

MOUNT EVEREST, 1962

BY HARI DANG

'MANY have been to Everest before us,' was the dull thought which mingled with elation at being invited to join the Second Indian Expedition to Mount Everest, sponsored by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and led by Major John D. Dias, the companion of glorious climbing months on Mr. Gurdial Singh's Nanda Devi expedition the preceding season. But the dullness was in the thought and not in the mountains, for however many a time they may be climbed, each time is like the first; one finds them new and clean-washed by the elements, in refreshing contrast to the smoke and grime of the city.

The mountains at Jaynagar were concealed behind a pall of russet haze, but the very air was so vibrant with their silent presence and promise that life acquired an unwonted zest. Our Sherpas from the high mountain districts of Sola Khumbu joined us here, bringing with them the forgotten loveliness of distant hills, and the simple cadence of their yak-herds and pastures. They confounded the chaos of a thousand packages, and revelled in it, for surely in all the confusion some of them would get away with lighter loads. Without their pranks and their broad grins, their babies and Sherpanis, their laughter and their tricks, this dreary railhead on the road to Everest would have been depressing.

They set about testing their sahibs, who, however, secure in the care of Sirdar Angtharkay, the veteran personification of Himalayan Expeditions (eleven with Eric Shipton alone, including the one which pioneered the southern approach to Everest) puffed at pipe and cigarette and discussed the tepid beer of Jaynagar.

We set out through His Majesty's southern paddy-lands, the mountains obstinately hidden behind haze. 'How drably different from the approaches to Garhwal and Kumaon', we worried. There you awaken refreshed in the agedly chugging Kumaon or Doon Express to thrill anew each time to the freedom of the hills, the foothills verdant in spring, or violet, laced with white frill where the snow has frosted the austere profiles of the middle ranges in winter; and always, that proud crest, that vague light which is the mountains of Kumaon and Garhwal. But the promise of the Nepal Himalayas is greater, and all the miles of uninspiring flatness of field and filthy village

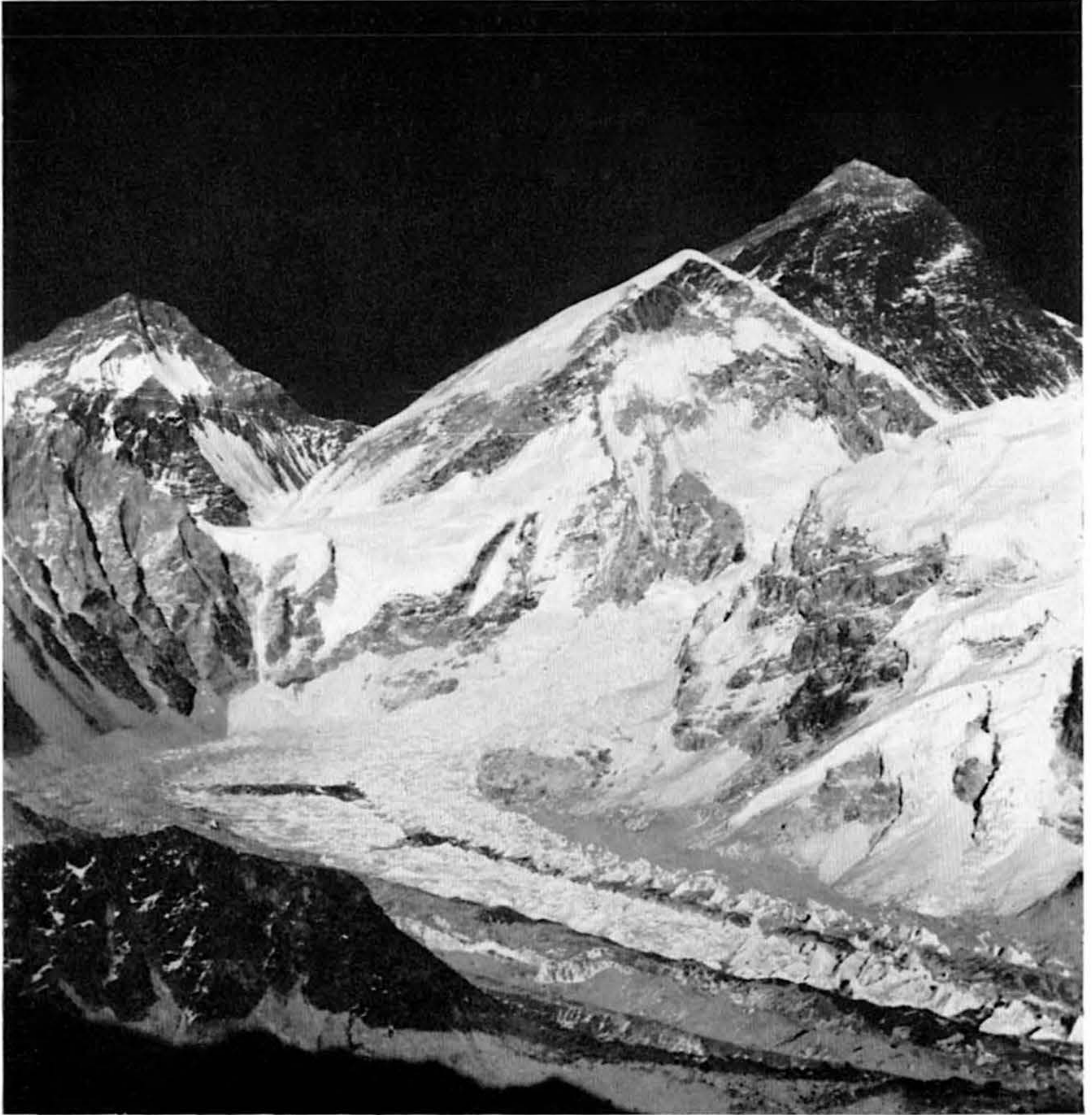


Photo: Indian Everest Expedition, 1962]

EVEREST, THE SOUTH-WEST SHOULDER AND THE KHUMBU GLACIER FROM THE FLANKS OF PUMORI

See pp. 1-10.

vanished at the first intimate glimpse of the forests and foothills of Nepal after a thunder-shower. We thrilled that night to the barking of a kakar and the purring monotony of a nightjar in the moonlight.

Across the Siwaliks of Nepal, and how like those of Dehra Dun these are, the forest burned with the blossom of semul and dhak. The air was heavy with the fragrance of camphor bushes, katchnar (bauhinia) and wild jasmine, and the vaporous fumes of 'chang' and 'rakshi', with which the porter-train drowned their own sorrows, though not the even more penetrating emanations of their toiling bodies.

The narrow, steamy valleys and over-populated, over-terraced hillsides of the routes to Everest have become one of the foremost platitudes of Himalayan climbing, like Mallory's reason for climbing, but the echoing rush of parakeets who hurtle like bullets between scrub-crags, the song of the demure oriole, the barbets vying with the discordant crescendos of the hawk cuckoo, and the giant rush of wings proclaiming the great pied hornbill remain memorable, as do the occasional covey of chukor, the knots of friendly 'Gurkha' folk, the forests of oak and rhododendron with the mauve blush of saxifrage blossom as carpet, and the silent, formless flow of mists across high ridges as accompaniment and goad to peaceful, free thought.

And then: the first view of Everest and its neighbours; from Jantardham, where the frosted earth and crisp-yellow grass, swaying fir and the goodly smell of resinous needles crushed underfoot, proclaim the high mountains, which in turn claim their own, and the torments of life below fade with each upward step; one forgets all in marvelling at the few primulas (*P. denticulata* and *P. bellidifolia*) that brave the early spring, and, of course, Everest, the centre-piece of the jewelled horizon, blowing its arrogant plume. If this were not enough, on every summit and in every village, on track and spring, were the symbols of Enlightenment: the Gompa and the Chorten; the Mane wall and the prayer-flag, proclaiming to all the One Catechism, 'In Truth is Purity, In Purity is Truth'. Who can help but believe in such country?

Bathing austerely in icy cascades, climbing in a lather of clean sweat, resting from the chill wind in the lee of Mane walls, we got closer to our goal each day. The Sherpas sloughed off their foothills despond and the flutes came out to serenade the mountains in melancholy airs. The vogue of Himalayan climbing has ushered prosperity to this land, but Sola and Khumbu retain their pristine charm, and in the shades of a platitude, Shangri La, these mountains do correspond to that secret retreat which the questing, restive heart of man craves. The flowers waited as eagerly as we did for the melting of the snows to assert their life through the frozen crystals that held it captive, but the Himalayan whistling thrush and the niltava, the short-billed minivet



Photo: Indian Everest Expedition, 1962]

AMA DABLAM AND THE PEAKS OVER THE MERA COL.

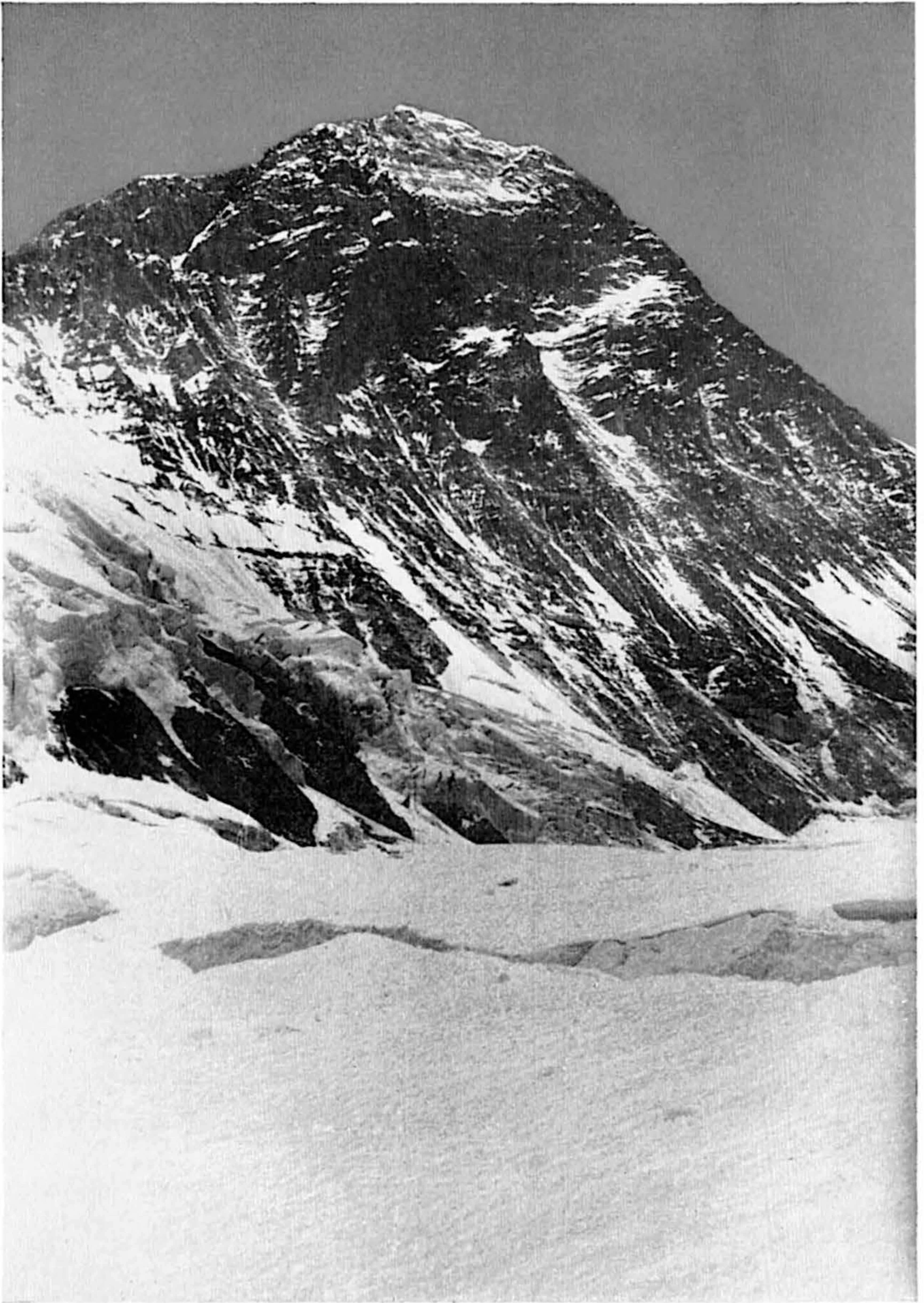


Photo: Indian Everest Expedition, 1962]

EVEREST FROM THE WESTERN CWM, NEAR THE INDIAN CAMP III

and the blue magpie lightened our loads as we plunged deeper and rose higher each day, till the conifer-covered ridge of Thyangboche bade us a frigid welcome for a fortnight of acclimatisation, a euphemism for long days strolling over the sun-warmed pastures on the hill opposite, which gets more insolation, enjoyable days photographing the herds of friendly thar and doing some fantastic rock-climbs.

The air is dry and rare at Thyangboche and when the sun went down on the deep snow that covered the swards around the monastery and the timber hut built by the Lama in which we stayed, a brittle frost cramped the air; conversation became a modulation of coughs. It was with relief that we followed the Imja Khola on March 26, towards the Base Camp, eating baked potatoes and drinking 'chang,' swapping yarns and smiles with Sherpas and Sherpanis. There was deep snow on all hillsides which do not get much insolation, and the route ploughed a slushy way through it. Long before reaching Base one sensed the change in the scale of the country; the rocky disarray of the Khumbu's debris and the rising cone of Pumori speak of mighty things to come. Two days of moraine travel, serenaded by the sad double-whistle of the snow-cock, brought us to the chaos of the ice-fall and the Devil's Cauldron of boulders that was to be our home for the next few months.

With avalanches thundering down the Lho La and the glacier grumbling subterraneously, we made our laborious way up the telemark of sérac-torn ice that is the ice-fall; around us was a world of limpid clarity. Though too well known to need emphasis, the ice-fall is unnerving, and those who had scraped up the frightening ice of Nanda Devi with a measure of confidence were frankly shaken by the great crevasse of the ice-fall; it is so very impartial in the dangers it bestows; technique is helpful, but futile, in averting the objective dangers; it is a wonder the trembling, tottering séracs and crevasses have not claimed their toll of life yet.

The Valley of Silence that is the Western Cwm is an interim of tranquillity before the tussle with the Lhotse face, which is the next obstacle. Though Camp IV was established without difficulty below the Lhotse bergschrund, which stretches all along the Everest-Lhotse-Nuptse walls, blizzards of unseasonal intensity, which were to dog us through to the final, bitter weather, prevented an early setting up of Camp V midway up the Lhotse face, a little below the Yellow Band, where the previous Indian Expedition had traversed the couloir—whereas the British had climbed right up to the top of the Lhotse glacier and then traversed to the slopes above the South Col. When eventually the weather's slight relentment was used and parties set out, it was found that an unprecedented and wide and comprehensive crevasse barred access to the upper reaches of the Lhotse 'glacier'; much as we tried, there seemed no reasonable way up or around this,



Photo: Indian Everest Expedition, 1962]

CAMP V, ON THE LHOTSE FACE. THE ROUTE TO THE SOUTH COL CROSSED THE COULOIR FROM THIS CAMP.

and in desperation one afternoon, we made a tragic attempt to follow the route of the early Swiss by climbing straight up the couloir itself.

It was easy going, and to avoid the stones which fall down this natural ice-chute, as could be seen from the debris below the bergschrund, we hugged the true right of the bulges and folds of ice which go by the name of the Lhotse glacier. Somewhat less than half-way up to the Yellow Band, the party of nine, three climbers and six Sherpas, including Sirdar Angtharkay, heard a rending noise; John Dias said, 'Yeti', a standing joke with the party which attributed all noises and trouble to this perennial enigma; a lump of ice knocked off my hat, and, even as I screamed in fun, a large stone hit Sherpa Nawang Tsering in the midriff, producing no external marks, but causing internal haemorrhage of the liver and the kidneys. We brought him back somehow, dodging more stones on the way, and evacuated him to Camp III the same evening. Despite oxygen and all that could be done without an operation, he died in the morning in the arms of Flt. Lieut. A. K. Chowdhury, to whom he had become attached through five seasons.

The Swiss in 1956 also lost a Sherpa in the couloir higher up, and, in the light of experience, the British route taken by Wilfrid Noyce seems the safest.

Death in mountaineering is an occupational hazard. But there is no calculation against objective dangers like stones, or, for that matter, against the hazards of the ice-fall. When death does occur there is nothing for it but to console ourselves like good determinists, with Confucius, who said, 'If there are no great mountains, then nothing need be said, but if they are there, they must be climbed.' Death is after all the result of the virtuous choice of austere people for mountains, instead of the wiser one of others for the sunny sea-coast: of such Chinese sophistry is comfort made!

On May 6 a workable route was finally made over the Lhotse crevasse and Camp V soon established, though not before a soft-snow avalanche, which followed daily fresh falls of snow almost all the time we were above Base Camp this year, led to another mishap which might have been a multiple tragedy had not Sonam Gyatso, a Sikkimese climber, saved the situation with a prompt belay. Even so, one rope was carried down 700 ft., leading to a broken ankle, a displaced shoulder-blade and shaken nerves. Slowly, the graceful cone of Pumori sank below us, and Cho Oyu and Gyachung Kang, the latter the subject of a risible attempt by an expedition this year, rose above us. Soon these, too, sank below us. From Camp V one day we saw the German-Swiss party of three climbers prance gaily on cramponed feet up that difficult mountain which Mallory named after his daughter: Pumori. An excellent performance by people with technique far superior to

ours, who, it is heard, plan to climb Everest in 1964 by the bare, rock ridge that rises above the Cwm: the South-west ridge.

Camp V was established, but the South Col, like the azure skies that should have been our due as part of the 'pre-monsoon lull', were buried in the vague shapes of chill clouds that daily doused our tents and our hopes at III, IV and V with feathers of mounting snow. Time began to run short, and though the wind continued to sweep the Lhotse face and couloir in frenzied gusts, driving stinging snow in their faces, party after party of members tried conclusions with it, and it yielded on May 21, the first ferry to the South Col being conducted on May 23.

The months of patience and preparation were moving to a climax and the summit party, Lt. Mohan Kohli, Sonam Gyatso and Gurdial Singh, moved up from Base Camp on the 25th to Camp III. Eighteen Sherpas and the support party, consisting of John Dias, Suman Dubey, the latter a young college boy from the Doon School, and myself, moved up with the summit party: and after spending a comfortable night at Camp V, continued up the couloir on May 26.

A relatively fine dawn found us leisurely traversing the couloir and the slabs of the Geneva spur, where crampons were removed and cans of juice, hoarded against the occasion, came out. So content and unworried were we that I forgot to switch on my oxygen supply and carried the load, some fifty-three pounds, without oxygen to the South Col, though the last bit was torture, the discovery being made just short of the Col.

On May 27 at the South Col, the sun did not rise. We waited. The sun remained a vague rumour behind storm clouds. At last the six of us conferred in the 'Jamet' tent, shouting to make ourselves heard over the flapping of the fabric and the noise of the wind. A day's delay was inevitable, thus reducing oxygen supplies available. We did without oxygen on the Col for the next twenty-four hours; it was a miserable time. I emerged from the tent towards evening to witness a scene of unique and utter desolation: a waste-land of ice and rock, littered with the remnants of previous expeditions and swept by a merciless wind bent on erasing all sign of life; the South Col must be one of the cruellest, most barren and hateful spots on earth. Some Sherpas were rummaging disconsolately among the discarded oxygen bottles strewn over the wide expanse of the Col in the vain hope of finding some with a few litres left. Inside the tents, on the gasping, grim faces of the members, redeemed only by courage and resolution, was an identical look of grim melancholy, a reflection, to my imagination, of the soulless brutality of the South Col.

The dawn of May 28 brought a whisper of encouragement, and we dragged ourselves into the chill wind, now without its former murderous

gusts, to prepare to carry to Camp VII for the summit party; a support party of ten, three members and seven Sherpas, including Angtharkay. As there were not many loads, Suman and John Dias decided to let me have the doubtful privilege of carrying alone, with seven Sherpas, while they stayed behind and made us some tea.

Scarcely out of camp, Nima Thondup, an old friend and a good Sherpa, suffered some heart trouble, and returned, the remaining seven sharing his load, while the summit party, as befitted the gladiators that they undoubtedly were, followed at a leisurely pace in the steps which Angtharkay and I cut with panting breath up the 'leap-frog' gully. Nima's life was despaired of, and while we were fighting one battle up the mountain, he spent six nights on the Col and carried out a grim struggle against cardiac insufficiency. He was finally evacuated successfully. Eventually we spent two unhappy months together at the Military Hospital in Delhi, and Nima is now back in the mountains he loves.

Admiring the view from the crest of the 'leap-frog' gully, I saw it marred by the scene below, where the summit party seemed to be in some trouble. It emerged eventually that Gurdial was feeling a trifle dehydrated and had returned to the Col asking Kohli and Sonam to go on, taking me with them on the summit rope, which they did, though not without some argument, as I was not prepared for the summit, having exhausted myself earlier and having planned to go down that day to Camp V below the Col. This decision cost me months of travail which are yet not over, but even from the depths of plaster and skin-grafts and amputations that seem to occupy a large segment of my life now, I cannot regret it; to regret imprudent steps in the mountains is almost as bad as taking them; it was to be.

We pitched our 'Hillary' tent on a narrow rock platform at about 27,650 ft., just above the last Indian Expedition's site, though the plan had been to pitch Camp VII in a gîte some three hundred feet higher up, like the British had done. In fact, the secret on Everest, apart from the weather, oxygen, and the fact that there are no secrets left, is to pitch Camp VII as high as can be, since the final climb and descent to the Col is arduous and long, rather than difficult. But for these considerations, Everest, in good weather, is an 'easy' mountain; grade I, if Nanda Devi is grade VI!

The tent was well pitched the first night, but gave great trouble on the succeeding two nights when it slid half bodily over the edge, leaving scarcely room for one person instead of the intended three. With nine oxygen cylinders, each lasting four hours at four litres per minute, we were content that we would breathe freely at night, and have eight hours of oxygen to distribute through the climb and the descent to the Col. We reckoned without the weather, though the

night of May 28 was more comfortable and happy than many far below, with tsampa and roast chicken, prunes and aerated lime-juice prepared over the two small gas burners.

The dawn of May 29 was absorbed by a pall of ugly cirro-stratus, and the route up remained a blind conjecture. A desperate attempt, after putting on our boots and crampons, led to a hurried retreat back to the tent: the wind and the snow ruled out any movement that day.

'What now?', was the question, and the knowledge that we could not use any more oxygen without fatally reducing the summit supply made the answer no easier. To spend another night at 27,650 ft. was unwise and unprecedented, yet to go down now would mean the abandonment of the attempt, as the monsoon was approaching and a second summit team, or the supplies for it, were nowhere near the South Col. It had been decided, because of the bad and unseasonal weather, to have only one summit attempt and this was it. Of course, one could climb another year, but it seemed then, and still does, that we must extract all the best from our situation. If one of us went down to the Col, the other two could have oxygen another day and night, and though all three volunteered for this, it was thought too risky to send an unroped man down to the Col without oxygen in such wind and blowing sleet. Feeling fit and determined to draw the last ounce from our opportunity, our decision to stay another night, without oxygen, was understandable, if on the side of boldness. That the one night became two was an occurrence beyond our reckoning.

The night of May 29 in the now cramped tent without oxygen was longer than any one year of my life. We moaned and panted through the endless nightmare hours, to awaken to Sonam's triumphant shout of the Buddhist catechism: 'Om Mane Padme hum'. He is a good Buddhist and has enviable faith which nothing can shake. 'Twenty-two lamas have prayed for this morning,' he crowed, with the gesture of a *maestro* introducing a fine work of art.

And indeed it was one of the clearest Himalayan mornings I can remember, and the most friendly. A sea of mountains on all sides, and the Tibetan highlands, parched brown and yellow, with islands of fair weather cumulus to soften the landscape, which must be the most inspiring in the world, if a trifle too grand. A sky of deep violet, as only Himalayan skies can be, cheered us, while gaunt Makalu to the south, distant Kangchenjunga, pastel-black Cho Oyu, Gaurisankar and a thousand other summits rose to meet it.

Jubilant again with optimism and warm liquids, we were scrambling up the easy slabs below the South-east ridge by 7 a.m. We made rapid progress up the couloir which leads up to the crest of the ridge above a slight shoulder, where it eases at the bottom of slopes leading to the South summit. By 9 a.m. we had covered some six hundred feet and



Photo: Indian Everest Expedition, 1962]

HARI DANG ON THE SOUTH-EAST RIDGE OF EVEREST, MAY 30, 1962.



Photo: Indian Everest Expedition, 1962]

EVEREST: SOUTH-EAST RIDGE, SOUTH SUMMIT AND THE SUMMIT RIDGE (MAY 30, 1962).

were so confident of making the summit that Sonam stopped murmuring his chants; I remember having whistled, or made a good attempt, anyway, while drinking mango juice, snatches from the Ninth symphony; and even the austere Mohan smiled.

At the bottom of the South summit snow-slopes, we left our half-used oxygen bottles against the return, and recommenced the climb with new bottles alone, but it was quite obvious that something had gone wrong. Perhaps the lamas had not prayed hard enough or long enough, for the snow had become softer as we progressed upwards, and a whorl of great intensity was even then driving ice and snow into our goggles. The South summit looked close enough to touch, and the humps and bulges, and the rock-chimney, of the summit ridge another few hours; all of it just a few hundred steps, but the wind rose over the ridge, enveloping us in its awful plume, fogging our glasses as often as we cleared them. Sonam gave a magnificent lead, but we sank deeper into the snow and till 2.30 p.m. covered only a few hundred feet. We were still a hundred easy feet short of the South summit, when Mohan's prudence partly saved the day by persuading Sonam and me to turn back.

We had done all that was possible, and a little more. Perhaps we had already exceeded the limits of safe climbing, which, after all, is the only climbing worth the name. That we did not turn back earlier is, I like to think, not only an error of judgement, but also a tribute to the determination to do all we could to crown the efforts of our friends and Sherpas with the success they so well deserved.

The return would have been tedious and melancholy had it not been fraught with much hazard, for while Hillary and Tenzing had taken two-and-a-half hours from their Camp IX to the South summit, and almost the same to the main summit, and while the Swiss had more or less ambled up in shirt-sleeves, we had spent eight hours already and had little oxygen left. The wind had erased all tracks, and clouds which were indistinguishable from the driving snow blotted out most of the light. We strayed on to ice, losing much time, but retaining our firm belays. Darkness soon replaced and reinforced the snow and the clouds, a darkness unredeemed by starlight, made threatening by strange thunder that echoed and glinted all over us in a sinister overture to the monsoon. We stumbled almost aimlessly, yet with a set purpose, the drowsiness of cold and fatigue an increasingly strong enemy. We sat down and two of us fell asleep, but moved on again, knowing the fatal fascination of such slumber, called euphoria. I still remember some parts of an intensely funny conversation we were having, when all seemed for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and one felt sure of convincing even the innocent Candide.

Our numb sense of direction told us we were in the vicinity of the

tent, but its welcome shape eluded us; once it was a boulder, next a shadow, and each minute the cold and desperation of death crept irrevocably over our now dulled minds. 'Must get to camp'; 'water'; 'must drink something'; 'the tent, oh God! the tent, the only hope'; such were our thoughts. Our hands froze through two pairs of mittens. We stumbled and crawled on hand and knee, and fell and got up again in mechanical answer to the will to survive for as long as possible.

All was hopeless and we must forget the tent and go down to the South Col. Such was our state of mind under severe anoxia that we seriously headed for the South Col at nearly 10 p.m., a journey of some hours even with oxygen, during which the cold would have frozen us had not an accident claimed us even earlier. We found a measure of new strength which was soon exhausted, but we kept our eyes open and prayed to personal beliefs: after numerous false alarms, one did not dare to say confidently 'There is the tent; I have seen it'; instead one said, 'Sonam, there is a rock there cruelly resembling a tent; let us go and curse it'. And, of course, it was the tent!!

We melted precious fluid and did what we could to restore circulation to our hands and feet, though the time and the circumstances permitted of no great effort. Sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, for the second night without oxygen at 27,650 ft., we laboriously descended to the South Col, being met with hot tea and a tearful hug from the faithful Dawa Norbu, who, like Gurdial at the South Col, had given us up for lost. Gurdial made us comfortable and spent a night without a sleeping-bag at the Col as Mohan and I had both left our sleeping bags at Camp VII. Gurdial spent a total of six nights on the Col, five without oxygen.

I like to think that the summit party achieved much more than establish records or do brave, bold, foolish things, which are all alien to good mountain-climbing; they stretched themselves to the limit and, for the expedition as a whole, gained a genuine success by deserving success.

The South Col was left to the choughs and the ravens and the everlasting wind on June 1, and the summit party, helped down by Gurdial and Captain Mulk Raj, reached Camp III amidst much thanksgiving and rejoicing.

The adventure was ended but not the story, for that has become a part of ourselves; we had struggled as a team and succeeded in mastering obstacles and fears. Success and failure in the mountains are personal concepts, for in our effort was our success, our victory over our fear and pettiness. The objective summit on Everest is a gamble in which the weather holds all the trumps. It was enough that we, whom all fourteen members had worked hard and long to place within striking

distance of the summit, had wrested from the weather's reluctant grasp all that was possible.

Apart from these two impostors, success and failure, we have much to cherish, and much to remember, not all of it happy. The happiness of the return, marred slightly by my own frostbite, is the only thing to compare with the first few days in the mountains after a long spell in the city. We were men starved for life, parched for the feel and sight of growing things and flowing water, content to lie flat on the swards of Sherpa-land and drink like animals straight from the turf-enclosed streams which trace their paths through the primulas.

The grandeur that is the world of ice and rock and snow can never replace the homely things in the hearts of civilised men. A pure, ethereal Spirit alone could bear the endless solitude of high mountains forever. Hostile starkness teaches an appreciation of beauty, the chill of ice makes us love the more the warmth of camp-fires; solitude, however brief or desirable, breeds in us an affection for company. Keyed to physical and nervous exertion for months, we now became relaxed; from mountaineers keen to scale the highest mountain, we became, overnight, connoisseurs of life, tasting each moment, relishing each joy, to the full.