

The highest peak (21,000 feet) visible from our base camp has a 10,000-foot face.

If you really want to climb...

By Arlene Blum

"If you really want to climb, don't go to the Himalaya." — H. W. Tilman

Dear Z.,

Thought you might like to see the photos from one of our more dubious ventures. We'd heard rumors of a range of beautiful mountains about 20,000 feet high, and thought we'd spend a month or so investigating and doing some good climbs. What a month! Ten days of hassle trying to locate the mountains was followed by twenty days of trekking made memorable by the 150 pounds of climbing gear we dragged along.

Our efforts to locate the mountains were rewarded by a vague sketch map of the approach. A hot crowded thirteen-hour bus ride was followed by three days of minor disasters. Various locals assured us the mountains were in various directions. Still not too sure the mountains actually existed, we set out hesitantly. Our confidence was further eroded when Joel's voodoo bracelet turned black forecasting his imminent death.

For two days and thirty miles we walked above the Maraw River to Sondar. Nomad caravans, blank-faced peasants, elegant women with fine jewelry, pant suits and gold-trimmed scarfs, the mule trains that carry all supplies to people living in this remote area, and men with briefcases and umbrellas, looking as though they were on their way to the office, all amicably shared this trail.

From Sondar we entered the gorge of the Nanth Nallah River in the rain. Occasionally we got tantalizing glimpses of granite domes, pinnacles and towers. Mostly we got wet. To our surprise, the trail was bordered with tall leafy green grass and fir trees.

Late the fourth day we reached our base camp at Sallarchin and a view of boiling clouds. Occasionally it would clear a little, revealing steep ice and rock faces towering to over 20,000 feet. Our camp was at only 11,000 feet in a green meadow. Around us were moraines from which the peaks

rose precipitously. We could not get much higher without serious climbing. Fortunately, rain soon began to pelt down, so we had an excuse not to try.

Well, these peaks were not our style, but perhaps there was something a bit more suitable about. We christened the 14,000-foot moraine across from our camp "Easy Peak," and decided to wander up it to look for something to climb. The first assault on Easy Peak was abandoned due to heavy rain. The following day it rained so much we didn't even get out of our sleeping bags. At last on the seventh day we made it to the top of Easy Peak. The view confirmed our guess that Easy would be the only climb of the trip.

Unfortunately for us, all the peaks seemed to involve very steep climbs of 6,000 to 10,000 feet on high angle granite and ice. The granite looked smooth, the ice hard, the icefalls very broken and the possibilities terrifying. There were huge cornices and hanging glaciers here and there to add objective danger.

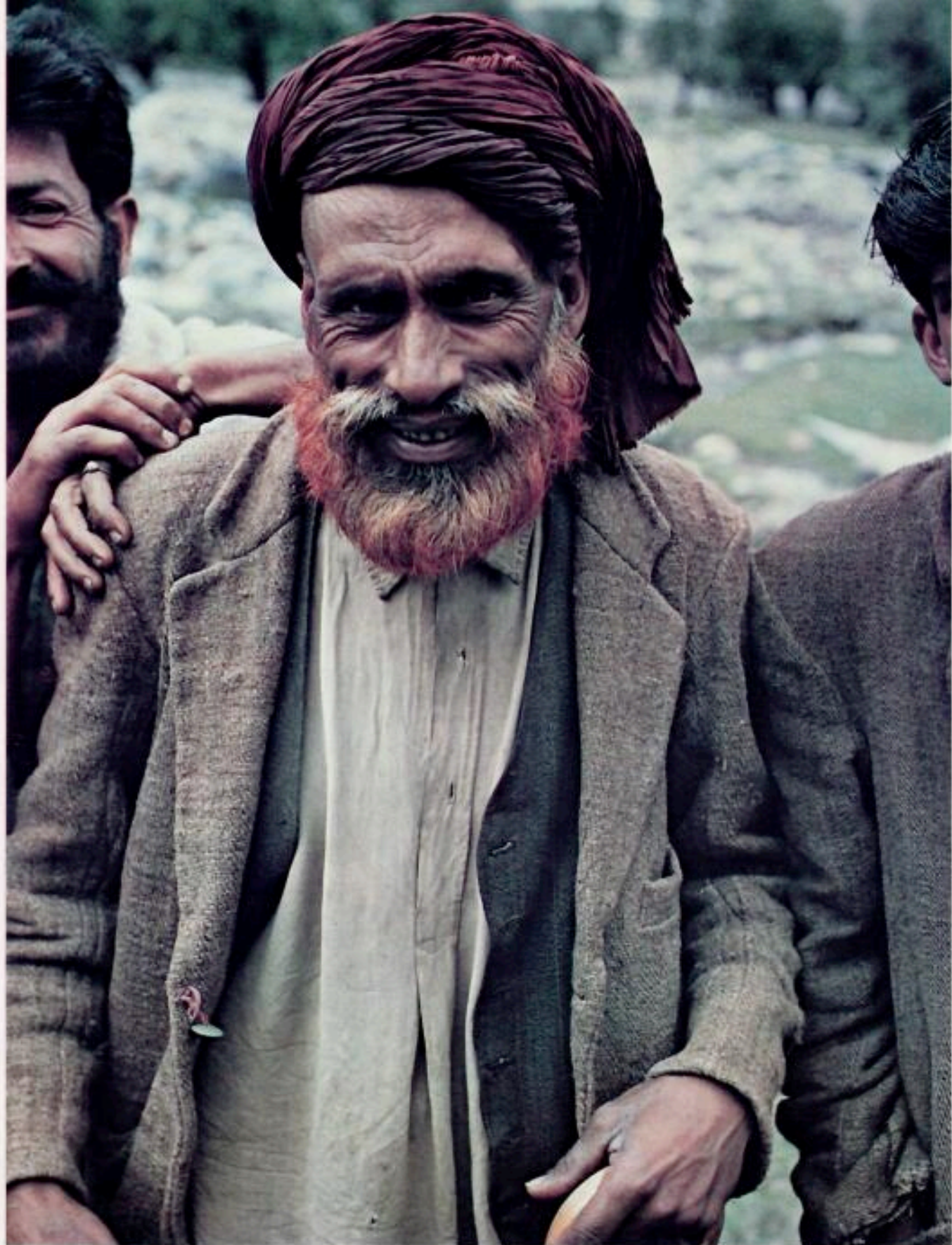
The highest peak we could see had a 10,000-foot high ice face averaging at least sixty degrees. Across from us an upside down ice-cream cone rose unapproachably to over 20,000 feet. There was a vertical granite face rising smoothly 6,000 feet above the glacier—rather like two El Capitanes.

"Let's take up hill walking," I gulped. "I didn't really want to climb anyhow."

After another day of looking at the mountains, we retreated, and spent the remainder of our time taking the scenic route back to civilization. An eighty-mile walk was substituted for the dreaded thirteen-hour bus ride.

We later found out that there had been about five other groups of climbers in this area but none of the major peaks have been climbed. These mountains are mostly unnamed and unexplored, and would be a good place for someone who really wanted to climb.

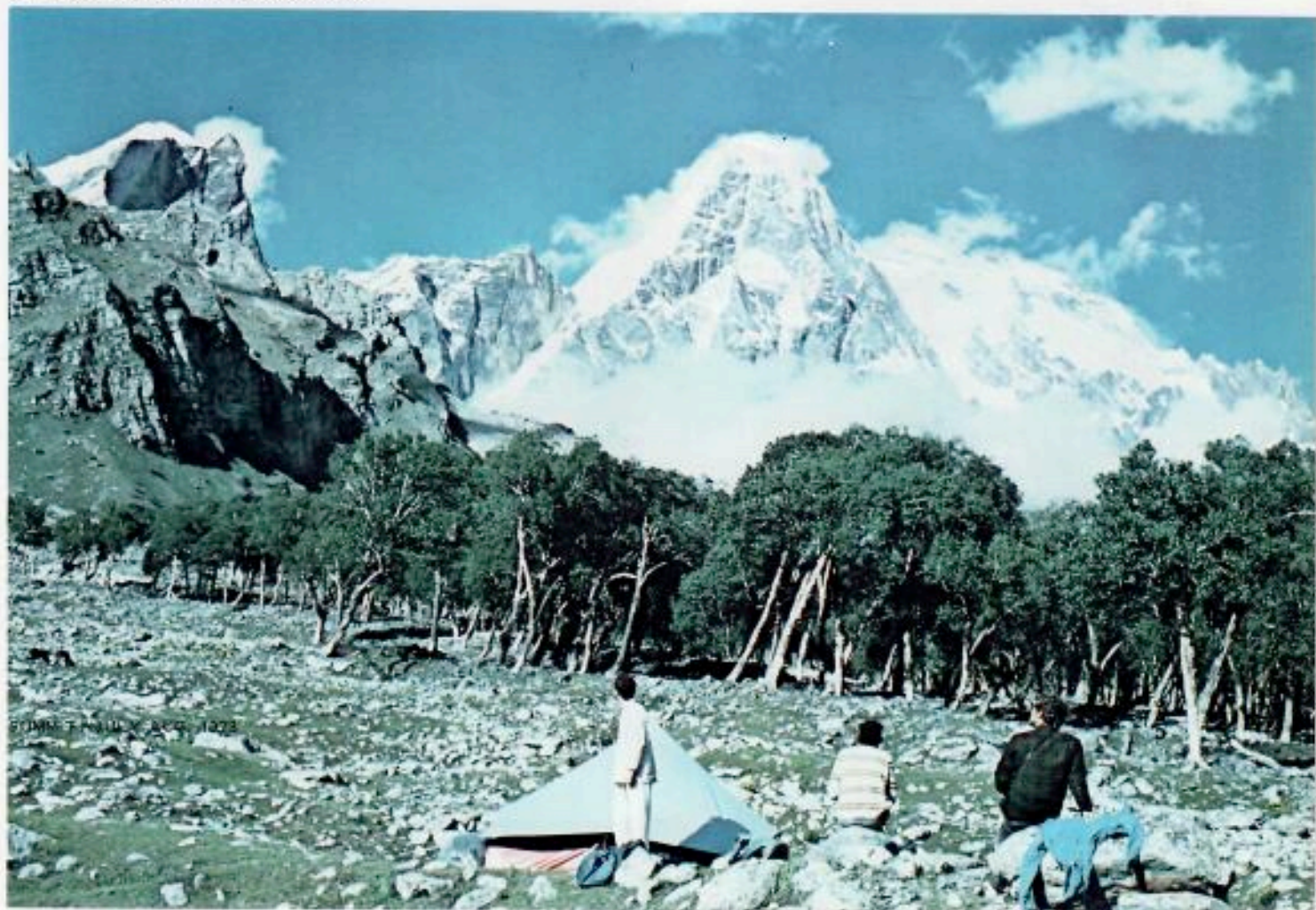
Sincerely, A.



One of the local men of the area displays a colorful beard.



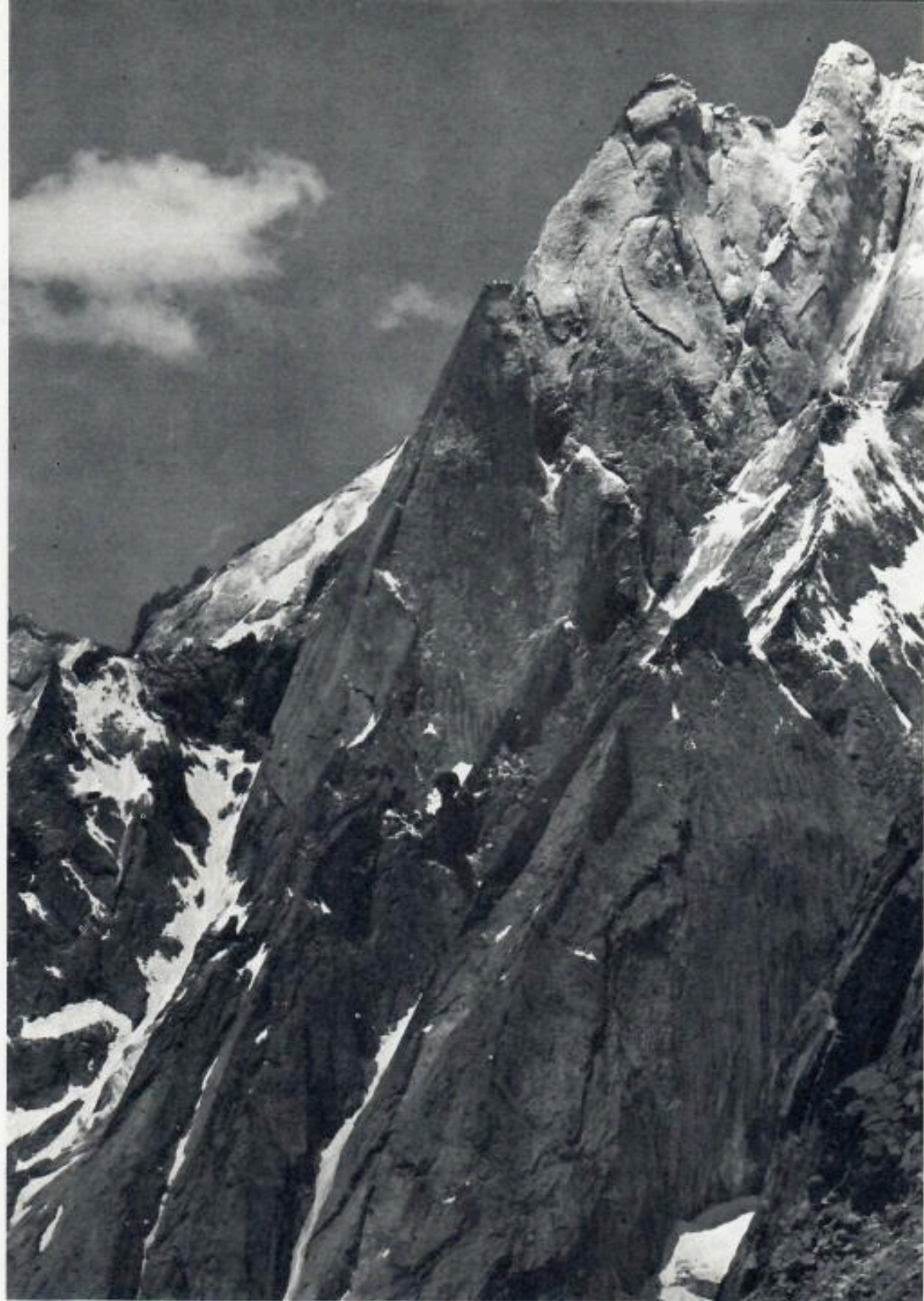
ABOVE: A 21,000-foot peak visible from base camp.
BELOW: Base camp at 11,000 feet.





Braman Bal, the highest peak in the Kistwar Himal. Most of these peaks are unnamed.





This steep rock face extends from 12,000 to 21,000 feet in the Kistwar Himal region.