

A climb in the western Himalaya

By R. G. PETTIGREW

WHEN Kim asked the Lama from where he had come, the old mendicant replied, "I came by Kulu—from beyond the Kailas." Kulu is the name most commonly given to the attractive, forested valley of the River Beas, one of the five rivers rising in the Punjab Himalaya whose eternal snows it drains. Eighteen years ago it could have been described as the farthest flung outpost of British India lying, as it did, beyond the princely state of Mandi and bordering on the buffer states of Lahul and Spiti where the landscape and the people are Tibetan in character.

The high mountains of Kulu, which form the Pir Panjal range of the Great Himalayan Divide, were for more than a century the haunt of the shikari rather than the mountaineer. The big game includes ibex, bharal, tahr, gooral, red bear, black bear and serow. Small game offers a shooter's paradise in snowcock (ramchukor), snow-partridge, chukor, woodcock, duck, and a variety of brilliantly plumaged pheasants such as the monal, koklas, kalij, chir and tragopan.

In May, 1964, the pre-monsoon season, our goal was a mountain named Kulu Pumori, 21,500ft. high, and unclimbed. It lies, as the crow flies, 30 miles east of Manali, dominating the majestic course of a great glacier. In shape its profile is classic, being a pyramidal peak. Four great, distinct ridges leap abruptly from the ice-fields at 16,000ft., express their individual character in combinations of rock and ice features and finally combine in a summit ridge of fluted ice. On all sides this ultimate point is defended by steep buttresses embracing avalanche-prone couloirs which run out onto great snow faces. It is the third highest mountain in the Kulu region of the Punjab Himalaya.

The highest, Shigri Parbat, 21,800ft., fell to Mr. J. P. O'F. Lynam's party in 1961; the second highest, Point 21,760ft., by local tradition the loftiest point in Kulu, is likely to remain inviolate for many years to come to judge by the ferocious aspect of its approaches. There are approximately 20 unclimbed mountains between 19,000-20,000ft., in altitude, of varying degrees of difficulty, in the vicinity of Kulu Pumori. The remainder were all climbed in a resurgence of mountaineering activity in the 1950s.

When Dr. Franz Mohling and I planned our expedition last April we were aware that Kulu Pumori was still unclimbed and would offer our party the chance of a classic ascent. This would be my fourth season of climbing in Kulu; my companion had had extensive experience in the mountain ranges of North America.

For the transport of our stores and equipment we recruited in Manali 12 porters representing nearly all the border countries of the Himalaya: Ladakh, Nepal, Lahul and Spiti. Our two high-altitude men, an integral part of the climbing team, were Ladakhis, the 'Sherpas' of the Western Himalaya, Wangyal and Ang Chook. To get fit, and economise on portage costs, we also carried rucksacks weighing 70lb.

Our route from Manali, 6,200ft., to the base of Kulu Pumori in Lahul crossed the Rohtang La, 13,050ft., the famous pass of the Western Himalaya in the once flourishing trade route between Tibet and India. According to local legend, remnants of Alexander the Great's army reached India by way of the Rohtang and, a millennium later, outriders of Ghenghis Khan's hordes gazed greedily into the verdant vale of Kulu from its crest.

The principal feature in the ice-bound land of Lahul was the churning, green torrent of the Chandra River by which we marched over a rough terrain for five wintry days. We were now opposite the impressive portals of rock and ice through which, sluggishly emerging, lay the ugly snout of our glacier approach to the mountain. Luckily for us the remnants of an avalanche tongue still lay

across the unfordable river permitting us to bridge it with ease, and saving a costly detour of two days' duration.

From the moraine-blacked snout of the glacier to the foot of our objective was a distance of 12 miles with 5,000ft. of ascent. At this point we paid off our 12 valley porters and saw them safely across the river and down the valley. The four of us then commenced the back-packing of our stores and equipment in a series of ferrying journeys between successive camps on the glacier. This valuable period of positioning and acclimatisation absorbed 10 days. We calculated that everyone had covered 80 miles over the surface of the glacier ferrying loads in seven working days.

For three days we had been snow-bound, and had survived a great avalanche falling from steep cliffs to the north of our route. The only sign of life we had seen was a pair of ramchukor (snowcock), whose plaintive cry, sounding to me like a cross between a grouse and a curlew, seemed only to emphasise the isolation of the party. From this and other signs we concluded that either we were too early or the season was late starting. Glowering above us, plastered in new snow, displaying a fierce aspect absent from the photographs, Kulu Pumori seemed to reiterate this conclusion.

Reconnaissance along the snow-covered glaciers streaming around its base, first to the north and east, second to the west, revealed that our best chance of success on Pumori lay in attacking the south-west ridge. It was the only way we saw fulfilling the most important requirement for a small party on a Himalayan peak in wintry conditions—it led directly to the summit. Furthermore, access to the foot of the ridge was open via a small snowfield below the south face, and a snow ramp. The last of the major ferrying operations installed us comfortably in advanced base camp at the foot of the south-west ridge in the finest glacier cwm I have ever seen. The fact that no-one had ever been there before added to our pleasure.

Before us, much foreshortened, rose the great ridge, here easy snow slopes, there a steep coxcomb of rock until, in its upper reaches, it landed abruptly against the formidable vertical cliffs supporting the summit cap. Long and hard was the study through field glasses and the conjecture was endless. Uncertainty was always present in our discussions. Would it be possible to reach the summit? We did not know but we spent much time lying on our backs with the field glasses and wishfully thinking our way to the top by a variety of fancy routes. One of these avoided the upper cliffs by traversing to the east across a steeply tilted snowfield.

We planned to place two camps on the ridge in support of the climb to the summit. Each consisted of one tent. The first, a 'Meade,' was sited at 19,000ft., about 2,000ft. above the advanced base camp in a natural step deepened by our excavating the hard-packed snow.

The next day we resolved that Wangyal and I should make the first attempt on the summit so the whole party climbed the steep and difficult Coxcomb Arete section of the ridge to install us in the highest camp, a two-man 'Mountain' tent, at 20,000ft. We sank the small orange tent securely in the snow on an exposed portion of the ridge, the best of several indifferent sites. Circumstances caused this to be the longest standing camp of the entire expedition; for a period of six days the diminutive tent shuddered under the onslaught of fierce gales but remained standing. I estimated that we were now in a very good position for our attempt on the summit since it could only be 1,500ft. above us.

June 6 dawned clear, cold and calm; the twentieth anniversary of D Day would see the climax of our expedition. Wangyal and I, numbed and befuddled at first by the cold, climbed ridge, snowfield and fluted ice arete to the symmetrical snow cone forming the topmost point of Kulu Pumori in three strenuous hours. It was every inch a Himalayan summit. Below, on all sides, lay a welter of glaciers, snowfields and peaks. We shook hands ardently and gazed in admiration at the snowbound ranges stretching towards Tibet. Half an hour later we began our descent like over-cautious cats.

As we withdrew in stages from the mountain Mohling and Ang Chook moved up to the assault. They truly confirmed the route by making the second ascent on June 9. The whole party was subsequently re-united when it began laboriously to retrace its steps back to Manali. Like Kim's Lama we had come by Kulu—from beyond the Kailas.



THE WRITER humping stores and equipment in a series of ferrying journeys.

AN AVALANCHE falls to the north of the climbers' route.

