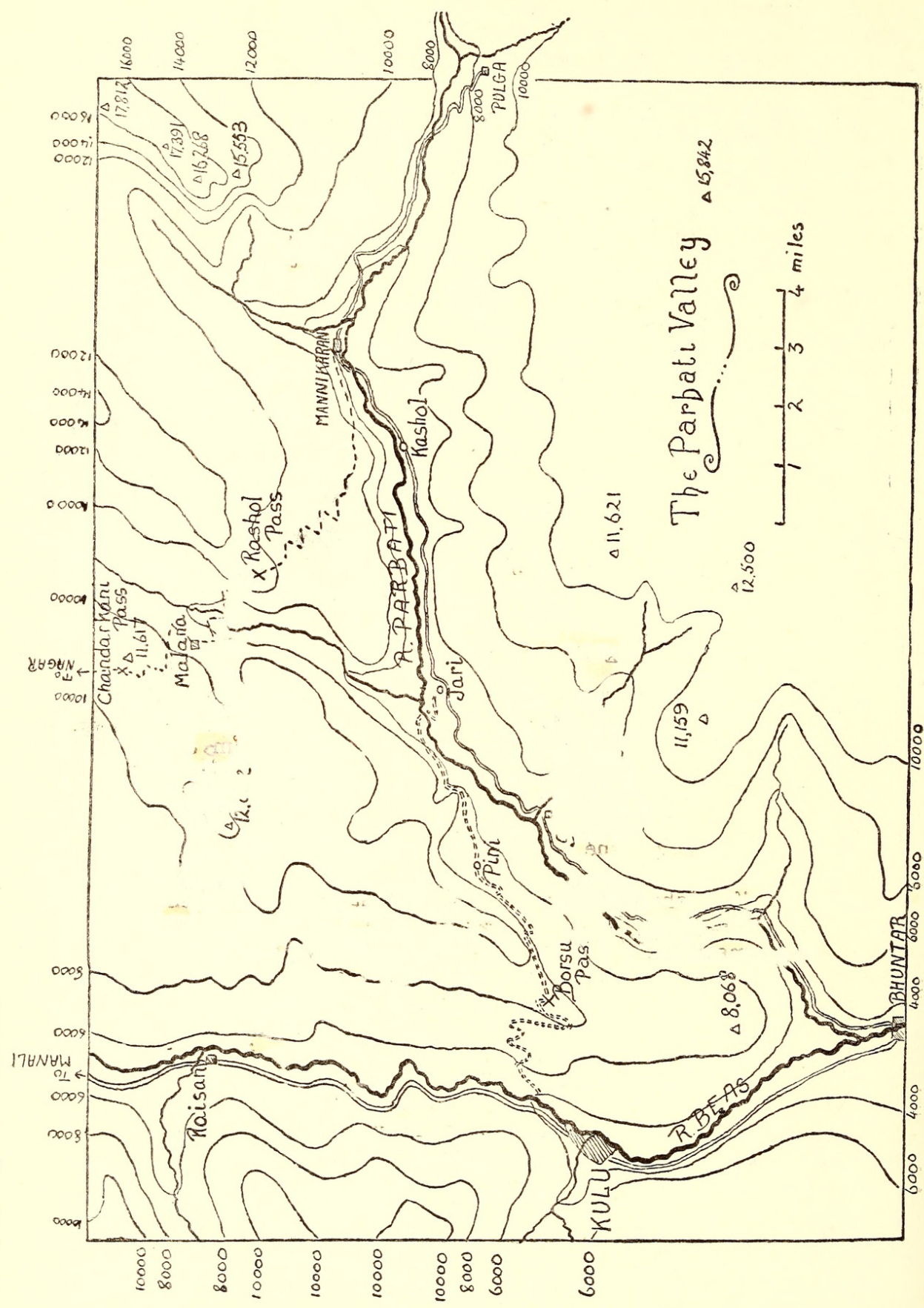
On entering the meadow I startled a monal into flight, loudly shrilling his ringing alarm whistle, to be followed a moment later, as is their custom, by his drably-coloured mate. This bird is common at this season around 10,000 ft. and to have seen him in flight from above with the sun shining onto his plumage is to have witnessed one of the most lovely sights in nature. His head and crest of spatulate feathers, are of brilliant metallic green, and around his eyes is a bare patch of bright blue flesh. His nape is of flame-tinted bronze which shades into the silky green of his upper back. His lower back and wing coverts are of silky purple, and his tail bright cinnamon, the only drably-coloured parts of him being his dusty white rump and dusky black breast and legs, a contrast that has caused the following legend about him to grow up among the hill folk.

In the beginning Jija Rana, the bird god, created the monal king of the pheasants, giving him the plumage he deemed worthy of this position. But that bird, being displeased with his drably-coloured breast and legs, complained to the god and asked him to improve on his handiwork. However, Jija, being extremely annoyed at such criticism, angrily drove him off, speeding him on his way with a handful of ashes picked from the fire, which fell on the lower part of his back so that from that day to this the monal has had a dusty white rump. Jija Rana then set about the creation of an even more beautiful bird to take the place of the monal as the pheasant king, and so came into being the glorious, scarlet, white-spotted, black-breasted tragopan, who ever since has been called Jija Rana in honour of his maker.

I walked across the meadows to where the final steep pull-up to Khanpari Tibba begins among shrubberies of mauve rhododendrons (*R. campanulatum*), as yet hardly in flower, for the season is late on these northern slopes. Marsh marigolds (*Caltha palustris*) were growing in profusion among the rocks and there were the bright yellow spikes of a fumitory (*Corydalis gowaniana*). At 12,000 ft. I passed through the shrubberies and onto grassland above the treeline. Here on a meadow favoured by the sun the bright blue, golden, cream-coloured and white forms of *Anemone obtusiloba* were massed among the deep purple of dwarf irises (*Iris milesii*?), white garlic (*Allium gowanianum*), yellow *Ranunculus* and lilac *Primula denticulata* to form such a carpet of flowers as I had never seen before.

On my return I was caught in the most violent hailstorm that it has been my lot to experience, and had I not been able to shelter under a large rock I should have been in a sorry plight for the hailstones were of the size of marbles. It wrought great havoc in this natural garden, beating down and destroying the flowers, except the nodding heads of the fritillaries which seemed especially constructed to withstand such an onslaught.

Lower down in the forest I saw a pine marten (*Charronia flavigula*), which, it so happened, was except for monkeys, the largest wild animal I saw in Kulu. His markings were unusual and striking, for his head appeared to be black down to the line of his eyes, as were his bushy tail, legs and hindquarters, whilst his back was brownish-grey. There is also another marten to be found here, the stone marten (*Martes foina*), but he is seldom seen, being very nocturnal in his habits. Of the other wild animals that I might have seen, black bears (*Selenarctos thibetanus*) are undoubtedly common, especially on this Khanpari Tibba



Sketch Map 1

where I came across many of their scratchings, but they are abroad little in the daytime and are adept at keeping out of sight. At this season brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) are up at the high altitudes, but I saw the tracks of one that had crossed over the Hamta Pass. The snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*), too, had moved to the heights, but one had been shot close to Manali village as late as April, after having killed a pony and mauled a bull terrier dog, and another was seen in Lahoul, a march or so beyond the Rohtang Pass in early June. Ibex (*Capra siberica*) do not seem to be rare as there were several reports of them whilst I was in the valley, and bharal (*Pseudois naheer*) to judge from the number of their horns that decorate the local temples, are to be found not uncommonly. The antlers of barasingha (*Cervus hanglu*) are also a popular decoration but these must be imported. (Rannoo, who is usually a reliable informant and is the generally accepted authority on wild life in Manali, asserts that they come from western Kangra, but no textbook allows that they can be found nearer than Kashmir). Of the rest, musk deer (*Moschus moschiferus*) are not very rare, and are persecuted for their musk pouch, tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*) are present on the craggy hillsides, goral (*Nemorhaedus goral*) in the same type of country at lower altitudes, and serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*), here called *yamu*, which are scarce, can sometimes be found in remote and thickly wooded nalas. I am told, too, that there are leopards, and that wolves occasionally come over from Lahoul in the winter.

II

THE PARBATI VALLEY

Edward Peck's plan was to walk from Kulu to Narkunda over the Pin Parbati and Bhabeh Passes. I agreed to accompany him as far as Pulga where he hoped to hire coolies to take him over the mountains to Wangtu.

Our drive down to Kulu early on the morning of June 1st coincided with the annual flux of flocks from Kangra, and progress was much delayed by the many thousands of sheep and goats on their way up to their summer pastures in Lahoul. Although at times it seemed as if we should never reach our destination it was an interesting spectacle. Most of the animals carried little packs for it is necessary for the herders to take all their provisions into the desolate regions where they will spend the summer, and every herd was accompanied by one or two big dogs, whose function is quite different from that of sheepdogs in most countries, for they are kept solely as a protection against wild animals. The herdsmen are picturesque in their grey, rather tall cloth hats, and large grey coats, or kirtles, secured round the waist by yards of twisted cloth so that the lower part of the coat, which ends well above the bare knees, projects outwards a little all around and gives the wearers a vaguely Grecian appearance. Their journey to Lahoul is slow, for they halt on the side pastures on their way up the valley.

The twenty-three miles took us two and a half hours and on arrival we found Rannoo waiting for us at the bridge with the transport and the pony man.

The start, at 9-45 a.m., was exasperating, for after three quarters of an hour we had covered a mere quarter mile and ascended but two

hundred feet. This was mostly the fault of the pony man for he had tried to lead us up a boulder-strewn slope by a path that existed only in his imagination, but in addition there had been difficulties with two of the ponies. The ropes securing the burden of one had twice broken, and the other, in a fit of irritation, had cast his down the hillside. The third animal, a minute mule, whom, in spite of his sex, we nicknamed Jenny under the mistaken notion that such an animal is called a jennet, had given no trouble. This was reserved for the fourth day when I was on my own.

After this Rannoo took the ponywallah in hand and our progress along the very winding path up the mountainside was more rapid, but we did not reach the Borsu Pass, if this tedious way over the long shoulder dividing the Parbati from the Beas can be honoured by such a title, until half past four. The weather had by that time deteriorated and several thunderstorms were converging overhead. As we crossed the pass, the storm broke, conditions being made much worse by the fact that we were now on the windward side of the hill.

The next three hours were among the most uncomfortable I can remember. The road, to use an euphemism for the narrow ledge scratched out of the hillside, endlessly traversed across crags or grassy slopes that must have been set at the steepest angle at which the growth of grass is possible. Every now and then when it had crossed a spur projecting into the valley, it would zig-zag down its tree-covered northern side for a little before continuing its traverse. The track was in a deplorable condition and in one place where it was blocked by fallen trees it was necessary to unload the baggage and lead the animals some way down the hill by a very slippery detour, and in another a landslide had left a yard-wide gap where the only foothold was a ledge six inches wide. A slip would have precipitated a pony on a journey that would have ended only in the Parbati, five thousand feet below. I shut my eyes and turned the other way while Rannoo literally heaved the animals across.

There were pretty flowers to be seen beside the path, banks of thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) and gypsophila (*G. cerastioides*), and massed grey-blue and purple salvias (*S. moorcroftiana* and *S. lanata*), and a white gerbera (*G. lanuginosa*) was growing in the interstices of the rocks, but I was far too wet and miserable to pay these anything more than the most perfunctory attention, so that it was with the greatest relief that at last, just as dusk was falling, we descended to the first village we came across to pitch camp close to a temple under the shelter of some deodars.

That the village should be called Pini was ironical for the only water we could obtain was a muddy fluid from a small pond, but otherwise Rannoo soon had its inhabitants organised and the tents were up and a meal cooked in a very short time.

Here perhaps Rannoo Shikari should be introduced for he is a character worthy of it. He is a man of most commanding presence and forceful character, and, as he is most capable and knows all there is to be known about the Kulu Hills and their game, those who employ him are fortunate, even though, as is often the case, they may hold him in considerable awe. It must be added that he seldom misses with either shotgun or rifle, is a competent cook and is quite tireless. This paragon is a realist and takes a poor view of his fellow creatures, especially low in

his opinion being the dwellers on the plains of India, to whom he refers as 'Hindustani lōg' and the 'bazari lōg' or those who live in towns. As he also condemns most hillmen as 'badmash lōg' it will be obvious that the persons who come up to the high standards necessary for his approval are few indeed.

The tents proved to be waterproof and, lulled to sleep by the sound of raindrops falling on the canvas, we passed a good night. I, however, was rudely awakened by the collapse of my tent at 6.00 a.m. and on disentangling myself from its folds had my first daylight view of our camping site. Under better conditions it would have been idyllic, for facing us across the valley was a magnificent view of the array of crags and peaks surrounding Shāt Nala, gloomy and sombre under the lowering storm clouds and wreathed with banks of mist. Just below us were the roofs of the little village and fields of ripe barley, now beaten down by the rain, while close above us in the cedar grove stood the temple, a wooden building with a peaked slate roof and overhanging eaves. As is customary its entrance was decorated with the horns of wild animals and, a novel feature, with carvings representing elephants, camels and what appeared to be dancing girls.

The rain eased off sufficiently for us to breakfast in comfort but came on again heavily when we resumed our march, so that we were very soon just as wet as we had been the evening before. At last, after again traversing bare hillsides and cliffs, we descended to the river, whose milky waters were in furious spate, crossed it by the Jari bridge and climbed to the forest bungalow where we rested and brewed for ourselves some tea.

As soon as we continued on our way to Mannikaran, nine miles off, the rain began to slacken and presently stopped altogether, allowing us at last a view of the beauties of the Parbati Valley, for it is very lovely.

It is a narrow V-shaped valley with the sides rising steeply for some six or seven thousand feet those to the north, as usual, being rather bare above their lower slopes, with magnificent precipices, but those to the south are finely wooded, as is the bed of the valley where the road runs through plantations of deodar and *Pinus longifolia*. Up the valley, and to its two sides, are views of snow peaks, those above Mannikaran being topped with strange pillar-like projections of rock, a common phenomenon in the north-west Himalaya. Opposite to Jari opens the forbidding Malana Gorge, the only winter entrance to the strange Malana Valley.

Nevertheless Mannikaran, and that part of the valley that contains it, has no pretensions to beauty, for it is a squalid collection of dilapidated houses set among bare, unattractive hillsides where the river bends to the east. It is, notwithstanding, a remarkable place, for, as the pillar of steam hanging in the dank and humid air declared even before the town itself came into view, it is the home of a veritable congeries of hot springs, and as such is a place of some importance for pilgrimages, both for spiritual and bodily welfare. As well as the principal bathing place near the little temple close to the river, there are numerous springs by the waterside and others in the village itself, the water gushing out of the ground and running along the village streets, so that it may literally be said that Mannikaran is a place with hot (but no cold) water laid on. The truth of this statement we learnt later when we discovered that among this plentitude of hot water the

only drinking water was that obtained from the river, a completely opaque fluid the colour of dirty milk, and, in fact, a thick emulsion of glacier-powdered rock! However, the greatest use is made of the *hot* water, for as well as supplying the villagers with ever-ready hot baths it is also freely employed for cooking. The priest, who exercises a monopoly over the latter, because the temple precincts contain the best and hottest spring, has, he told us, a regular schedule—half an hour for rice, one hour for dhal, and so on. All the time we could see dishes of hot food being fetched away from the temple.

As a rest house is marked here on the map we had hoped to spend the night in relative comfort and to be able to dry our drenched clothes and damp bedding. But we were disappointed because the rest house had been turned into a school, and so we had to fall back on the local 'hotel' kept by the village shopkeeper. This is an unprepossessing building, very like a row of poor stables with a verandah in front. We had already peered into the two end rooms which lay open, and not much approved of what we had seen, when the shopkeeper arrived bearing a large bunch of keys, and led us carefully round to the back, unlocked several doors and with a grand flourish ushered us into the best suite, the two open rooms we had already inspected. It was a fine piece of showmanship, but unnecessary as there was nowhere else to stay and we were too tired to search for a camping ground.

If the building had been unprepossessing outside, it was more so inside, being in a state of considerable disrepair and very dirty.

A great circular red patch where the plaster had fallen off the wall gave us both an uneasy feeling that this room had been the scene of some sinister Mannikarian crime of violence, and Edward Peck (possibly because he has travelled much in Turkey) also viewed the two string charpoys with some degree of suspicion—a suspicion that I tried to allay by telling him that I had seldom been bitten by bed bugs in India. Although, as it turned out, I proved to be right, he was not further reassured when we retired for the night by the sight of a large scorpion climbing up the wall.

Almost as soon as we had left Mannikaran the valley resumed its pleasant appearance, and by mid-day we had climbed to the rest house at Pulga. Here bad news awaited Edward Peck for we learnt that the Pin Parbati Pass would not be open to coolies for another six weeks, so there was nothing to be done except to return to Manali. Pulga, however, was well worth the trip for its own sake, for it is a place of great beauty. The rest house looks across the valley up Tos Nala, by way of which is a difficult route to Spiti, framed on the one side by the high mountains above Malana and on the other by the magnificent peak of Dharingdhar (19,000 ft.). Further up the valley, and partly behind Dharingdhar, lies another peak of almost identical shape and size, whilst behind and to the right of the bungalow above the forested slopes were the icefalls and glaciers of Baskihag shining with new fallen snow.

Life in this valley is hard and it must be a difficult task for its natives to wrest a livelihood from their scanty fields. Perhaps this poverty may partly account for the fact that at least 70% of the adult population of the valley above Mannikaran suffer from goitre, any person above the age of twenty-five who does not show signs of it being a rarity indeed. It is a common enough infirmity throughout the

north-west Himalaya, but nowhere have I seen more sufferers from it than as in this neighbourhood.

We spent that night on the rest house verandah, as we had been politely but firmly told by the chowkidar that we could not be allowed to enter the bungalow without a pass. Nevertheless we greatly preferred this sleeping place to that of the previous night, although a bitter breeze was blowing from the snows.

The next day we returned to Mannikaran where Edward Peck suddenly decided to return to Manali by way of Malana and the Rashol and Chandarkani Passes. As the thought of carrying my bedding and belongings up 6,000 ft. of extremely steep hillside did not appeal to me (for no coolies could be obtained) I decided not to accompany him and Rannoo, but to continue down the valley with the transport.

Malana, because it is so isolated and cut off from the outer world, has earned for itself a considerable reputation. The inhabitants speak a language of their own, a dialect of the Tibetan group that is unintelligible to the natives of the adjoining valleys, and have managed to maintain a marked degree of independence (which is carefully fostered by Jamloo, who lives on Dev Tibba, through his earthly representative, the headman of Malana). If local reports are to be trusted the Malanese have persistently refused to pay taxes and are very hostile to strangers.

Peck and Rannoo camped that night at Rashol and the following day passed through Malana and over the Chandarkani Pass down to Nagar, a remarkably long march. Their journey was uneventful and they were unmolested by the Malanese. Indeed the only living thing they saw in the village was an ancient woman who fled into the forest on their approach.

I, however, had a trying afternoon now that Rannoo was no longer with us to control the ponies. The black pony, having friskily kicked to pieces the wooden gutter carrying the water supply to Kasol rest house, indulged herself in barging matches with Jenny, who himself became more lively the further we went, breaking every now and then into a brisk trot to the great detriment of his load. All the while the brown pony lagged behind having to be driven every inch of the way by the ponywallah.

At 6.00 a long day come to an end at last and we pitched camp underneath some alders beside the river in Shāt Nala. The ponywallah made himself useful (indeed! it was time) and insisted on brewing my tea and boiling the eggs. The same method served for both (in fact it would have saved time if they had been done simultaneously in the same degchi) for they were placed in cold water and when that came to the boil they were ready. Strangely enough, and a useful fact to remember, the results were remarkably successful.

I set off at 6.00 on the morrow in order to reach Bhuntar by 9.00 when the Kulu bus was reputed to pass through the village, but no matter how fast I travelled I found myself unable to exceed three miles an hour, even though every now and then I broke into a rapid amble. I regretfully put down this fact to advancing age. Having reached Bhuntar and found no bus, I continued toward Kulu in the hope that the bus would overtake me—which it did, but not before I was one hundred yards from my destination. Now the strange thing was that

I had covered the six miles from Bhuntar to Kulu in exactly $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours although I had decreased my pace considerably. Would it be unworth, to suspect that the milestones on the Parbati road were so placed to the considerable profit of the contractor who built it?

III

THE HAMTA PASS

The route from Kulu to Spiti crosses the Pir Panjal Range by the Hamta Pass, which, though relatively low (14,025 ft.), possesses a rugged grandeur that can be surpassed in few parts of the Himalayas. The pass is 21 miles from Manali, but three days are needed for the return journey.

Three of us set out from Manali on the morning of June 18th with five coolies and the redoubtable Rannoo. Our way ran along the short-cut over Rahan Dhar, the forested ridge that separates the valley of the Beas from the Hamta Nala. The coolies were heavily laden and found the going hard, but, as luck would have it, Rannoo met two friends on the mountainside whom he forthwith impressed into our service. This entailed a wait while they returned to the village to collect food for the journey, and when at last they reappeared, to our surprise they were accompanied by a large he-goat. It turned out, however, that this was not an auxiliary to our transport, but that they were going to leave him with a friend herding goats along the route.

The day was hot and sunny as we steadily climbed among the pine trees. In many places the undergrowth was a lilac mist of flowering irises and the air was often fragrant with the sweet scent of syringa. Every now and then the pleasing song of a rock thrush (*Monticola rufiventris*) could be heard from lower down the valley and occasionally, too, we were startled by the hurried, chattering call of the small cuckoo (*Cuculus poliocephalus*) from a nearby tree. Above us three hobbies (*Falco subbuteo*?) stooped and wheeled and screamed in their incredibly rapid and swift-like flight as they mobbed an eagle.

But it was mid-day before we had passed over the ridge, for coolies, even when they are cheerful and willing as these were, are a slow means of transport. Our way then lay up the Hamta Nala, at first high above the river, across steep slopes and the lower crags of the stupendous precipices that wall the valley on its western side and continue almost unbroken to beyond Chhika. From the other side of the nala this track looks most dangerous, but it is by no means as bad as it looks, and is in fact of no difficulty to the reasonably sure of foot and steady of nerve.

On a small pasture where our path descended close to the river we met two shepherds herding their flocks, who told us that they had seen two black bears early that morning and wished us to camp there to shoot them. However, time would not allow of this, and so we pressed on.

Again we climbed high above the river, to descend once more to the river bank opposite to the entry of Jobri Nala from the east, across a meadow that was a golden lake of marsh marigolds, into a small grove of mountain oaks. Here was supposed to be the bridge that would take us across the river, for further progress up its western bank was impossible as the cliffs dropped sheer to its waters. As the whole



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