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'TWIN GABLE (20,042 feet) FROM ABOVE CAMP II

F. Solari

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FLYING VISIT

MARGARET MUNRO

SEVEN weeks in a country so far and so different from one's own is too short a time to create any but the most fleeting impression. But my memories are real and vivid to me and all the more precious for being the fulfilment of a long-cherished ambition to see the Himalayas. I was lucky, for I knew Hamish McArthur who invited me to join his expedition, and of all the wonderful holidays I owe to him and Millicent, this was the best. With sorrow in our hearts we left Hamish in the Himalayas and I, personally, would like to record here my gratitude to him.

The aim of the expedition was to visit the head of the Thiroi Nal, a hitherto unexplored tributary valley of the Chandra River on the border of Chamba and Lahul, and to explore, photograph, and map this area. The existing Survey of India map of the Thiroi Nal fades out with some vague dotted lines on its eastern edge, and many of the actual contours look as though an imaginative cartographer had filled them in at his office desk just to satisfy his artistic instincts. It was a wonderful chance to combine a holiday with true exploration. The party was the same as for the Central Lahul Expedition, 1955—that is, Hamish and Millicent McArthur, Frank and Babs Solari, with two additional members, Emile Bayle from Billy-Montigny in France (a member of the Groupe des Hautes Montagnes), and myself.

Babs and Frank Solari and I flew from London to Bombay as advance party. Our job was to extricate the equipment (which travelled by sea) from the clutches of the Customs, a long and tedious business which occupied us fully for a week. Thus my memories of Bombay chiefly consist of countless taxi drives from Custom Houses to docks and back again, long earnest discussions with the hundred

and one official concerned with our business, the vivid clear colours of the saris which all Indian women wear with such grace, and the blanket of humid air typical of the monsoon season. Now and again the skies would let forth a deluge of solid water, so we were immediately glad of the umbrellas we had so prudently taken! (This important item of equipment I used regularly throughout our travels, chiefly as a sunshade, only parting with it reluctantly when we left Base to set up high camps on the glaciers!)

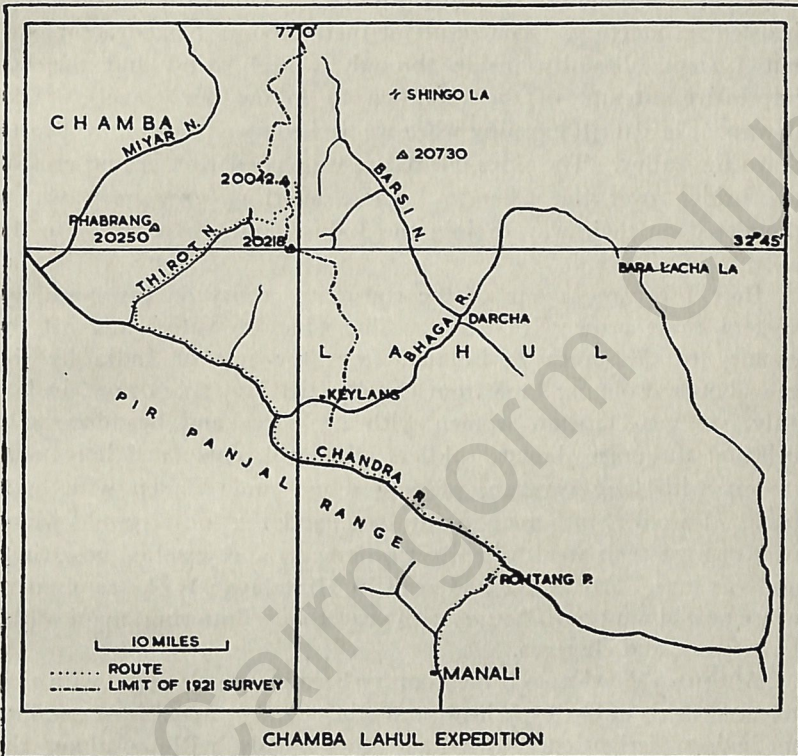
The Chamba-Lahul Expedition, 1958, really started when the six of us met in Delhi on July 18. Next day we travelled north by train to Pathankot, where we were met by our two Sherpas, Ang Tsering and Da Temba, after their five-day journey from Darjeeling. Here we hired an ancient bus to transport us and our mound of equipment for the next 200 miles, first east and then north, to Manali in the Kulu valley. This was an interesting two-day drive through jungle and foothills, rice fields and tea plantations to Mandi; then up the spectacular road which clings precariously to the side of the great gorge of the Beas River. We were fortunate for, though the monsoon had recently swept away sections of this "highway," it was mended and open again that day for traffic.

The road ends at Manali (6,000 feet), the busy trading centre for many distant people from the north who make arduous journeys each summer to trade wool and salt in the bazaar in exchange for some products of civilisation. They come from Lahul, Ladakh, Spiti, and even Tibet. It was sheer delight to be welcomed by one out of the throng as we drove through the village. This was Sonam, a Ladakhi, who greeted the McArthurs with a tremendous salaam. He had been with them in 1955 and was to come with us this time too.

Manali, owing to its height and sheltered position, is an excellent fruit-growing area. We stayed with Major Banon, who owns an enormous orchard of apple, plum, pear, and cherry trees. These fruits tasted specially good on our return from the mountains. Major Banon had arranged porters and ponies for the expedition, and next morning he introduced the Ladakhi porters he had engaged for us, and a cheery-looking bunch they were too—Sonam, Wangyal, Dorje and Ishe Namgyal. It was interesting to contrast their unbridled enthusiasm, when issued with boots and clothing, with the Sherpas' quiet acceptance of their dues!

On Thursday, July 24, the expedition took to the road. After some delay in getting the equipment sorted into loads and then tied on to the ponies, we set off in a monsoon shower—three sahibs, three

mem-sahibs, two Sherpas, four Ladakhis, twenty-five ponies, and eight pony men! An easy half-day's march this was to Koti rest house, only 7 miles from and 2,000 feet above Manali.



Next day was strenuous, for we had a steady climb up and over the Rohtang Pass (13,050 feet) to the Chandra valley. It was a brilliant sunny morning but, as we climbed, mist began to obscure the mountain views and made us all the more aware of the myriads of flowers by the track. It was a great thrill to see the Himalayan blue poppy in flower near the summit. Once over the pass we soon emerged from the gloom, and I was jerked out of my preoccupation with the miseries of slight altitude sickness by the glories of the splendid view ahead. This was what I had longed to see—snow peaks soaring above deep-cut valleys scoured out by glaciers and the powerful rivers that they feed. The mist hung round the mouth of the pass we had just crossed, but now we were in monsoon-free Lahul and had little rain for the rest of our travels.

That night we camped on a delightful grassy shelf about 1,000 feet above the river and revelled in the delights of luxury camping with the ever-helpful Sherpas and Ladakhis in attendance. Sonam and Wangyal had some fun with the guys of my Guinea tent which they insisted on erecting. The result of their labours looked a bit odd, but I slept blissfully inside through a high wind and the last impressive attempt of the monsoon to follow our travels. This downpour lasted till morning when we packed up and set off westwards down the valley. The skies cleared as we passed Koksar and crossed the bridge over the Chandra, whose swirling grey-green waters thundered on their way to join the Indus hundreds of miles to the west.

Here I became aware of the constant activity on this path, an ancient trade route with Tibet. The Chandra valley and all the country to the north is isolated from the rest of India by the snow-bound Rohtang Pass from October till May; but now, in late July, we met Tibetan women with necklaces and headdresses of brilliant turquoise, lamas, soldiers on patrol, emaciated holy men, traders with long caravans of ponies and mules laden with huge packs of wool, Spiti men in fur hats, and the local people whose women wear their wealth in silver ornaments and jewelled nose rings and earrings. All that I had read in Himalayan books came alive as we passed mud-built houses with prayer flags fluttering, mani walls, lamaseries, and chortens.

After two days' march the country became more fertile, with tiny terraced fields of barley, wheat, and other crops watered by a cunning method of irrigation. Now and then shady willows along the roadside gave us welcome relief from the strong sun which seemed specially fierce when we crossed the dry stony nullahs that sweep down the mountain sides. The south side of the Chandra is tremendous; the steep flanks of immense peaks rear straight up from the river, making the occasional flocks of goats precariously grazing on the few green patches look like tiny white lice. One particularly impressive rock face I remember was opposite the junction of the Bhaga with the Chandra. Its layers of red, yellow, brown, and grey were frozen into immense whorls and streaks as though a giant had stirred a huge molten pudding.

Apart from the constant interest to be found in the magnificent surroundings, in the flowers and the birds, and the passers-by, there was plenty of opportunity on the march to get to know our friends, the Sherpas. Ang Tsering (aged 48), our excellent sirdar, has had



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F. Solari

CAMP I AND THIROT NALA: PHABRANG (20,250 feet) CENTRE BACKGROUND

a most interesting life. At the age of 14 he was a porter with Bruce's last expedition to the Rongbuk side of Everest and in 1934, with the tragic German expedition to Nanga Parbat, was the last Sherpa to come down alive, though badly frost-bitten, from Camp VI. Unfortunately his English was very limited, and it was only possible to learn the bare facts of these tremendous experiences. On the other hand, Da Temba, his son (aged 24), spoke English fluently and was a very sophisticated young man. He also read and wrote our language and could keep accounts. On the march one day we discussed books and films. I was startled and amazed when he informed me that he found Shakespeare very difficult! I hope it was a comfort when I told him he wasn't the only one who did! It was a relief to find that, although he knew about atom bombs and other inventions of the "civilised" world, he had never heard of television. His home is in the Sherpa country of Sola Khombu, fourteen days' march from Darjeeling, where he spends the summer months seeing films between joining expeditions. His great ambition is to be chosen for the expedition the Sherpas are planning on their own.

On July 30 we turned north into the Thirot Nala and camped by the river just beyond Chokhang. At last we were nearing our objective and were right off the well-beaten track in the Chandra valley. At once the Thirot Nal showed its notable characteristic of keeping secret the impressive peaks that guard it on each side. Even when we reached our base camp site two days later, we still could not see much beyond the steep 2,000 feet moraines that hid the glaciers and mountains above. The last lap of the journey was the hardest for the ponies, as the path disappeared and we had to find our way over huge boulder screes and through rushing glacier torrents. When crossing the latter it was wonderful to be a mem-sahib, for mem-sahibs must not get their feet wet and were firmly led across on horse-back, usually by our faithful Sonam.

Base camp, at 13,750 feet, was set up on the last grassy patch beside a clear-running burn of good water. This was obviously part of the traditional grazing ground for the goats belonging to a very typical old gadi (nomadic goat-herd) who now joined our party. Perhaps the unusual company, the food, cast-off tins (much prized), and odd cigarettes compensated for the invasion.

Pictures of the head of the Thirot Nala give an impression of barren stony country, but this is deceptive for one of the chief pleasures of base camp was the wealth of different flowers growing all around—small asters of brilliant mauve, drifts of rose-pink persicaria, a

handsome species of sedum with deep-crimson flowers, the mountain cranesbill (its delicate blue-purple petals veined with red), masses of pedicularis with tall heads of bright-yellow flowers, and a myriad of others. Here, to our great joy, were more blue poppies (*Meconopsis aculeata*, as I have since found out) in full bloom, which were very difficult to photograph as they prefer to grow in the cool shade of enormous boulders. It would have been fascinating to make a collection of flowers had there been time, but now we had only sixteen days before setting off on the homeward march.

The first day was spent in settling in, sorting stores, and finding a way up the river and over the first great moraines. Some wonderful peaks came into sight and we began to see the layout of the glaciers, most of which had tremendous avalanche-swept ice-falls which did not suit us at all. We were looking for an easy, quick way to gain height and fortunately spotted one glacier high above which looked promising for, though a line of vertical ice-cliffs apparently barred the way, we thought a route might be found to one side or the other. The shapely peak Gangstang (20,218 feet) which dominates the valley and has already been climbed from the other (south) side by a party of Italians, looked a tough proposition from here with its steep knife-edge ridges and hanging glaciers. It has the same magnetism for photographers as the Matterhorn from Zermatt, and only when our films were developed on returning home did we realise how much we had fallen under its spell.

After a training climb from base camp of a snow and rock peak of 16,700 feet (in mist, unfortunately, so survey and photography was impossible), the first high-level camp was set up on the moraine 2,000 feet above base and a few yards from the snout of the chosen glacier. All the porters, and even some of the pony men, carried loads up the boulder-strewn route, through the ice-cold river where it spread out into fairly shallow channels over gravelly flats, and up the steep moraine. This was hard work for our untrained lungs and hearts, and I was very glad to see the tents already pitched when we tottered in with our comparatively light loads. After a good mug of tea with lemon, life took on a rosier hue and, having seen the pony men off down to base, we settled in for the night. The party at Camp I now consisted of Hamish, Frank, Emile, and myself and four porters, Da Temba, Wangyal, Sonam, and Dorje.

A heavy snowfall in the night led to sleet and rain next day, when we woke to find thick mist all around us and a quagmire around and inside the tents. The boys dug an efficient drainage system in the

sodden glacier clay and made stone "causeways" to the tent doors, and we bailed out the tents! We ate, read, and slept to pass the time and were rewarded for our patience by a bright clear dawn next morning.

We set off up the glacier carrying loads for Camp II. The first ice-cliffs were easily turned on the right and we made slow but steady progress, which became slower still as the sun grew hotter. The snow grew soft and, in our unacclimatised condition, we found it hard going. The view opened up as we gained height and wonderful peaks began to appear, notably one which Frank christened the Twin Gable, and another to the west of the Thirof Nal called Phabrang—both twenty-thousanders waiting to be climbed! I, for one, was very glad when at last a halt was called, and we dumped our loads. After a rest we returned to Camp I, had supper, and crawled thankfully into our sleeping bags.

Next day we established Camp II in a snow basin above the second ice barrier. This camp was memorable for the wellnigh insufferable heat caused by the strong sunlight reflected from the snow. Even in the tent there was no escape, for it was like a furnace inside and the camp was in a position well protected from any stray breeze. Sunset was a great relief for the crisp cold that it brought. Dawn at Camp II was really beautiful, for light mist-wraiths tinged with pearly colours floated up from the valley and the great peaks looked remote and ethereal rising above the haze. We started early and had a pleasant walk on good hard snow up to the "edge of the map," an easy col. It was exciting to approach uncharted country and, when we reached the col, a thrill to see other glaciers pouring down to a remote valley and ranges of mountains spreading north-eastward towards Tibet. We scrambled up a small rock peak, where Hamish and Frank made a start on the survey observations, and we all got busy with our cameras. Meanwhile the porters brought up loads from Camp II and then we all went back to fetch the rest before setting up Camp III on the col. This was a perfect site with magnificent views, though naturally rather exposed to the wind.

It was here that my exposure meter had an unusual adventure. I took off my camera and meter and laid them on what seemed to be level snow, while I took off my anorak as the sun was very hot. When I looked down, the meter had vanished, but a faint track could be seen running down the north-east side of the col, over the bergschrund and one crevasse, then disappearing into the next about 200 feet below. That, I thought, was the end of the meter and was thankful

that it was insured! It was impossible at that time to organise a "rescue" party, but early next morning, when the snow was hard and safe, Emile was seen approaching the second crevasse. He bent down, peered in, and let out a shout of triumph—the meter had landed on a narrow shelf about 18 inches down! When I tested it, encrusted with ice and the leather case frozen hard, it was working perfectly in spite of its night out.

At high camps one does not always feel at one's brightest and best. The brain works even more slowly than at sea level, the appetite is poor, and any exertion, such as struggling into sleeping bags or putting on boots, leaves one breathless. But all these discomforts are forgotten when you see such a dawn as we did next morning. It was a marvellous spectacle which I could never put into words and which I will never forget. We spent over an hour taking photographs of the brilliant light creeping over the peaks, throwing ice-fluting into sharp relief and making snow crystals glint and sparkle. At last we tore ourselves away and set off for an easy peak of about 18,000 feet nearby. The porters were delighted to come too—in fact, they took part in all our climbs. We divided into two parties; Frank and I roped up with Sonam and Dorje to climb the west ridge—an easy snow plod, a shattered rock arête, and finally steep snow to the summit, while the other four came up the east—a snow ridge finishing with a spectacular cornice which was most photogenic. The boys set to work on building a row of neat cairns (or chortens), while we took a round of survey readings. From here we saw a twenty-thousander to the north that appeared to be the only possible peak of that height in the vicinity for us to attempt.

We returned to Camp III and decided that the time had come to go down to base and see how Millicent and Babs were faring. Emile preferred to stay high and kept Wangyal with him. The rest of us roped up and made a quick descent of the glacier which, after the hot weather, had begun to reveal many more crevasses than we had encountered on the way up. I well remember the eternity it seemed to take going down the steep moraine and through the boulders before reaching the friendly welcome at base, and the joy of seeing flowers and grass and running water. The following day was wet and misty, and we wondered what the weather at Camp III was like. We packed up and started about 4 P.M., Babs coming with us for a night at Camp I.

Light was just appearing when we set off up the glacier next morning at 5.30. As we approached Camp III we caught sight of



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E. Bayle

THE OBJECTIVE FROM EMILE AND WANGYAL'S PEAK
Site of Camp IV below right-hand ridge

two tiny figures moving slowly up the steep ice ridge of the fine peak (over 18,000 feet) to the south of the col. Emile and Wangyal returned at 2.30 P.M., having had a splendid climb, the complete traverse of the mountain. Emile was full of praise for Wangyal's climbing ability, both on rock and on steep snow and ice—a wonderful achievement for a Ladakhi with very little previous experience of mountaineering. They told us—in fact, it was obvious from the state of the tents—that the previous day of rain and cloud at base had been blizzard and gale for them, so they could not venture out.

Now we prepared to move camp to the glacier basin under the proposed twenty-thousander. We went down the north-east side of the col (that is, still farther away from base), descended about 800 feet, then turned north up the other glacier. Camp IV was pitched near the head of the basin and below the south-east ridge, which we hoped would lead us to the summit. After a brief rest, Hamish and Emile set off on a reconnaissance and, after some difficulty in a steep ice gully, found a way to the crest of the ridge which was shattered and covered with loose rock. The top section still looked hard from here, but they returned to camp full of hope that a route could be found.

Next morning, August 14, Emile and Da Temba went off early as advance party to pioneer a route; indeed, we all hoped they might reach the top, which was at the far end of the summit ridge (about a mile in length), and get back in one day. The rest of us packed one tent, sleeping bags, and food to set a camp well up the ridge to be in a good position for a second attempt next day. The climb up the loose treacherous rocks to the crest of the ridge was unpleasant, for secure belays were non-existent and it was practically impossible to prevent stones falling but, once up, the view was tremendous. Now we could see the Himalayan chain stretching eastwards to infinity, and Hamish and Frank pointed out distant peaks in the area they visited in 1955. The ridge at this point was just a scramble, and a prominent gendarme seen from camp was easily turned to the left. We were soon up to a large snow patch which had been marked from below as a possible place for Camp V. As we rested and admired the scenery, a shout came from above drawing our attention to two figures silhouetted against the brilliant blue sky. When Emile and Da Temba joined us, we were disappointed to hear that Emile considered that this route would not go. They had reached the summit ridge after a harrowing climb up an iced-up chimney to find that access to the main top was along a knife-edged snow arête which was in rotten

condition and badly corniced on the north side. Emile was the best and most experienced climber in the party, and what he judged unsafe we certainly would not attempt.

We started down the ridge together, wondering if we could find an alternative route in the short time that was left, for we had to return to base on August 17. When we were on a short steep rock pitch, Hamish suddenly became unconscious. We got him to a safe place and, after what seemed an age, he came to and was able, after a rest, to scramble down the loose rocks to the glacier with strong support from Emile and the porters. Back at camp he appeared his usual cheerful self and ate a good meal before going to sleep. We all knew that we must get him down to a lower altitude at once. It was too late that day for it was now 4 P.M., so we planned to make for base camp first thing in the morning. But it was not to be, for at 5.20 next morning he suddenly became deeply unconscious and shortly after (we now believe) he died. At the time our one thought was to get him down somehow for we hoped his life might yet be saved, and here Da Temba's Sherpa School training came into action. Swiftly and with great efficiency he made a sledge-stretcher out of a mountain tent, with Hamish, in his sleeping bags and on his air mattress, firmly lashed on. We packed what we could and started off, leaving behind food and cooking equipment which we could not carry. It was dreadful to think of the news we must tell Millicent still far away, over a pass and many thousands of feet below, at base camp.

I will not go into details of that tragic day and the utter sadness and exhaustion at the end of it; or the next day when Frank, Emile, the porters, and pony men dug a grave, beside a little lake surrounded by grass and flowers, high up on the moraine and we three women followed with leaden steps to join in the simple burial ceremony. We were very touched by the expressions of sorrow and sympathy shown by the pony men and porters, who made a beautiful wreath and brought masses of mountain flowers to cover the grave of their Bara Sahib. Emile found a flat slab of stone on which he carved name and date and set it at the head of Hamish's resting place.

Sadly we returned to base and the tasks of packing up and going home. Millicent was an example to everyone with her calmness and courage which sustained us all on the long march back to Manali and the outside world. Exactly two weeks after leaving base camp, I was back at work in Edinburgh, with a host of unforgettable memories—sad and happy—which will remain with me all my life.