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General Editor: ERNEST YOUNG, B.Sc.

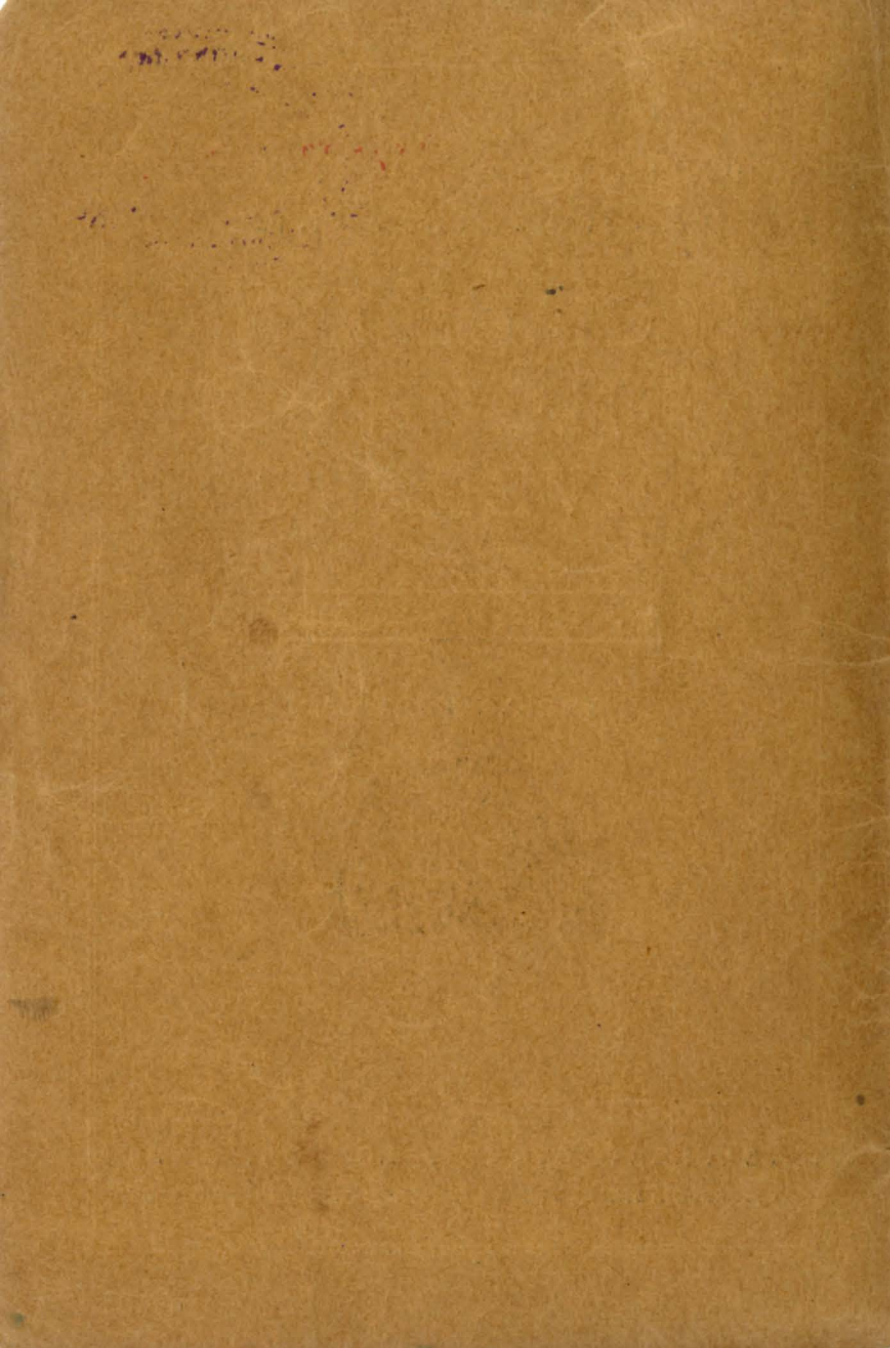
CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST

G. INGLE FINCH

INDIAN EDITION



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CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST

BY

CAPTAIN G. INGLE FINCH, M.B.E.



A TIBETAN PRIEST

LONDON

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BROADWAY ERNAKULAM

TO
CAPTAIN J. P. FARRAR, D.S.O.
Homme sans peur et sans reproche

PREFACE

THE final chapter of the Climbing of Mount Everest still remains to be written.

Did Mallory and Irvine reach the summit? In all probability they achieved the goal for which they had struggled so bravely; but we wish to know for certain.


What was the manner of the passing of these two men in their last epic venture?

It will be the task of a further expedition to solve these questions. At the moment nothing can be done. Man-made difficulties, in the shape of a political barrier against entry into Tibet, were raised after the last expedition and still prove insuperable. Soon, we hope, these will be removed and then another expedition will go forth—to conquer.

What is the good of it all? What is the use? What shall we have gained when Mount Everest is finally climbed?

This little book supplies, I hope, the answer.

G. I. F.



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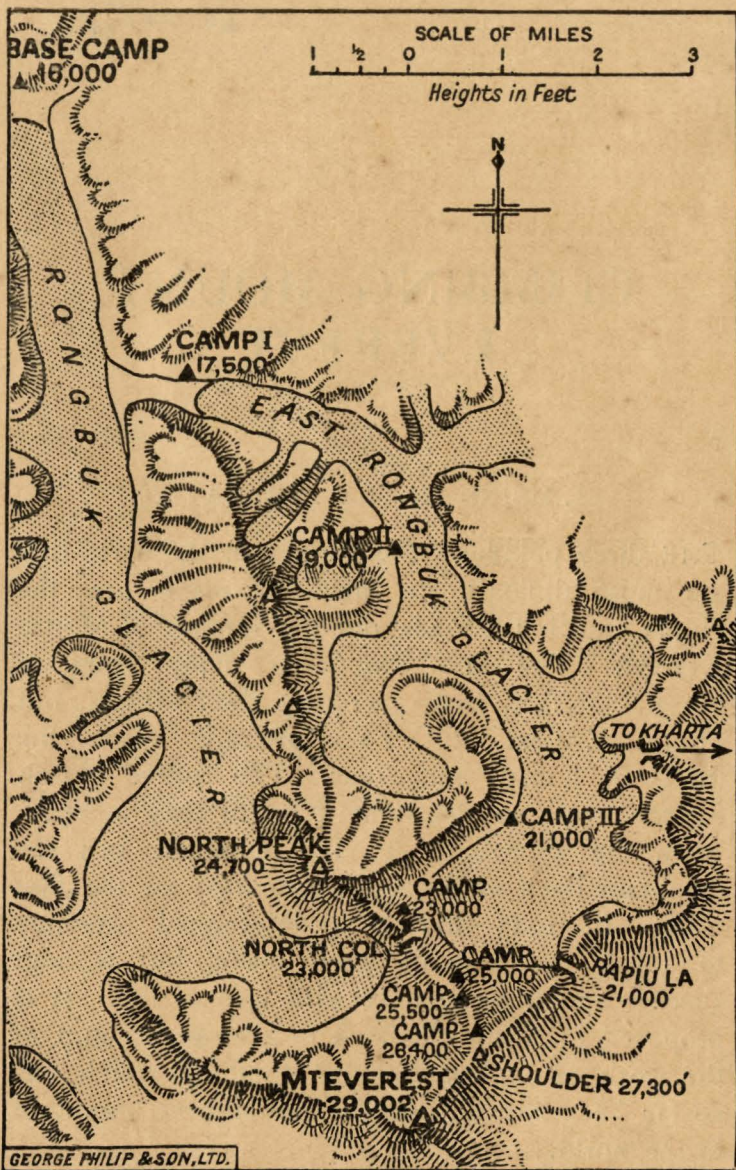
CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST

I

CLIMBING IN THE HIMALAYAS

THE three points on the surface of the earth that are most difficult for man to reach are the North and South Poles and the summit of Mount Everest. The first two, after many years of ceaseless effort, have given up their secrets, but Mount Everest still rises proudly above the limits of human endeavour. The active search for the route to the summit began only in 1921, when the approaches to the mountain and the mountain itself were closely examined for the first time. In 1922 and 1924 determined attempts to reach the summit were made, but without success and unfortunately with loss of life. It is proposed in this little book to give an account of the work of exploration and climbing which has so far been carried out on the highest mountain in the world.

In order to understand what it is that man has



set himself to do in trying to reach the top of Mount Everest, it will be necessary to call to mind a few important facts about the geography of the Himalayas and of mountaineering explorations amongst them.

The Himalayas are not a single chain of lofty mountains, but an immense collection of huge ranges and lofty plateaux divided by deep valleys. The name Himalayas is usually given only to the mountainous region which roughly forms the natural boundary between India and Central Asia. This, at its greatest, is some 500 miles wide and, from Afghanistan to Burma, over 1,500 miles long. The separate ranges in this tremendous area of highlands are more or less parallel to each other, and run generally from north-west to south-east.

Two rivers, the Arun and the Sutlej, have cut deep valleys across the Himalayas, thus dividing them into three sections—Western, Central, and Eastern, each of which contains one of the three highest mountains in the world. Mount Everest, 29,002 feet above sea level, is in the Central division.

In the Alps, if you want to climb Mont Blanc, you just try, when and where you please. Nobody puts any difficulties in the way. But this is not the case with Mount Everest. On the northern slope is Tibet, a country which no white man may enter without permission, and that permission is very hard to obtain. On the south are the two countries, Nepal and Bhutan, which are absolutely

closed to Europeans. It is only through Garhwal in the United Provinces that access to the Central Himalayas is possible without the mountaineer being faced with difficulties of this kind.

Two more difficulties have to be overcome, viz., time and money. An expedition means, even in the most favourable case, absence from Europe for at least four months, and much more likely six months, while at least two months, possibly even more, must be spent in preparation. It is therefore safe to reckon that a mountaineering expedition to the Himalayas takes at least from six to eight months.

Then as to the question of expense: even before the war an expedition cost at least £1,000, though double or even treble this figure would not have been thought extravagant. To-day it is doubtful whether a party of three Europeans could attack even the more easily reached mountains for less than £2,000 without their chances of success being seriously hindered by their attempts at economy.

Thus the first three things that a Himalayan mountaineer had to possess, in the past, were money, time, and the spirit of adventure. These things, however, by themselves are not sufficient to make a good mountaineer or to ensure success in the hardest of all mountaineering schools. In addition, the Himalayan climber should possess perfect physical fitness and suitable physique. Man is probably at his best, has the greatest

powers of endurance, and is able to call upon the greatest reserves of energy between the ages of twenty-five and forty. But a man of the right age and physically perfectly fit may yet be more or less useless for serious work at high altitudes. He must be able to expel from his lungs the greatest possible amount of air after taking the deepest possible breath. Further, it is well known, even in the Alps, especially under winter conditions, that the tall thin man is generally less likely to get tired than the short thick-set one. Again, a man with long legs and a short trunk is much superior to the man with short legs and a long trunk.

In addition, the climber must believe he is going to win through. To be half-hearted when trying to climb a Himalayan peak is to court almost certain failure. He must also possess plenty of "go." Some mountaineers when tired and almost exhausted give in; others will rise to the occasion, not once, but time and again. Sheer pain conquers the one class, but is overcome and borne by the other.

Of very great importance too is the mountaineer's ability to handle the natives of the Himalayan regions. The backbone of success of any expedition is transport, and the only means of transport are the native hillmen. The hillmen of the Himalaya, like hillmen all the world over, are tough, of excellent physique, energetic, cheerful, loyal, and brave. When well led they

make ideal porters. But if they are to put forth their best effort they must be well fed, well clothed, and led in their work by one whom they love and trust. They are in many ways almost like children and sometimes appear to take to or dislike some particular Sahib for no reason whatever.

If they like their leader they serve him devotedly ; if they dislike him, though they may desire to perform their duties well, they never seem to be able to do their best. More than one expedition has made use of porters from Nepal, similar to those that were used on Mount Everest. Some of their employers looked upon them simply as beasts of burden, and did not trouble about clothing or feeding them properly. If the expedition failed the porters got the blame.

Last but not least, the would-be Himalayan explorer should have a thorough grounding in mountaineering. For Europeans, this is best obtained in the Alps, and practice should be obtained in climbing without guides not only in summer, but also in winter, for it is only in winter that snow conditions in the Alps resemble those usually met with in the Himalayas.

To sum up: in order to ensure the best chances of success in Himalayan adventure, the mountaineer needs much spare time and money, should be physically and mentally fit, able to handle and look after his porters properly, and should be an expert mountaineer who can climb without guides under

both summer and winter conditions. Until quite recently it has been very rare to find a young man fond of travel and mountaineering who possessed the necessary funds and leisure. But when the Mount Everest Committee was formed, and offered to young, able-bodied men who had proved that they were good mountaineers to pay all the expenses of an expedition and to use their influence to obtain for them leave of absence from their everyday duties, then indeed was the way at last opened for the beginning of the conquest of the Himalayas.

II

FINDING THE WAY

IN June 1920 permission was obtained for an expedition to pass through Tibet towards Mount Everest, and in January 1921 the Mount Everest Committee was formed. The Committee at once began to organise and equip an expedition which was to set out that year, not to climb Mount Everest, but to explore the approaches. Colonel Howard-Bury was in command. The party included four mountain-climbers, a medical officer, two surveyors and a geologist.

Up to 1921, it had always been thought that the most suitable time of the year for climbing in the Himalayas was late in the summer and early

in the autumn. It was known that the monsoon breaks over the group of mountains nearest to Mount Everest early in June and continues for the best part of three months. This period of unsettled weather and frequent snowstorms is usually followed by a period of a month or more of fine, settled weather. Thus the 1921 party planned to explore the main approaches and the

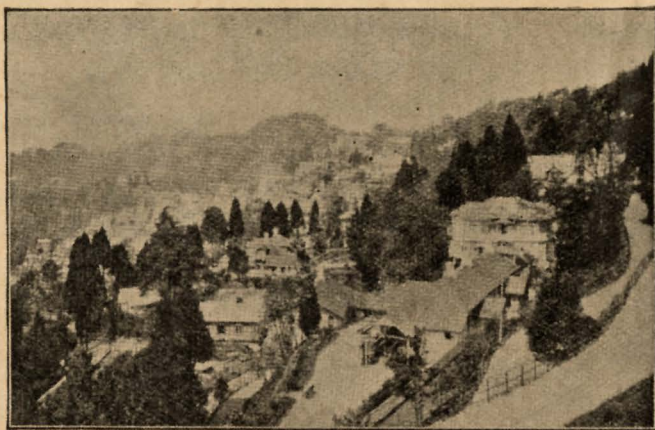


FIG. 1.—Darjeeling is an important hill station on a spur of the Himalayas.

outer defences of Mount Everest in July and August. In September, after the monsoon, they were closely to examine the innermost defences of the mountain and to discover and explore as far as they could the best way of reaching the summit.

Early in May, the party gathered in Darjeeling, where about sixty porters were selected for work

with the expedition. These porters hailed from Nepal; indeed, many of them actually came from villages on the southern slopes of Mount Everest. With the addition of two interpreters and two local surveyors, the expedition was finally brought up to its full strength. Some time was spent in fitting out the porters with proper boots and clothing and in arranging stores.

The road that was to be followed across Sikkim into Tibet is the main trade route from Lhasa and Central Tibet into India. Almost the whole year round there passes along it a continual stream of Tibetan mules carrying wool from Tibet down to India. On the return journey these mules are, for the most part, only lightly laden. Thus, there was plenty of transport available. These Tibetan mules are magnificent animals, very hard and tough and very fast walkers both uphill and down. Their drivers are just as good. They are astonishingly quick at loading and unloading their animals, look after them well, and know just how much work can be got out of them. They are also cheery and good-natured companions, not given to grumbling or being down in the mouth.

After ten days' travelling the expedition, having crossed through Sikkim, arrived out on the bleak, wind-swept plains of the Tibetan table-land, and on June 19th settled down at an old Chinese rest-house which was to be its head-quarters. The three hundred and fifty mile journey from Darjeeling

across broken, hilly country had taken just one month.

The expedition was now split up into several parties, each with a different kind of work to do. From the mountaineering point of view, the most important party consisted of two of the climbers, Mallory and Bullock, with nineteen porters, who set off to see if they could find a way up Mount Everest on its *northern* side. They struggled up glaciers, climbed several peaks, and gained a great deal of information about the tangled array of peaks, ridges, precipices, and glaciers to the northwest of the mountain. As the result of all their hard work, which occupied three weeks, they came to the conclusion that this side of Mount Everest defied attack. But they had learned a great deal about the country, and Mallory felt certain that the upper final sections of the northeast ridge could be climbed, and that this ridge could, most likely, be gained by another ridge which was separated from the first by a pass named the North Col, 23,000 feet above the sea.* The next thing to do was to find a way to the North Col. For this purpose a base well to the east was established. Now the monsoon breaks over the Everest group of mountains early in June, and though the weather is not bad all the time, fine days are few and far between. During August, in the Kharta valley, the site of the new base, the weather conditions were much worse than any the

* See map on p. 6.

expedition had met with up till then. In spite of the weather, however, attempts to explore the eastern slopes of the mountain were pursued with vigour, but it was found difficult to approach Mount Everest from this side.

The southern side lies in Nepal and so was out of bounds. Hence the only possible line to the summit would have to be *viâ* the North Col, the north ridge, the shoulder, and the north-east ridge.

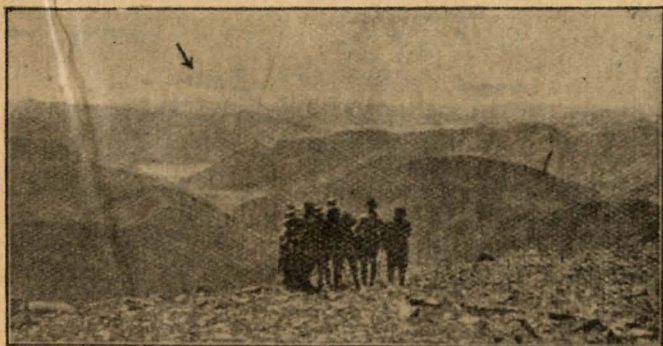


FIG. 2.—Mount Everest seen from the Pang la Pass (18,000 ft.) in Tibet.

The burning question awaiting an answer was how to reach the North Col from the east. It was not till nearly the end of September that Mallory, Bullock, and Wheeler, with eight porters, trod the depression of the North Col; they had found a way by which Mount Everest could be climbed.

But though the way was clear there could be no question of further advance. A violent west wind was sweeping across the North Col and lashing

up great streamers of snow dust, and the climbers were already weakened by the hardships they had undergone. Mallory saw a better way to the North Col and also discovered a most suitable site for a base camp in the valley of a river and glacier called the Rongbuk, at an altitude of rather over 16,000 feet and close below the end of the glacier. From this camp, beyond which animal transport could not proceed, the next expedition could easily gain the entrance to the East Rongbuk valley, and marching up the East Rongbuk Glacier and establishing camps at suitable intervals, could reach the North Col. Above the North Col the north ridge would be followed to the shoulder, from which the north-east ridge leads, at a comparatively gentle slope, to the summit.

But at what time of the year should the next expedition commence operations? The party had no difficulty in answering this question. During the monsoon, which usually breaks before the middle of June and lasts for quite three months, the weather is far too unsettled and snowfalls are too frequent and heavy to permit climbing attempts on the mountain. In September, after the monsoon, the cold is already intense, the snow remains covering up the rocks of the great ridges above the North Col and fierce winds sweep up clouds of snow dust—a combination of obstacles which is too formidable for the climber, already hampered by the rare atmosphere at a high altitude. Later, in October, the winter sets in

in earnest, and not until the spring, after the short winter monsoon, does the snow disappear to a great extent from the rocks of Everest.

Only in the spring, then, will weather conditions permit of Mount Everest being attacked with any hope of success, and the time available is very brief. The base camp may be pitched about the beginning of May, but the best time to attempt the actual climb is about the end of May and the beginning of June, just before the monsoon breaks. The monsoon is usually preceded by several days of fine, settled weather, when the prevailing west wind, always a powerful enemy, is at its weakest. Thus to have the best chances of climbing Mount Everest it was clear that the next expedition would have to leave England some time in February or early in March. Leaving Darjeeling towards the end of March, the party would then be able to establish itself in the Base Camp in the Rongbuk Valley not later than the beginning of May.

III

THE ORGANISATION AND EQUIPMENT OF THE 1922 EXPEDITION

WHEN the news that a possible way of climbing Mount Everest had been found was received in London, the Mount Everest Committee at once set about organising and fitting out an expedition

whose business it would be to attempt to climb the mountain. As a leader they chose General Bruce, an expert mountaineer, who had had many years of experience of climbing both in the Alps and the Himalayas. Owing to his years he could not be expected to take part in the actual climbing of Mount Everest; but what was most important was that he thoroughly understood the Himalayan people and knew how to get them to give always of their best.

The porters, who would provide all the transport on the high slopes and without whom the expedition would fail, were natives of Nepal, from which the Ghurkas come. For thirty years General Bruce had served with Ghurka soldiers; he spoke their language, knew them, loved them as none other did, and in turn was beloved and looked up to by them. As already explained, this was of the very greatest importance.

The other members of the party, all of whom were picked mountaineers, included Lieutenant-Colonel Strutt as second-in-command, a chief medical officer and his assistant, three officers to help General Bruce, Captain J. B. Noel, who was both a mountaineer and an expert in photography and cinematography, and the climbers. Of the men intended for the actual attempt to reach the summit, two were specially selected—Mallory and the writer. The remaining members of the climbing party were Major Norton, Dr. Somervell, and Major Morshead.

The question of suitable equipment was attacked with energy, because the difficulties of living at a high altitude and in intense cold were serious. For instance, the ordinary pattern of Primus stove does not burn properly above 18,000 or 19,000 feet, but after many trials the burners were altered so that the stove could be used at an altitude of even over 30,000 feet. Thermos flasks, tents, sleeping-bags, clothing, and boots for the use both of the members of the actual climbing parties and of the porters had all to be specially considered and made.

The food supplies were the best that could be procured, and were so varied that everybody's tastes were catered for. All the stores, both food and equipment, were packed in labelled and numbered boxes, the weight of each being about 40 lbs., an easy load for a porter.

The oxygen outfit for climbing at high altitudes called for much careful experimenting before a suitable design was perfected. All the known methods of storing and carrying oxygen were considered, one by one, until at last it became clear that the only sensible plan was to make the oxygen in England and compress it into the lightest steel cylinders that could be obtained. The climbers would have to carry these cylinders on their backs and, by means of a suitable breathing apparatus, draw upon their contents in much the same way as is done by men wearing oxygen outfits meant for mine rescue work in foul atmospheres.

A number of light but immensely strong steel cylinders, such as had been used by the Air Force during the later stages of the Great War, was obtained, and an apparatus to be carried on the back of the climber and to hold the cylinders and draw off their oxygen contents as desired, was designed.

Each cylinder, made of extremely strong, thin, high-carbon steel, contained enough oxygen to last, at a rate that had been decided upon as suitable, for two hours. The oxygen was very pure, and was freed from all but the minutest traces of moisture; were the oxygen moist there would be, at the low temperatures to be met with on Mount Everest, grave risk of blockage by condensation and freezing of moisture in the tubes of the breathing apparatus. In all, one hundred and twenty cylinders were filled, packed four at a time into strong wooden boxes, and sent out to India.

The breathing apparatus was so arranged that the climber should always have a supply of oxygen, even while changing an empty cylinder for a full one, because it was thought that if a climber who had been using oxygen for any length of time were deprived of it at a great altitude, such as 27,000 feet, he might collapse to a serious degree.

The oxygen itself flowed through a rubber tube to the breathing mask worn on the face of the climber. The mask was fixed firmly over the

nose, chin, and cheeks of the wearer, and held in position by straps that fastened behind the head.

In the construction of the apparatus and the carrier in which the cylinders were placed, weight was cut down as far as possible without sacrificing strength. The weight of the apparatus without cylinders was just over 12 lbs. As the cylinders when charged weighed a trifle under 6 lbs. each, the total weight of an apparatus and four cylinders containing sufficient oxygen for about eight hours' climbing was 36 lbs. This, it is true, was a heavy load, but by no means excessive or unreasonable.

IV

THE JOURNEY TO MOUNT EVEREST

THE Mount Everest Expedition left England early in 1922, and towards the end of March we were all in Darjeeling, where we were divided into two parties, one of which, the larger, soon moved off. Crawford and I were compelled to remain behind in Darjeeling for a week, owing to the fact that the oxygen cylinders had not yet arrived.

Darjeeling is probably the most famous of the hill stations in India. The town consists of an Indian section and another, picturesquely laid out with gardens and the houses of Europeans, and is built at a height of about 7,000 feet on the very summit of one of the foothills of the Himalayas.

Situated as it is, within fairly easy reach of Western Nepal and hard by the main line of communication between Central Tibet and India, a considerable amount of local trade is carried on. Thus the town, so far as its Indian population is concerned, does not entirely depend for its prosperity upon the floating population of officials, who in the hottest parts of the year exchange the torrid, weakening heat of the plain of Bengal for the temperate and bracing climate of the heights.

In Darjeeling, the new-comer, if he be a mountaineer, cannot fail to be impressed by the huge scale upon which the foothills of the Himalayas are built. From the northern end of the town, for instance, you may look down at a densely wooded slope which plunges steeply down right into the rolling torrents of the Teesta river and its tributaries, some 6,000 feet below. In fine weather in the morning, when, as a rule, the haze that generally hides the distant views has not yet been conjured up by the heat of the sun's rays, one may look out across line after line of rolling foothills and dark, deep, close-wooded gorges and see the snow peaks of Kanchinjunga, the third highest mountain in the world.

At length, on the morning of April 2nd, news came that our oxygen cylinders had arrived and were already on their way up to Kalimpong, the first settlement in Sikkim on our line of march. We travelled down by the Darjeeling Railway, collected the cylinders, and in due time arrived

at Kalimpong, where our march across Sikkim to Tibet and on to the Base Camp may be said to have fairly begun.

Our road lay through the independent State of Sikkim, the lower part of which is a country of tropical or almost tropical climate and luxuriant jungle vegetation. Instead of always following

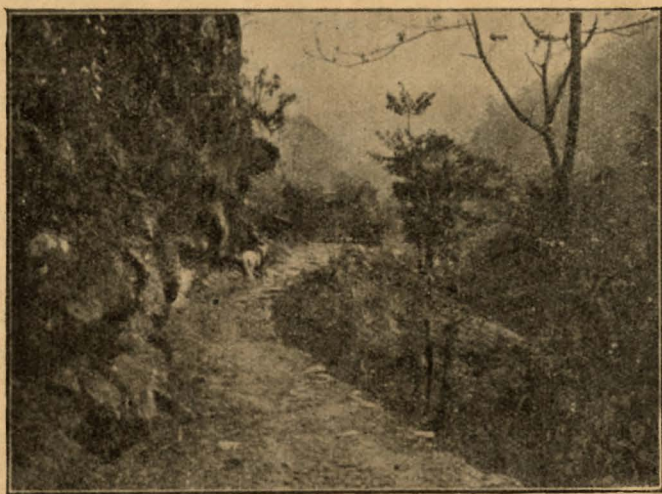


FIG. 3.—On the way through Sikkim.

the road or track, which forms the main line of communication between Lhasa and India, we often climbed over the backs of one range of hills after another, descending in between to the shady streams and pools, all hedged round with dense forest, where we often found relief from the heat and the dust.

The last settlement in Sikkim through which we

passed was Gnatong, a desolate village at an altitude of nearly 13,000 feet, well above the tree line. It was situated in a small basin, protected to some extent from the wind by the surrounding hills—a most inhospitable-looking spot. A day later, in a snowstorm, we crossed the Jelep la, a lofty pass on the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet and near the entrance to the Chumbi valley,

where we passed our first night in Tibet.



FIG. 4.—Tibetan nuns.

Crawford and I were anxious to catch up the main body of the expedition as soon as we could, so we pushed on and at length learned that it was only three marches ahead. On the first night we camped in the open. On the second the nuns of a Buddhist convent offered us hospitality, and Crawford and I passed the night in a roofless

temple chamber. Some of the nuns spread out my sleeping-bag on the altar and there I slept, awakened occasionally by the cold. A brilliant moon shone down and lit up my weird abode. The desiccated remains of a magnificent billy-goat hanging above the altar grinned down at me, and prayer wheels surrounded me on every side.

At the end of three days' hard marching across

these vast, dry Tibetan plains through intense cold and in the teeth of a wind that whipped up clouds of dust and sand into our faces, we rejoined our companions. In view of our somewhat travel-stained appearance, the General decided to postpone the departure of the expedition for two days, and so give us a much-needed rest. Since leaving Darjeeling we had been marching hard without a single off day.

From now onwards the yak replaced the mule as our transport animal, owing to the difficulty of providing suitable fodder for the latter. What the camel is to the desert the yak is to Tibet—an animal without which human life would be impossible. The yak's chief food is a very coarse grass which grows in the marshy bottoms of the valleys fed by the streams that flow down from the northern slopes of the Himalayas. It relishes and thrives on this fodder, for which no other animal seems to care. In appearance the yak is a hefty, beefy animal, somewhat like the Indian buffalo, but it has a coat of long shaggy wool to protect it against the cold and the wind.

The Tibetans are forbidden by their religion to take the life of wild animals, but they may kill domestic animals for food. Thus the yak, besides being the national beast of burden, supplies the people with milk, butter, cheese, meat, leather and wool, and last but not least, provides in a land that has neither wood nor coal, the chief fuel, dried dung.

The pace of the mules had been about four miles an hour; that of the yak was less than two. To hustle a yak serves no useful purpose; it simply gets annoyed, throws off its load, and runs in all directions, charging anything or any one it can see; and anything a yak does it does thoroughly. While they are on the march they expect the drivers to whistle soft, lullaby airs. If



FIG. 5.—Tibetan yak drivers.

for lack of moisture on the lips or for lack of breath the whistling stops for any length of time, the yak objects and there is usually trouble. When treated in a way that pleases him, however, the yak is a most reliable transport animal, capable of carrying heavy loads for as much as ten or twelve hours on end, no matter how difficult the ground. When he comes to a river, he does not wait to be unloaded, but plunges in and wades across as if in his natural element.

Owing to the difficulty of obtaining a sufficient supply of yaks for such a large caravan as ours, some of our baggage was carried by donkeys. These little animals are very good and tough, but on one occasion, when our way lay across a wide area of quicksands, the nature of the ground had them thoroughly beaten. With their

tiny hooves, the poor little donkeys would, at almost every step, sink deeply into the quagmire; sometimes so deeply that little more than nose, eyes, ears, and tail remained above the slime. In such cases, the loads were first removed, after which the drivers stationed themselves at three corners of the donkey, one at each ear and the third at the tail. Then it was simply a case of 'heave-ho' till the animal came out of the mud with



FIG. 6.—Yaks.

a noise like that made by pulling a cork out of a bottle.

From the European point of view the Tibetans have one great failing, which, however, considering the climate in which they live, may perhaps be excused. They are, to our minds, dirty. A noble Tibetan informed me with great pride that in his life he had had two baths, one on the day of his birth and the other on the day of his wedding. Only once did I see a Tibetan having a bath. This was on the return journey from Mount Everest.

The day was bright and sunny and all but windless. Disporting himself in the waters of a pool quite close to the village was a Tibetan boy, stark naked. An interested crowd of his fellow-countrymen looked on. On making inquiry as to this unusual happening, I learned that the boy was the village idiot, and therefore not responsible for his actions. I think I ought to say, in fairness to the Tibetans,

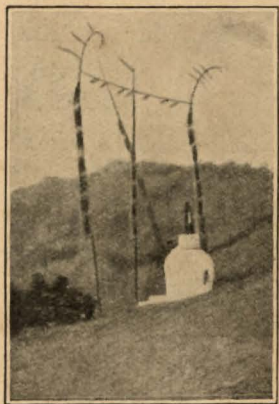


FIG. 7.—A Tibetan shrine.

that during our stay in Tibet our own washing was by no means too thorough. We usually limited ourselves to washing the head and arms as far as the elbows. The tooth-brush was, of course, plied regularly by all of us, and it was this action and that of shaving that afforded most amusement to the Tibetan onlookers, who always watched us dressing in the morning.

Apart from their one striking drawback, the Tibetans are a most likeable people. Their love for and pride in their country, harsh though it is, are great and sincere. They are cheerful and good-humoured, keen and willing workers, honourable in carrying out their bargains, and, as I found them, completely honest. During our travels in Tibet, though we did not bother to keep close guard over all our stores and belongings, we never lost so

much as a biscuit through theft. They are most kind to their children, and treat them, from the time they can speak, with much the same respect as is shown to grown-ups. The priests, or lamas, as they are called, form the ruling class, and are also the educated class, the monasteries being the seats of learning. The religion of Tibet is Buddhism.

On April 29th we crossed a pass called the Pang la, about 17,000 feet in height, whence we

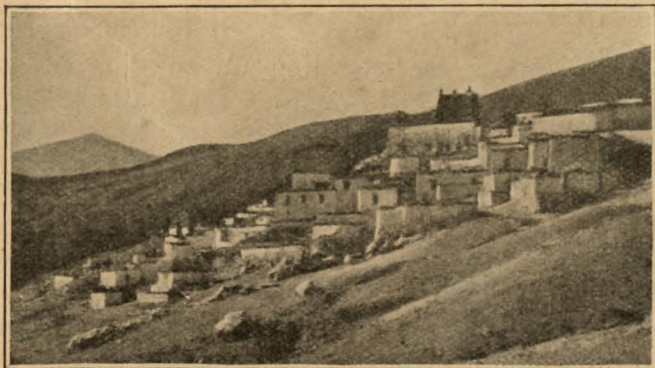


FIG. 8.—A Tibetan monastery.

obtained a good view of Mount Everest and the peaks near-by. Everest towered head and shoulders above its surroundings, a dark, irregular, forbidding-looking rocky pyramid. Three days later we pitched camp in the Rongbuk Valley, at the head of which Everest stands. Close to the camp was a large monastery ruled over by a very venerable old abbot, who received us in audience.

He showed a lively, intelligent curiosity and

asked many questions. He specially wanted to know why we were so eager to reach the summit of the "Goddess Mother of the Snows," as the Tibetans beautifully call the highest mountain in the world. "Why," asked he, "spend so much money, endure hardships, and face the dangers which I am sure have to be faced, merely for the sake of standing on the top of the loftiest of great peaks?"



FIG. 9.—A beggar.

General Bruce, as usual, was quite ready with an answer, and explained that as the summit of Everest is

the highest point on the earth, so is it the nearest point on earth to heaven, and was it not fitting that we should wish to get as close as possible to heaven during our lifetime? This explanation, which contains much more than a grain of truth, satisfied the old abbot completely. Henceforth he did



FIG. 10.—A Tibetan soldier.

everything he could, and that was a great deal, to help the expedition to carry out its errand.

V

ESTABLISHING THE CAMPS AND THE FIRST
ATTEMPT

ON May 1, 1922, the sun rose in a cloudless sky. At the head of the valley lay Mount Everest, powdered from head to foot with fresh snow. The fierce west wind that later in the day would

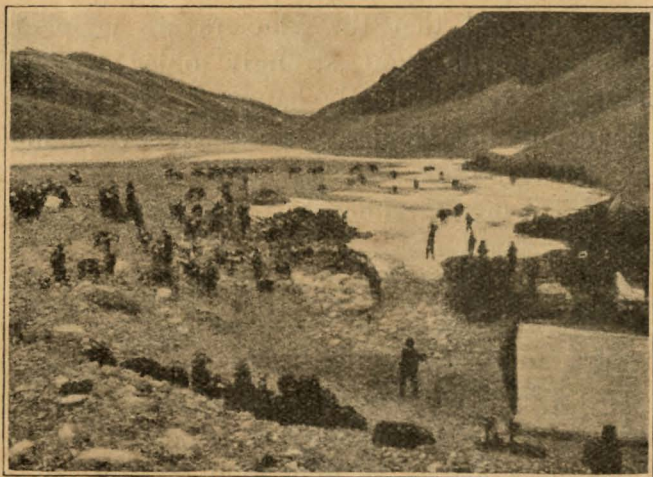


FIG. 11.—Arrival at the Base Camp.

tear away from summit and ridge streamer after streamer of glistening spindrift had not yet arisen. The camp was astir early, long before the sun's rays had found their way into the deep, gloomy rift which is the Rongbuk Valley. The cold, for all we knew, may have been great, but in the unusual

absence of wind it was not felt. Everything seemed to favour an early start on what was to be the last march through Tibet towards the Base Camp from which we should attack Mount Everest itself. The position of this camp would have to be somewhere near the farthest point that could be reached by the animals.

In our hurry to start we had forgotten that the Tibetan drivers would be afraid to enter the unknown region to which we were making our way. They believed that the glaciers are peopled by powerful devils who strongly object to being disturbed in their lonely haunts, and it was some time before the General, aided by several monks from the Rongbuk Monastery, was able to allay the fears of the drivers sufficiently for them to be able to make a start.

We passed another small monastery, called Za Rongbuk, where the monks, bent on enjoying the strange sight, lined the roof to gaze upon and make remarks about our procession. Presently the path we had been following ended, and beginning to rise more steeply we were soon making our way up the great jumble of moraines which the Rongbuk glacier had once deposited. Despite the loudly voiced fears of the drivers, the animals had no difficulty in making their way; donkeys, yaks, ponies, all alike excited admiration for the skill with which they threaded a course over slippery boulders and across steep banks of loose stones without a false step.

The 1921 party had shown that the best line of advance to the North Col lay over the East Rongbuk glacier. The entrance to its valley was soon in sight, and a deep-cut trough near the east side of the glacier promised an easy route for the animals as far as that point. But the fear of the unknown and the lack of all grazing proved too

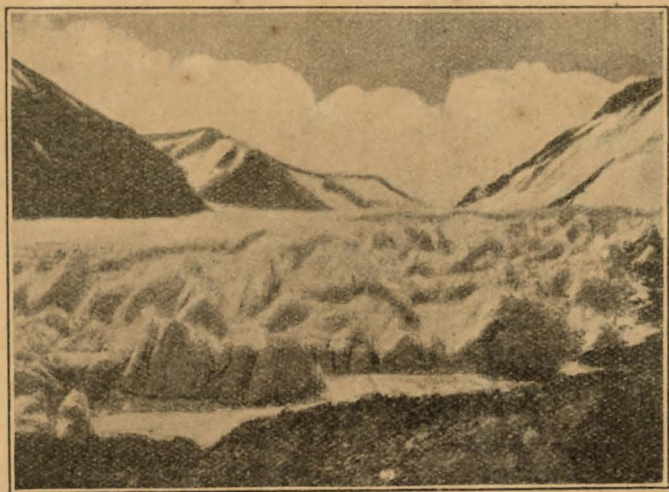


FIG. 12.—The East Rongbuk Glacier.

much for the drivers : with one accord they struck, halted their animals, and even looked as if they would at once drive them all back from the ice to the valley. The General soon coaxed them into not doing this, but try as he would, even liberal offers of extra pay failed to secure an advance. There was nothing left for it but to look for a suitable camping site near at hand.

Nearly a year before, Mallory and Bullock had camped close by, and Mallory now told of a spring of clear fresh water and a stretch of soft green turf sheltered from the wind on two sides by high banks of moraine. We went back a few hundred yards from where the drivers had struck and there found the desired spot. The spring was there, but still in the grip of winter frosts and waterless. The turf looked brown and dead, but for all that was fairly soft and springy. And, best of all, tall, steep moraines seemed to promise good shelter on almost three sides from that enemy of the traveller in Tibet, the wind. As a matter of fact, the promise was not kept, and during a stay of nearly two months at the Base Camp, the wind took no notice of the barriers and attacked us as severely as if the tents had been pitched on an exposed mountain top.

Soon after our arrival all was bustle. The drivers, anxious to get away from these devil-haunted regions, worked with a will, and also helped the porters to stack the stores. Tents sprang up on the level and softer bits of ground, and the cooks soon pitched their kitchen tents and got a yak dung fire going. By four o'clock we were all sitting down to tea in the mess tent, and the last of the yaks were strolling back on their way down to the valley.

Our long journey through Tibet had come to a successful end. We were now face to face with Everest itself. The siege of that greatest strong-

hold of the mountains had begun. We were well up to time, but for all that there was no time to lose, for it was already the beginning of May, and the monsoon usually breaks before the middle of June. Thus we could count on from five to perhaps even six weeks in which to carry out the campaign. This may seem more than time enough, but owing to the difficult nature of the country and the great distances to be covered, it was necessary to set up at least five camps above the Base. In order, too, to safeguard, as far as possible, the strength of the climbers, the camps would have to be well supplied with tents and sleeping-bags, and a steady stream of food and fuel would have to be pushed up. All this meant weight, and the number of our porters was not too great. Furthermore, the way to the North Col through the East Rongbuk valley was as yet unknown to us. Thus there was indeed no time to waste.

After our first evening meal in the Base Camp, as we sat round the mess table and smoked and talked in the dim, yellow light of a hurricane lamp, the General unfolded his plans. Strutt, Norton, and I were to search for a suitable site in the East Rongbuk valley for the first of the advance camps and also to look out for the best route to the site.

Next morning, after three and a half hours' steady going, scrambling up and amongst loose stones with here and there a patch where the going was easier, we found a small, almost level

terrace, fairly well sheltered from wind by steep moraines and with water in a frozen-over stream close by, and only a few minutes' walk from the East Rongbuk glacier. This terrace we at once chose for the site of Camp I. We built a pile of stones to mark the spot, ate our lunch, and took in the view. The glacier was almost hidden from sight by great masses of stones lying upon its surface; the mountains behind it looked dull and uninteresting; Mount Everest was almost hidden from view; but towards the west some magnificent peaks stood up well for a while, till they were concealed by the dense masses of cloud that soon began to sweep in from Nepal.

Shortly after midday we set off on the return journey. Going into the completely frozen bed of the stream, we descended this without difficulty to the edge of the Rongbuk glacier. We then made steady progress down the trough, a valley between the glacier on the left and a huge moraine on the right, and finally came out on the open stony wastes just above the Base Camp. The only disadvantage of this trough route, as we called it, was that in certain places there was the danger of falling stones.

A few days later, Longstaff, Norton, and Morshead went off on a longer scouting journey to explore the East Rongbuk glacier and find the most suitable way up into the great bay that lies at its head at the foot of the eastern slopes of the North Col. They discovered a good line of march

and chose suitable sites for two more camps, as it was found that it would be necessary to pitch three camps between the Base and the North Col. The three camps were known as Camp I (17,500 feet), Camp II (19,000 feet), and Camp III (21,000 feet). By the middle of May Camp III, which lay in full view of the North Col, was completely ready.



FIG. 13.—Camp II (19,000 ft.).

At each of the camps were stationed a Gurkha soldier to lead the convoys of porters to and fro, and a cook to attend to the needs of the inner man. Everything was now ready; the beginning of the great attack of May 1922 was at hand. On May 10th, Mallory and Somervell left the Base with instructions to occupy Camp III and from there to set up another camp in the North Col (23,000 feet). A few days later they were joined

38 CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST

by Strutt, Norton, and Morshead, and the five climbers, backed up by the pick of the porters, then set to work to make arrangements for pitching another camp as high up the mountain as possible, from which they were to make the attempt to climb Mount Everest.

It was arranged that if the first attack should fail, then I should organise another party to



FIG. 14.—Broken ice on the way to Camp III

make a second attempt. My choice of climbing companions was easy enough. First of all there was Captain Geoffrey Bruce, tall, strong, cheerful in any situation, full of energy and "go," an ideal companion. Then there was Lance-Corporal Tejbir, a Gurkha non-commissioned officer, six feet in his stockings, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, and ready to grin under any hardship. I have noticed often that the man who grins most is

usually the one who goes farthest in the mountains, and perhaps also elsewhere.

We selected a few porters at the Base Camp; others were to be obtained on the way up to and at Camp III. We set out cheerfully and easily reached Camp I and then, two days later, Camp II. At this camp there were some magnificent slopes, and the sight of them gave me the idea that it would be a good plan to give all the members of



FIG. 15.—A rest on the East Rongbuk Glacier.

my party their first lesson in the proper use of the ice axe and climbing irons. A suitable slope was soon found. At its foot lay a frozen-over pool. In a very short time my pupils were hard at it, and within half an hour many of them were so good that one might have thought that they had been used to this sort of work all their lives.

Tejbir, however, on one occasion slipped,

slithered down the slope, and broke through the frozen surface of the water, but like a born mountaineer kept hold of his ice axe. We hauled him out at once, but as the air was well below zero, his clothing was immediately frozen so hard that he was encased as if in armour plate. We hustled him over to the camp and stripped him of his frozen clothing, and for the next few hours all that was to be seen of Tejbir was a broad grin surrounded by many blankets as he sat under shelter and thought things over.

At last we arrived at Camp III, where we found Strutt in residence. He told us that that morning Mallory, Morshead, Norton, and Somervell had left for the North Col, prior to their attempt on Mount Everest. High up on a terrace above the steep snow slopes, immediately below the Col, we could see a cluster of tiny black dots, the tents of the North Col Camp, and on the skyline, in the Col itself, some more little black dots, moving.

Snow fell on the night of May 20-21 and ushered in one of the rare windless days of that season. Towards sunset, while scanning the north ridge of Everest for signs of the first climbing party, we made out four dark specks descending the great broad snow slopes of the lower section of the north ridge. They were the four members of the first climbing party, making their way back to the North Col after their attempt upon the mountain. It appeared to us that they were more or less exhausted, so on the morning of the 22nd,

acting on orders from Colonel Strutt, Geoffrey Bruce, the doctor, Tejbir, and I, with eight porters, set out for the North Col to render assistance to the

The shoulder
(27,300 ft.).

Summit of
Mt. Everest
(29,002 ft.).

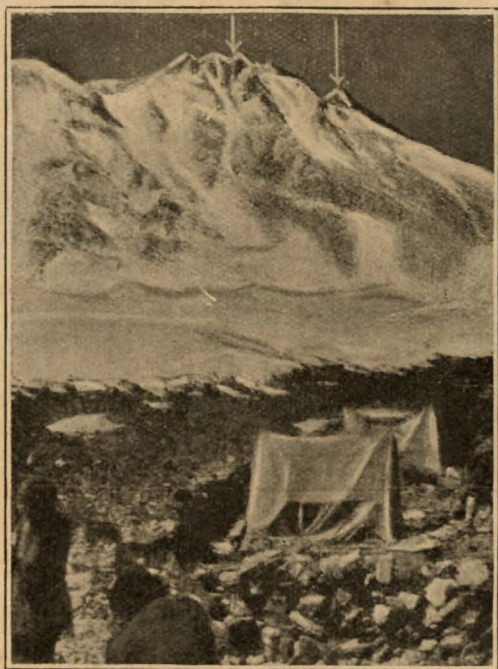


FIG. 16.—Camp III (21,000 ft.).

climbers, take fresh stores to the camp, and give the oxygen apparatus a last thorough trial.

A longish tramp led to the foot of the steep slopes of ice and snow up which one must mount

to gain the Col. The first climbing party was making its way down towards us and we at last met a short distance above the foot of the final slopes. Most of them seemed practically at the end of their tether and were hardly able to



Colonel Strutt. Major Morshead. Colonel Norton. Dr. Somervell.
Dr. Wakefield. Mr. Mallory.

FIG. 17.—The first climbing party at Camp III.

speaking. Norton, weather-beaten and showing signs of having undergone immense strain, gave us a brief account of their climb. On the night of the 20th they had camped at a height of 25,000 feet, and the next morning, Morshead having already suffered too much from the effects of cold and altitude to go farther, Norton, Mallory, and Somervell had climbed on until, at 2.40 p.m. on the 21st,

they had reached the enormous altitude of 26,985 feet.

There they had to confess themselves beaten and return. Snow had fallen on the night of the 20th, but they had been blessed with a calm day for their climb. Retracing their steps they had rejoined Morshead in their high camp, and all four had together continued the descent to the North Col Camp, where they had passed the night. Such in brief is the history of the first attempt on Mount Everest. We gave them food and drink and then, leaving Dr. Wakefield to see them safely down to Camp III, my companions and I went on towards the Col.

The slopes were laden with fresh snow, much of it probably wind-borne and drifted, and great care was needed while climbing them to avoid starting an avalanche; but at length, three hours after setting out from Camp III, we arrived at the North Col Camp. Of this time forty-five minutes had fallen to halts. The difference in height between the two camps was 2,000 feet. We had, therefore, ascended at the rate of nearly a thousand feet in an hour, quite a good average rate of climbing even in the Alps; but then we had used oxygen.

Arrived at the North Col, we dumped a supply of oxygen cylinders, food, and other tackle, and then sat down to look round and thoroughly enjoy things. The porters were amazed at the pace which we had been able to keep up in spite of

the fact that our loads, on the whole, were heavier than theirs. They began, for the first time, to take a lively interest in the oxygen apparatus, and called on Geoffrey Bruce to show how it worked. He told them that the Himalayan air did not suit

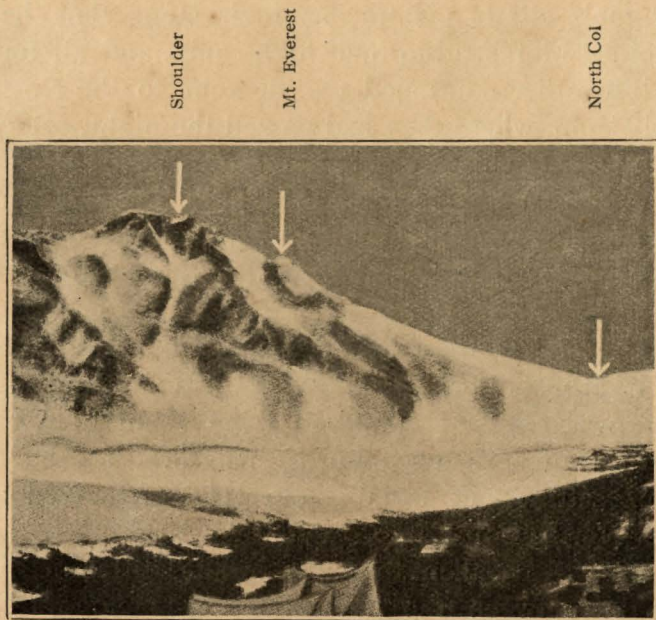


FIG. 18.—Mt. Everest and the North Col from Camp III.

me, and I had, therefore, brought out a supply of strongest "English air," and just to show them how strong "English air" is, I turned a stream of oxygen on to the glowing end of a cigarette, which thereupon flared up and spluttered with a brilliant white light. A better audience for this most beautiful of experiments, carried out at

23,000 feet above sea-level, could not have been desired.

The view from the Col is magnificent. Everest looks far better from this point of view than it does from the Base Camp. It still lacks beauty, but, owing to its nearness, has gained enormously in size. We could trace out almost every inch of the way we hoped to follow to the summit. The most remarkable feature of the view was the jumble of *sèracs** and great ice cliffs perched just above the camp. To the untrained eye they looked as if at any moment they might fall and crush the little tents beneath; but the trained mountaineer knew that there was no danger or he would never have pitched the tents in such a spot.

That afternoon we all returned to Camp III. On the journey home we halted frequently, took two dozen photographs, and yet, in less than fifty minutes after leaving the Col, were back in camp with all doubts gone as to the great advantage of using oxygen.

On our arrival in camp, we found the four members of the first party much restored in health. They had performed a wonderful deed in reaching an altitude of about 2,500 feet above the previous world record for high climbing; but they had paid a heavy price. All were more or less severely frostbitten. Morshead's fingers and toes were in a woeful condition, blue-black and covered with

* Huge ice blocks.

immense blisters. Early on the 23rd all four, together with Colonel Strutt, left for the Base Camp, which they reached that evening.

VI

THE SECOND ATTEMPT

IN the meantime, we completed our preparations, and on the 24th Geoffrey Bruce, Tejbir, and I, accompanied by ten porters, went up to the North Col. With us was Captain Noel, the official photographer, whom we had rigged out with an oxygen apparatus. Apart from the question of altitude, the camp in the North Col was the most comfortable of all, being well sheltered from the wind. As soon as the sun set, however, the cold became intense, and after a somewhat early evening meal we crawled into our sleeping-bags. In spite of the fact that the tents were pitched on snow we passed a fair night.

Next morning we were up betimes, but not too early for the porters, who were as keen as ourselves on setting to work. At 8 a.m. they had breakfasted, loaded up, and started off towards the Shoulder of Everest. Knowing that with oxygen there would be no difficulty in overtaking them, we waited in camp for another hour and a half, busying ourselves the while in putting the finishing touches to our preparations, and in making the

best of breakfast. Both this and the meal of the evening before were rather scanty, but the stock of provisions at the North Col permitted neither waste nor over-eating.

Just before gaining the foot of the snow ridge, we came upon one of the porters sitting on the floor of a snowed up crevasse. His strength had failed him, but his comrades had divided up his load amongst themselves and he had now settled down to await their return. He was quite comfortable and well sheltered from the wind. So with a parting warning not to move away before the return of his comrades, we left him basking in the sun and carried on.

The lower section of the snow ridge is not steep, and, furthermore, by keeping a little to the right of the actual crest, we were able to make good headway over stones where the rock of the mountain joins the snow of the ridge. We drew level with the porters at an altitude of about 24,000 feet, but halted only for a few brief moments while I took some photographs. Further delay was unwise, because one of those extraordinarily rapid changes in the weather, for which Mount Everest is now so well known, could be seen approaching. With the porters following and doing their utmost to keep pace, we climbed on steadily. Shortly before coming to the end of the snow ridge, we had to cut steps up a steep snow slope. I made them large and close together so that the porters could both mount easily and

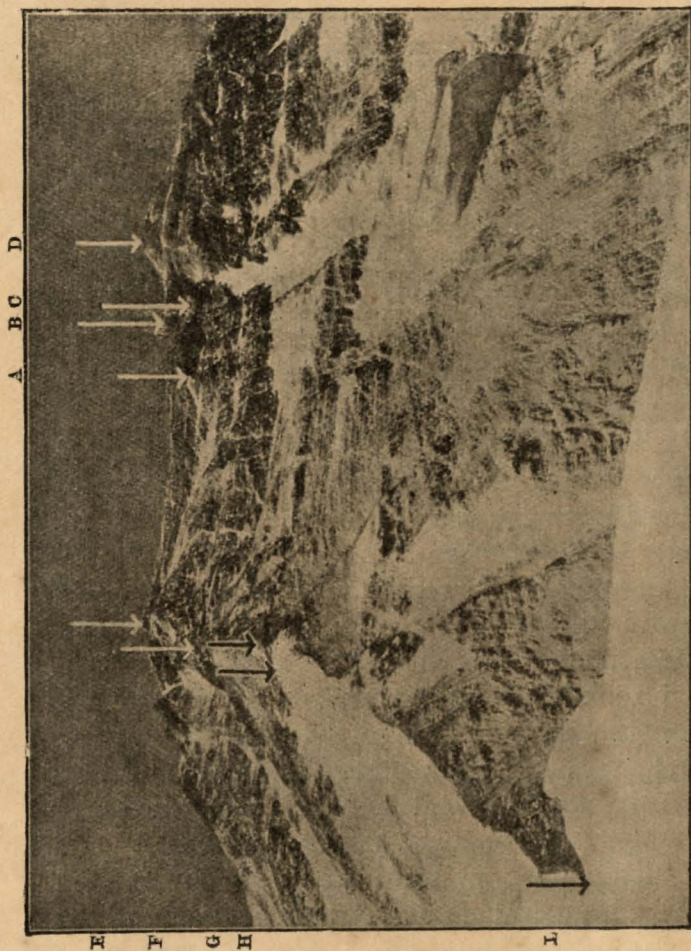


FIG. 19.—Mount Everest from the North Col.

(A) Finch and Bruce, 1922. (B) Mallory and Irvine last seen here, 8th June, 1924. (C) Norton and Somervell, 1924. (D) Mt. Everest (29,002 ft.). (E) The Shoulder (27,350 ft.). (F) Camp 26,400 ft. (G) Camp 25,500 ft. (H) North Col, 23,000 ft. (I) North Col, 23,000 ft.

descend in perfect safety. As a matter of fact, I might have contented myself with cutting the smallest of steps. Every single man in our party, sahib and porter alike, was working away as if he were a born mountaineer, showing splendid balance and self-confidence.

The weather had broken by the time the rocks above the snow ridge had been gained. We were at a height of about 25,000 feet. The wind was whirling snowflakes past us. We climbed on, however, because, from Camp III, I had noticed at a height of about 26,500 feet, a suitable site for our intended high camp. But by the time an altitude of 25,500 feet had been reached, the storm had become so threatening that all idea of going farther had for the time being to be given up. To persist in going on in the face of this break in the weather would have meant running the porters, who had to make their way back to the North Col that afternoon, most unjustifiably into danger.

It was anything but a cheerful spot in which to pitch a camp. But though I climbed some two hundred feet higher, nothing more suitable was to be found. The leese side of the ridge was bare of any possible camping ground, and as a wind is always felt more severely a little below and on the windward side of a ridge than on the crest of the ridge itself, I decided to camp right on the very backbone, on a little ledge overlooking the tremendous precipices falling away to the East

Rongbuk and Rongbuk glaciers, now 4,000 feet below.

As soon as we had sent the porters scurrying down towards the safety of the North Col, we looked to see that the guy-ropes holding down the tent were quite secure, then gathered up our sleeping-bags and food and crawled into the tent. After taking off our boots, all the undressing that was practicable, we crept into the sleeping-bags. It was bitterly cold, and as the wind and storm had already severely chilled us, we huddled up together as closely as possible, to keep each other warm.

The storm without was now in full blast, and it was snowing hard. Although we did our best to block up every opening in the tent walls, a thick white sheet of fine, powdery snow soon covered us. Much of it found its way into the sleeping-bags and through our clothing on to our skin and caused us severe discomfort. Towards evening we set about preparing a meal. With the help of solidified spirit, snow was melted and tea made. It was far from being hot, for at this altitude water boils at such a low temperature that one can put a hand into it without fear of being scalded; but such as it was, the tea helped to warm us a little.

After sunset, when we wanted to sleep or at least rest, the storm rose to a perfect hurricane, and kept us busy for the next eighteen hours. During the whole of this time we had to remain awake and watchful. To sit down and think

quietly over what our attempt on the mountain would bring forth was out of the question. Terrific gusts tore at the tent, and occasionally the wind would force its way underneath the sewn-in ground-sheet and lift it up at one side or the other. When this happened, the efforts of all three of us were necessary to hold the ground sheet down, for we knew that once the wind got a hold upon it, the tent would belly out like a sail, and nothing would save it from stripping away from its moorings and being blown, with us inside, over the precipices on to the East Rongbuk glacier.

By one o'clock on the morning of the 26th the gale was at its height. The wild flapping of the canvas made a noise like that of machine-gun fire, and what with this and the shrieking and howling of the gale round our tent, it was almost impossible to talk to each other except by shouting, mouth to ear. Later on came intervals of comparative quiet followed by outbursts even more furious than before. Some of the guy-ropes had broken or had worked loose and we had to take it in turns to go outside the tent to try to straighten things up. To work in the open for more than three or four minutes at a time was impossible, so great was the exhaustion caused by even this brief exposure to the fierce and bitterly cold wind.

A cheerless dawn broke. The snow had ceased falling, but the wind howled and hurried with a force as great as ever. At eight o'clock on the morning of May 26th, it showed signs of subsiding,

but half an hour later it returned with even greater vigour. With almost unbelievable fury it tore at our tent, and once again we had to take it in turns to go outside and tighten the guy-ropes. These little excursions showed without any possible doubt that until the storm had gone down there could be no question either of advance or of retreat to the North Col Camp. No human being could survive more than a few minutes' exposure to a gale of such fury in such intense cold. To add to our discomfort a great hole was cut by a stone in the windward face of the tent and the flaps of the door were stripped of their fastenings. Fortunately, however, everybody was remarkably cheerful.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, just as we were beginning to feel rather cross at the rough treatment that Mount Everest was serving out to us so generously, respite came. The blustering gale dropped to nothing more than a stiff breeze—the sort of thing against which one can walk comfortably if one only leans far enough forward into it. This was our first chance to return to the North Col; but we decided to stay where we were for the rest of the day and the night, and on the next morning make an early start to climb the mountain.

The one fly in the ointment was that our food was almost at an end. We had never intended to spend more than one night in the high camp, and had, therefore, brought provisions for only one night, and even these had been measured out on an

extremely small scale, because everybody had told us it would be quite impossible for a human being to survive a night spent at such an altitude as we had now reached (25,500 feet) and that at such a height we should have no appetite and be unable to eat anything at all. As a matter of fact, we were so hungry that we could almost have eaten each other.

We were quite a merry little party that afternoon as we gathered round a scanty meal and then prepared to settle down for the night. Towards six p.m. I heard voices outside the tent, but thought I must be dreaming. When Bruce, however, also started up at the sound, I knew that some one must be outside. Six porters had brought thermos flasks of warm tea provided by the thoughtful Noel. These splendid men had left the North Col that afternoon as soon as the storm had lessened, and made the tremendous journey up to our camp just to assure themselves that all was well with us. They expected us to return with them, and needed a good deal of persuasion before they would leave us.

The second night in the high camp did not begin well. We were tired out after our struggle with the windy tent and weak from lack of food. A dead, numbing cold was creeping up my limbs, and I soon found that my two companions were undergoing the same unpleasant feeling. Suddenly I thought of trying the oxygen. We had dumped the apparatus outside the tent on our arrival at

our high camp and it was the work of only a few minutes to haul one of them into the tent, take doses all round, and do it in such a way as to make the whole business seem like a joke. Tejbir took his medicine without much interest, but his face soon brightened up. The drawn, anxious look on Bruce's face gave place to his usual one. In my own case, I felt the painful, pricking, tingling



FIG. 20.—Camp III. after a storm.

sensation due to the fact that my blood was beginning to circulate again, restoring warmth to my half-frozen limbs. We connected up the apparatus so that all could breathe a small quantity during the night, and this probably saved our lives.

Before daybreak we were stirring. We had to dress, that is, put on our boots, a much longer

operation than it sounds. By taking mine to bed with me I had managed to keep them fairly soft, so that I was able, by much struggling, to get them on within a quarter of an hour. The others had neglected to nurse their boots, with the result that the uppers were frozen hard and completely out of shape. It took us an hour to soften and reshape them by holding them over lighted candles.

Shortly before six o'clock we assembled outside. The first rays of the sun had just touched our tent when we shouldered our loads and set off. What with oxygen apparatus, cameras, and other odds and ends, Bruce and I each carried more than forty pounds. My plan was that Tejbir should go with us as far as the Shoulder, where we should relieve him of his load and send him back. The weather was clear and the only clouds in the sky, though of the wrong sort, seemed too far off to mean any harm to us. A fresh wind cut across the ridge and the cold, as usual, was intense.

Keeping to the ridge and making straight for the Shoulder, we mounted rapidly. But very soon the cold began to have a bad effect on Tejbir, already weakened by starvation and hardship. At an altitude of 26,000 feet he collapsed. It took some little time to bring him back to his senses, and then we saw that he had given of his best and could go no farther. We took off his load, left him sufficient oxygen to see him safely back to camp, and sent him home. The ground over which we had come was easy and the tent was

in full view, so there was no chance of his losing the road.

After seeing him well on his way, we shared Tejbir's load between us. Climbing by no means steep and quite easy rocks, and passing two almost level places where there is ample room for some future high camp, we arrived at an altitude of 26,500 feet. By this time the wind, which had been steadily rising, had gained such force that I saw that if we were to remain fully exposed to it much longer, we should be beaten by the cold as Tejbir had been. So we had to leave the ridge and strike out across the north face of the mountain, where there was more shelter.

The new route had many disadvantages. The ground over which we had now to make a way was steep and slabby, and there was much new snow to hamper us. Care was needed all the time. Bruce was sure-footed, careful, and unlikely to slip, but as I was responsible for his safety I slowed down and never allowed more than a few feet to separate us. Thus, keeping close together, we worked away steadily, gaining but little in altitude, but getting ever so much nearer the summit. The climbing became more and more difficult. Sometimes the slabs gave way to snow, treacherous powdery stuff with a thin, wind-formed crust that gave a false appearance of compactness. Little reliance could be placed on it. At length, when about half-way across the face and at an altitude of about 27,000 feet, we decided once again to

change our route and strike straight upwards in the direction of the summit ridge.

At length, some three hundred feet higher, we had to halt for a rest and also to repair Geoffrey Bruce's oxygen apparatus which was no longer working properly.

After about five minutes' rest the intense cold once more drove us forwards. But after a few steps I realised that if we persisted in climbing on much farther we would never get back alive. The sudden realisation of failure came as a heavy blow; but there was nothing else to be done. Back we had to go.

VII

THE RETREAT

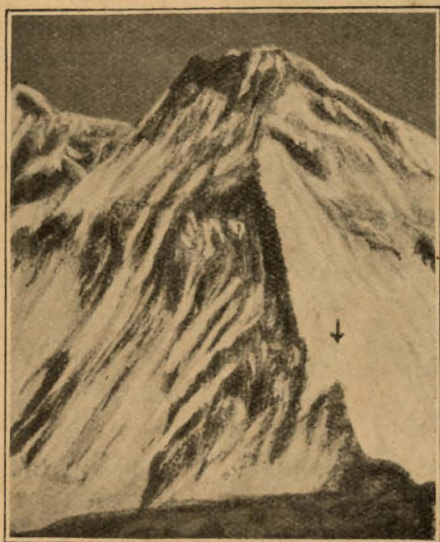
LOOKING towards the Shoulder it was easy to see that we had reached a height of at least 27,300 feet above sea-level. The point we had gained may be easily recognised. We were standing inside the bend of a well-marked patch of snow shaped like a "V" turned upside down. This lay immediately below the great belt of reddish-yellow granite which cuts almost horizontally through the greenish grey-black rock of which the summit and north face of Mount Everest are composed. With the exception of the summit of Everest, nowhere could we see a single mountain top as high as our lofty perch. We could look across into clouds

which lay some distance behind the Shoulder, a clear proof that we were only a little, if anything below its level. Though 1,700 feet below the summit, we were well within half a mile of it; so close, indeed, that we could make out single stones on a little patch of scree just below the highest point.

But it was useless to think of continuing. Furthermore, masses of yellow clouds were sweeping in from the west in the wake of an angry storm wind. The decision to retreat once taken, no time was lost, and fearing lest our weakened condition might lead to a slip, we roped together. It was mid-day. At first we returned in our tracks, but soon branched off along a series of ledges and eventually struck the ridge leading up from the North Col to the Shoulder at a point above where we had left it in the morning. On these ledges we had been able to find level going, when I could walk ahead, keeping my companion on a short, taut rope. The clear weather was gone. Once back on the ridge, we plunged down the easy broken rocks, through thick mists driven past us from the west by a violent wind. For one small mercy we were thankful—no snow fell.

On regaining our high camp we looked inside the tent and found Tejbir snugly wrapped up in all three sleeping-bags, sleeping the deep sleep of exhaustion. Hearing the voices of porters on their way up to meet us, we woke him up, telling him to await their arrival and to go down with

them. Bruce and I then went on our way, met the ascending porters, and passed on greatly cheered by their bright welcomes and encouraging smiles. But the long descent, coming as it did on the top of a hard day's work, soon began to find out our weakness. We were thoroughly



North Col
Camp.

FIG. 21.—The North Peak from about 24,000 ft. on Mt. Everest.

tired and could no longer move ahead with our usual vigour. Knees did not always bend and unbend as required. At times they gave way altogether and forced us, staggering, to sit down.

At last we reached the broken snows of the North Col, where we found Crawford and Wakefield, who had come up to have a look at the Col and

spend the night there. A craving for food and rest, to the lack of which our weakness was due, had to be satisfied, even if only to a small extent, before continuing the descent. A cup of hot tea and a small tin of macaroni were forthcoming, and even this little

nourishment so refreshed and renewed our strength that three-quarters of an hour later we were ready to set off for Camp III, which was gained that evening.



FIG. 22.—Retreating down the East Rongbuk Glacier.

Since mid-day, from our highest point we had descended over six thousand feet, and we were quite finished. The brightest memory that remains with me of that night is dinner. Four quails followed by nine sausages only left

me asking for more. With the remains of a tin of toffee tucked away in the crook of my elbow, I fell asleep in the depths of my warm sleeping-bag.

Next morning an inspection by Somervell, who had returned to Camp III during our attempt on Everest, showed that Bruce's feet were sorely frost-bitten. I had almost escaped, but not

quite, for four small patches of frost-bite, due to the cold which had got through the half-inch thick soles of my boots and three pairs of woollen socks, made walking unpleasant. I was also weak. The result was that both of us were piled on a sledge and dragged by willing porters down over the glacier until the surface became too rough. I then discovered that I could walk quite well; perhaps I had been lazy in the morning. Geoffrey Bruce fared less well, and had to be helped back to Camp II. And so from camp to camp the weary return journey dragged on, and always the sense of failure was with us. We had set out with one resolve—to get to the summit. It had hardly yet dawned on us that we had climbed higher than men had ever done before. With fine weather and but one night at our camp, it is almost certain that Mount Everest would have been climbed.

The descent from Camp I to the Base was perhaps the roughest and most trying of all. Great was the rivalry amongst the porters as to who should have the honour of carrying Geoffrey Bruce, the condition of whose feet would not permit of his walking down those almost unending moraines with their harassing stones. Even the worst journey, however, must at last come to an end, and on the afternoon of May 29th we were being given the warmest of welcomes by the General and the other members of the expedition at the Base Camp.

The next few days were spent in resting. But I underwent the same experience as the members of the first climbing party; instead of recovering strength rapidly during the first three or four days, a further decline took place. However, as the weather seemed good, although it was certain that the monsoon must shortly break, it was decided to make a third attempt upon the mountain.

Somervell was, by now, by far the fittest of the climbing members of the expedition, with Mallory a good second. Both had enjoyed some ten days' rest since their first attack upon Mount Everest, and had, therefore, had some chance of recovering from the terrible strain they had experienced. Medical opinion as to my condition, after only four days' rest, was somewhat divided, but in the end I was allowed to join in the third attempt.

On June 3rd we left the Base Camp. The party consisted of Wakefield as Medical Officer, Crawford and later Morris as transport officers, with Mallory, Somervell and myself as climbers. Oxygen was to be used, and I was placed in command. It was a great struggle for me to reach even Camp I, and I had to realise that the few days' rest at the Base Camp had not been long enough to allow me to recover, and that it was useless for me to attempt to go any farther. Snow fell during the night. Next morning, after giving Somervell final instructions about the oxygen apparatus, I returned once more to the Base Camp.

As two other members of the party were leaving on the following day to escort the badly frost-bitten Morshead to Darjeeling, I was given and accepted the chance of going with them.

That return journey is one of the most delightful memories of my life. Within a week of leaving the Base Camp I had entirely regained my strength, although a certain tenderness in the soles of my feet made itself felt for a long time. For the most part the weather was warm, and everywhere the eye feasted on a riotous colouring of blossoms such as we had never before seen. The only dark spot was the sense of defeat, coupled with the knowledge that, with only a little better luck, we should have won through.

Six weeks later Strutt, Longstaff and I arrived back in England and heard, for the first time, that a great avalanche, in which seven of our brave and devoted porters lost their lives, had put an end to the third attempt to climb the



FIG. 23.—Captain Geoffrey Bruce (left) and the Author at the Base Camp.

mountain before even the North Col had been gained.

VIII

THE 1924 EXPEDITION

ON our return to England it was possible for us to make clear to the Mount Everest Committee the three most important of the many lessons which failure had so strongly driven home to us, namely, the need of oxygen and the best type of oxygen apparatus that could be obtained, the need for warmer and absolutely wind-proof clothing, and the need for including among the climbers only first-class mountaineers with wide experience. In order that there should be ample time in which to make the preparations as thorough as possible, and that the climbing members should have at least one season, if not two, of winter climbing in the Alps, it was decided that the next attack on Everest should be not in 1923 but in 1924.

When early in 1924 the expedition left these shores for India, it was provided with a new type of oxygen cylinder, weighing only about two-thirds of the old one, with a breathing device which I had invented, and with warmer and more wind-proof clothing. Against the storm winds of Everest, however, nothing short of an absolutely non-porous material, such as oiled silk, rubber, or

gold-beaters' skin is wind-proof enough. Sail-cloth or canvas, no matter how densely woven, unless specially treated with, for instance, a rubber solution, is far too porous to provide sufficient protection.

General Bruce was again chosen as leader, Colonel Norton was second in command, and the climbers were Mallory, Somervell, Irvine, Odell, Beetham, Hazard, and Geoffrey Bruce. Major Kingston was Medical Officer, and Shebbeare and Macdonald transport officers.

Norton, Mallory, Somervell, and Geoffrey Bruce had already, in 1922, shown what they could do; Mallory, indeed, was the veteran of the expedition, for he alone of all the members was advancing for the third time against Mount Everest. Odell and Beetham were both proved Alpine climbers. Irvine, who was exceptionally strong, had shown in two expeditions to Spitzbergen remarkable powers of endurance. He had also spent a winter season in the Alps.

Each of the other members possessed special qualifications for his task. Kingston was an Air Force Medical Officer and had travelled in the Pamirs; Shebbeare spoke the language of the porters, completely understood them and how to handle them; Macdonald had a perfect mastery of the exceedingly difficult language of Tibet, had travelled in the Eastern Himalayas and in May 1922 had made the journey to the Rongbuk valley alone,

General Bruce, Norton, Geoffrey Bruce, and Shebbeare met in Darjeeling towards the end of February 1924, and immediately set to work to select the porters for the expedition. Many of the porters, mostly natives of Nepal and a few Tibetans, came into Darjeeling specially to have the honour of being chosen. It was the hillman's undying love of adventure, and not the amount of money they might earn, that made them so willingly offer their services.

Towards the end of March the whole party had assembled in Darjeeling ready to move off; more than seventy porters, amongst them many of the valiant men of 1922, had been signed on (the signature of a porter being his thumb print), and most of the stores were already on the way up to Phari Dzong, the first important settlement in Tibet proper. Between this place and the Base Camp the great baggage train of over 350 animals (yaks, bullocks, and donkeys) steadily made its way in weather that was not the cold, fierce, biting-wind weather of 1922, but mild and pleasant. Unfortunately, during this march General Bruce was smitten with a serious attack of malaria and had to return post-haste to Sikkim. The great loss to the expedition in being thus suddenly and almost at the outset robbed of its leader can hardly be understood except by those who have enjoyed serving under the General.

On April 29th, a little more than a month after leaving Darjeeling, the site of the Base Camp

in the Rongbuk valley was gained in a snowstorm, the only bit of bad weather during the whole journey. No time was lost on arrival. The great attack on Mount Everest, which all expected to be successful, was begun by the establishment of the three lower camps, of which Camps I and II were, by the aid of 150 Tibetan coolies, established in three days. In the meantime the expedition's own porters were at work on Camp III, and in less than another week, Mallory, Odell, Hazard, Irvine, Norton, Somervell, Beetham, and Geoffrey Bruce, and all the available porters, were on their way up to the East Rongbuk valley.

Shortly afterwards Camp III was established, and then Everest dealt the first of the many hard blows the expedition was to receive. Ever since the arrival at the Base the weather had been doubtful, and in addition the cold had been more severe than in 1922. A snowstorm of great severity had compelled Norton, who was now in command, to withdraw all his forces to the Base Camp. The retreat was carried out in model fashion, and three camps were left ready for future occupation. Unfortunately one of the Nepalese porters and one of the Gurkhas died on the way down, and two more brave men were numbered amongst those who had already laid down their lives in the fight against Mount Everest.

As soon as the weather was a little better, though it was still unsuitable, Camp III was again occupied, and in another two days an effort

was made to begin the establishment of the North Col Camp. Snow fell during the day; nevertheless, that night, with snow falling steadily, Hazard and twelve porters slept in the North Col. But in spite of this magnificent hard work and effort, the weather again dealt a second blow, and Norton found himself compelled to order a second retreat down to the Base Camp.

In Camp I, a few days later, the climbers came to the conclusion that the porters had suffered so terribly that most of them were now too weak to be able to do any more. Only fifteen of them, who were nicknamed "the Tigers," could be expected to do further good work. This loss of strength in carrying-power made it necessary to adopt new plans according to which burdens would have to be as light as possible. For this reason it was decided that as soon as the weather was suitable an attack should be made without oxygen.

Towards the end of May there set in a period of settled fine weather which lasted a week—a thing never before known to any of the parties in these unfriendly regions.

On June 1st, Mallory and Geoffrey Bruce, having spent the night with Odell and Irvine in the North Col, left the Col to make the first attempt. That night Somervell and Norton arrived, but left next morning to make a second attempt, thus following close on the heels of Mallory and Geoffrey Bruce. Twelve hours after leaving the Col, Mallory and Bruce, together with a few

porters, succeeded in pitching a camp at 25,300 feet—a little below my old camp of 1922—and there they spent the night. But the day's work had taken too much out of the porters and Geoffrey Bruce, who had strained his heart. The result was that after their night in this high camp, they were unable to go any further and had to give up the attempt. On the way down they passed Somervell and Norton, who gained the first high camp and spent the night there with four of their six porters, the other two having returned with Mallory's party.

Next morning only three of the porters were able to continue the ascent to the site of the camp, which this party pitched in the afternoon at an altitude of 26,800 feet, only about 500 feet below the Shoulder, the highest of all the camps established by the expedition. When the work on the camp was finished, the porters returned to the North Col, and the two climbers were left alone. They spent a fairly good night, but Somervell was suffering from a kind of sore throat that one often gets at high altitudes. The complaint itself, if not actually serious, is very annoying and weakening, as it brings on fits of coughing which do much to rob one of both breath and strength.

On the morning of June 4th, soon after sunrise, they started on the last lap of their most gallant race to reach the summit of the mountain. The weather was at its best. Shortly below the Shoulder a broad terrace of fairly gentle slopes

cutting across the great north flank of Mount Everest opened up in front of them, and they took to this terrace instead of going on to the north-east ridge. All that morning they plodded steadily along, gaining inch by inch in altitude, but the pace was slow and frequent rests were necessary.

At length at mid-day, at an altitude of about 28,000 feet, Somervell, broken down by the strain which his severe fits of coughing brought on, gave in. Norton for a whole hour longer carried on alone, but he did not succeed in gaining more than 80 feet higher. It was clearly impossible at such a rate to reach the summit, so he returned, rejoined Somervell, and together they began the long retreat. By nightfall they had gained the great snow ridge below the first of the high camps, and two hours later they were met by Odell and Mallory, who had come up from the North Col to escort them home.

While Norton and Somervell had been carrying on their record-breaking climb, Mallory had been hard at work preparing for another attack on Mount Everest, this time with oxygen; and on the morning of June 6th, in beautiful weather, Mallory and Irvine, with five porters, left the North Col on what was to be the last of the high climbs. They used oxygen and went well. The next day, having spent the night in the first of the high camps, they set out for the highest camp. At the same time, Odell left the North Col, taking one porter with him, and went up to the first

of the high camps to remain there in case of need. Odell's porter suffered from mountain sickness, and when Mallory's porters returned from the high camp in the afternoon he was sent back with them to the North Col.

The morning of June 8th was fine. Odell left his tent and climbed slowly up towards the highest camp, but before mid-day the weather took a turn for the worse and squalls of sleet and snow troubled him from time to time. When he was at an altitude of about 26,000 feet the clouds cleared away and he caught a glimpse of the high north-east ridge of the summit of Mount Everest. Far away on a snow slope at an altitude of about 28,200 feet not far from the base of the pyramid whose top is the summit, he saw two tiny black specks. They were moving; but as he watched the clouds once more swept over the ridge and hid the figures. It was after mid-day. That was the last that was ever seen of Mallory and Irvine.

Thus, to the long roll of victims claimed by the Great White Mountain we must now add the names of the two men who died in the prime of life, almost within a stone's throw of the top, in their struggle with the opposing forces of nature.

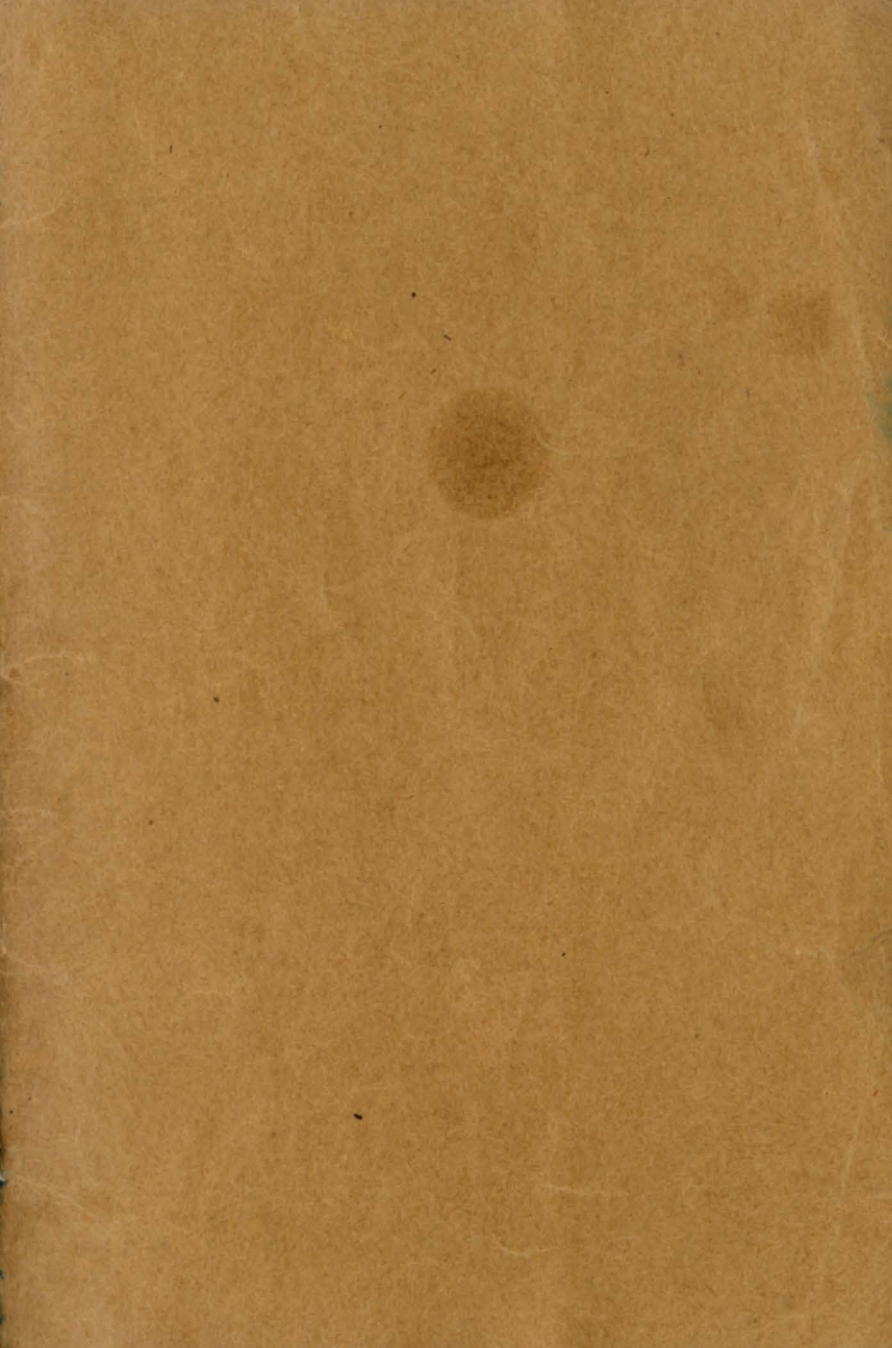
"What is the good of it all?" you may ask. In pounds, shillings, and pence—nothing. But the nations who in the past have ranked as great have owed their position to the spirit of adventure with which their men have been inspired. For centuries past, this inspiring impulse has driven

forth from this country pioneers in search of the unknown, and it is to the love and pursuit of adventure by its sons that this country owes its position in the world to-day. Irvine and Mallory have not sacrificed their lives in vain. With their example before us, the love and pursuit of adventure will not flag.

The Great White Ways to the North and South Poles are paved with the bones of British pioneers, and over this heroic paving the adventurous sons of other nations have been the first to gain these farthest points of the earth. Is it too much to hope that after the sacrifices that this nation has laid at the foot of Mount Everest, the conquest of this last farthest point of our globe may fall to the credit of one of British race?

U.S.M.

THE END



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