Xixabangma 1987 – Expedition Jade Venture

LUKE HUGHES

'What's that you're reading, John?'

Our Chinese interpreter had an insatiable curiosity. John House and I were huddled in the Mess Tent with him, out of the howling Tibetan winds. The rest of the climbing party had already left Nyalam for Base Camp, 25km up the valley. We'd been left to create some order out of the chaos of Chinese officialdom and their inadequate provision of yaks.

'Oh, it's some ridiculous adventure story set in Asia.'

'Much like *Jade Venture*?'

'Sort of, only at least Wilbur Smith is believable.'

It wasn't as if the expedition was exactly a fairy-tale but, as on any comparable expedition, problems with customs and transport tried even the coolest of tempers. Brushes with officialdom defied logic and reason. John, a Lance-Corporal in the Devon & Dorsets, had been the one man who always managed to be in the middle of all the fracas, and the one man who usually managed to extract solutions.

Jade Venture was the name given to an expedition promoted by the Scientific Exploration Society and authorized by the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA) to climb the virgin E face of Xixabangma (8027m) and to conduct scientific research *en route*. The scientific programme, directed by Dr Henry Osmaston, had been agreed with the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The climbers were led by Lt Col Henry Day, whose official report will be found in the libraries of the Alpine Club and Royal Geographic Society; it includes chronologies and references for serious visitors to the area. Col John Blashford-Snell led the scientists and support party. The climbers included Chung Kin Man, Brian Davison, myself, Stephen Venables, Lindsay Griffin, Nigel Williams, Jonny Garratt, Duncan Francis, Robert Durran, Jerry Gore, Julian Freeman-Atwood, Mark Upton, John Vlasto, Kate Phillips, Alastair Wells, John House and Jim Kimber. Eight were soldiers and, in keeping with the expedition's early association with Operation Raleigh and its aims, the 10 youngest were aged between 18 and 23. Amongst the scientists there were two Americans, an agro-chemist from Hong Kong, and two geographers from Beijing. The combination of civilian and military climbers could have created problems even before the international element was added, but none materialized. Indeed even Venables, a dedicated anarchist, was heard to remark: 'It's great, this. Soldiers do as they're told. They don't sit round arguing about the best course of action.'

In retrospect, two overwhelming successes of the expedition were the

universally happy memories which it left with us, and the outstanding performance of the youngest members, especially during the most adverse conditions. Partly because of the strong presence of youth, the trip was intended to be a conventional siege of a virgin face which, while ensuring a greater chance of success than an alpine-style ascent, would also provide the widest experience for the maximum number of individuals. There are currently so few opportunities to attempt 8000m peaks, and few climbers in Britain have had any experience of them. Henry Day's vision for the future of British Himalayan climbing played a large part in devising both concept and plans. The expedition was financed principally by ICI and Mr Eric Hotung, with contributions from the Bank of Boston, Cathay Pacific, MEF, BMC, and the Army Mountaineering Association.

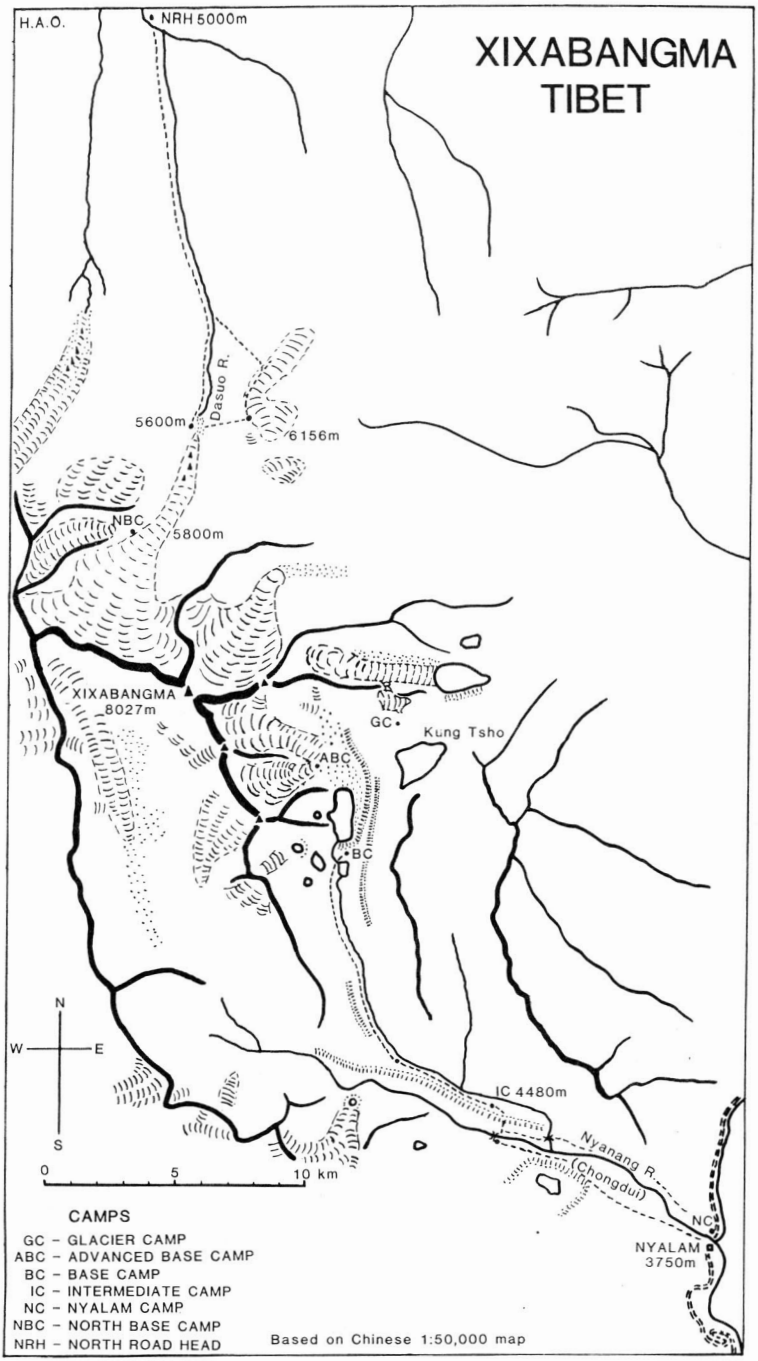
Time was short. Leaving England on 8 September, we had to be back by 9 November. Such a large group posed formidable logistical problems, complicated by the threat of winter. There was little time to acclimatize, and Nigel cast a superstitious spell on us all by announcing that he had been on three previous post-monsoon Himalayan trips, each of which had been abandoned after storms in the third week of October. The budget was tight, too. A great metaphoric CMA meter starts to tick as soon as you cross into China. Every cost is multiplied. A local hotel room charged at 7 yuan costs 77Y to guests of the CMA. Clothing for yak drivers attracts fees even when no clothes are actually provided. They even tried to tell us that the mileage from Nyalam to Lhasa was greater than printed on official maps or carved into the kilometre stones, because the trucks had to go round corners. Consequently, the acclimatization was planned to take place in Nepalese Langtang, close to the part of the border we had to cross.

The trek followed a pilgrim route to the Bhairab Kund, a lake sacred to both Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims. Split into groups, some of us travelled with the scientists. In the evening we would gather in the mess tent to attend seminars orchestrated by Henry Osmaston. Donnish and distinguished behind his grey beard, he would draw out from each of us what had been observed during the day's walking. Schist, gneiss, leguminosae or mill-wheels were fair game; migmatite, hypericum and orchid pollination mechanisms became part of common small-talk; and (as a cabinet maker) I found myself discoursing on joinery techniques in Nepalese buildings. It was fascinating. During the day Henry would register a rest stop with a huge triumphant grin, clutching wads of obscure foliage, and deliver an oration on the virtues of leeches. These were never fully revealed and much energy was spent keeping the blighters at bay. John Blashford-Snell suggested the application to the socks of an ammonia compound and soap – 'an old remedy, don't you know'. Every time you walked through a puddle you frothed at the lace-holes.

On 19 September we walked into Tibet. There was still something blissfully romantic about that, for all the foiled attempts to reach Lhasa, the tragic behaviour of the Chinese, the current plethora of tourists and all the hype of China's attempts to normalize relations. The prayer flags still flutter above the barren hillsides, the yak caravans bring life to the deserted valleys, and the ruins of monasteries prompt memories of the past.

20. Luke Hughes and Jerry Gore, leaping crevasses on way down from Camp 2 after an early morning load carry.

21. Stephen Venables descending Xixabangma.


H.A.O.
NRH 5000m
XIXABANGMA
TIBET
Dasuo R.
5600m
6156m
NBC
5800m
XIXABANGMA
8027m
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Kung Tsho
ABC
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IC 4480m
Nyanang R.
(Chongdui)
NC
NYALAM
3750m
CAMPS
GC – GLACIER CAMP
ABC – ADVANCED BASE CAMP
BC – BASE CAMP
IC – INTERMEDIATE CAMP
NC – NYALAM CAMP
NBC – NORTH BASE CAMP
NRH – NORTH ROAD HEAD
Based on Chinese 1:50,000 map

184 porters helped to shift the loads over the landslips to the roadhead, 8 km inside Tibet. John Blashford-Snell stood on the steps of his hotel supervising them, and looking like that great sapper before him, Gordon of Khartoum. Two wealthy American trekkers approached.

'Hey, what's this Ikky?' they asked, pointing to an ICI logo on one of the packages.

'That's Imperial Chemical Industries – one of the largest companies in the world.'

'Uh-huh. Never heard of them, what do they make?'

'Oh, weedkiller, pesticides, fertilizer, you know the kind of thing.'

'Hey, but you got enough weedkiller for the whole of Tibet!' one exclaimed, weighing up JBS's semi-military garb.

'No, that's just expedition equipment.'

'Oh yeah . . . hey, Maisie, I heard the CIA have companies like that.'

By truck to Nyalam, where one of the advance science party had spent the evening talking to such a nice man called Reinhold something, passing through on his way back from visiting Everest. Had he climbed other mountains, asked Emma ingenuously. 'A few,' he told her.

Of the Chinese officials, our Liaison Officer was incompetent, and the interpreter was inept. Both were ill-equipped and disorganized. The failure of the CMA to provide pack animals, as arranged, caused bad feeling. That metaphorical meter ticked on. The climbers champed at the bit, and the scientists longed to get out of Nyalam to begin their investigations to the north of the mountain. Impatience seethed. Arguments arose about priorities for equipment, about who had nicked the Alpen bulk supplement, about the lack of cash; a crush on one expedition member led to sulks in other quarters. People would pick up ration boxes and move them round the camp convinced they were being useful. Heads were sore from both altitude and a Kathmandu virus. Four days later Base Camp was established, the loads began to trickle through, and no one could remember what all the fuss had been about.

The inadequacy of transport facilities remained a nagging problem, both getting up to Base Camp initially and getting down at the end. Much individual humping was necessary even before the foot of the climb was reached. This took an inevitable toll, not only on individual fitness but also on the logistics of stocking the higher camps.

Base Camp was an idyllic affair, sited above a lake in a meadow, beneath the awe-inspiring face of Nyanang Ri (7110m and unclimbed). Little stone circles where yakkers had camped in the past gave clues to centuries of use. On the sides of the moraines were those anonymous tracks that seem to appear on mountains without sight of the animals that make them. Tibetan snowcock pecked around in the morning, eagles soared above, ravens and choughs raided the BC incinerator, and marmots were pursued by JBS after dark with a night-sight. The tight geometric shape of the Phillips aerial added a hint of high technology.

The radios were excellent. The evening call became a ritual, the focal point of the day. Voice procedure was hybrid, not to say eccentric, but in its own way became quite fluent.

22. *The E side of the Xixabangma massif. Far left: Nyanang Ri. Right of centre: Pungpa Ri. Right: Xixabangma summit hidden behind ridge. Route with camps is indicated. X: High point (7700m) reached by Venables and Hughes.*

23. *Unknown footprints at 6000m on edge of small plateau glacier, E of Dasuo glacier, N Xixabangma.*

'Hello, Camp 1, this is Base Camp. Our noses have finally tracked down 43 fudge bars, 28 Twixes and 53 packets of Rolos . . .'

'Camp 1. Is the priority lift the food, the ropes, or for Rob to come up to acclimatize? Over.'

'Base Camp. If he left his Alpen behind he wouldn't notice the rope . . .'

Apart from logistics, the World Service was beamed across the mountain. Bombings in the Gulf, riots in Lhasa, hurricanes in the south of England were mingled with hybrid messages about Stephen's gloves, Alastair's spoon, and John House's severe attack of worms.

'Camp 2. Regards to all the family, John!'

The east side of Xixabangma presented two potential approaches. One, more direct, was heavily threatened by overhanging ice-cliffs. Had the style of the intended climb been more 'alpine' it might have been fair to attempt it. But the prospect of leaving several camps for several weeks under that threat was not attractive. The other route necessitated climbing through the southern ice-fall to a cwm between Nyanang Ri and Pungpa Ri, then up an ice headwall on to the ridge which led to the summit of Pungpa Ri (7486m), and then on, for the horrific distance of over 3½ km, all over 7000m, to the main summit. We chose the second option.

Advanced Base was established at the foot of the southern ice-fall at 5200m, thereafter known as the Ice-Fall. Stephen pioneered a route. Having joined us from the Karakoram he was thoroughly acclimatized, and he infuriated his companions by carrying huge loads faster than most, then thrusting a microphone under their noses asking how they felt (he was gathering material for a radio programme for the BBC). He then swarmed up a near-vertical 75-foot serac wall and announced that the ledge at the top would do nicely for a temporary camp. In reassuring the others he scared himself. The others slept soundly, but the serac began to creak during the night, and Stephen began an all-night vigil measuring the width of the crevasse behind it.

Camp 1 was established at 5800m and Camp 2 at the foot of the headwall (6250m). The plan was to fix the headwall, establish a third camp on the ridge (6900m) and make summit bids from there. But it was doubtful whether it was possible to cover that kind of distance without establishing a fourth camp or using oxygen. Time was so short that we would be hard-pushed to get properly acclimatized. None of us, apart from Henry Day, now laid low by pneumonia, had any experience above 6900m.

The headwall was fixed in turn by Duncan and Alastair, Brian and John Vlasto, then Stephen and me. It was finished off by Stephen and Jerry who together established Camp 3 as planned. Since yakkers had walked off with some of the ropes, we were desperately short. Only by raiding some of the rope over the fixed pitches on the ice-fall could we get enough to fix the headwall to within one metre of the ridge. We descended in turn to recuperate, leaving Nigel, Jonny, Duncan and Alastair in position at Camp 2 to make the first summit bids.

The oxygen debate continued. Stephen had decided not to use it on ethical grounds, and anyway the climbing fraternity would laugh. I had no such qualms, but each bottle was so heavy, the headwall so high, and the ridge so

53. Stephen Venables and Luke Hughes.

54. Mont Blanc from Mont de la Saxe (1987).

long that just to carry it to Camp 3 would scupper you before you even switched it on. It could only be an encumbrance. The others had no hesitation in using any means at their disposal. So the hope was that they would break the trail, using those absurd bottles, and leave a good track for Stephen and myself, oxygen-free, to sweep on through. That way we would conclude our traditional Himalayan-style assault, each according to his own ethic. The plan was set. Lindsay and John House were at Camp 1 in support, and the rest of us descended to Base Camp to recuperate.

On the night of 17 October, Base Camp evening meal was being prepared by Ajamba, our Nepalese cook. Supper was late; the stoves had been giving him trouble. With his usual ingenuity he had repaired them with spit and elastoplast. Earlier, he had made a pair of flutes out of a discarded ski-stick. The radios spluttered back to life.

'Hello, Base Camp, this is Camp 1. It's doing some serious snowing up here.'

'Camp 2. That's nothing. It's been chucking it down for three hours up here.'

'Camp 1. Low on rations too. We've got *I Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. I'm afraid Lindsay's going to eat them if we don't get out.'

'Camp 2. Hey, there's a two-foot boulder here about four foot from the tent. It wasn't there a minute ago.'

'Camp 1. Lindsay speaking – don't make a fuss. Everyone will want one.'

Thus began our experience of the worst storm in recent Himalayan history. By the morning of the 20th, when the sun eventually shone again, Camp 2 was completely buried. The climbers had dug out their tents three times with ice-axes before they finally abandoned the site, the food, and the oxygen bottles. Camp 1 was annihilated too. Advanced Base Camp was just saved by John House and Jim Kimber who watched their tent become a snow-cave as it was buried in three and a half metres of snow. Even at Base Camp, where there was a queue for every shovel, a metre and a half of snow destroyed many of the tents and buried the camp. All over the Himalaya climbers abandoned expeditions and tried to struggle out of the mountains. On the road to Lhasa, a coach-load of Westerners expelled from the city after the riots was trapped on one of the passes; one of the passengers had a wooden leg. For us the implications were serious. Apart from the loss of equipment, the abandonment of the camps meant that any further attempt was going to have to supply itself, and, worse, break its own trail all the way back to Camp 3. There were effectively nine climbing days left, if we stuck to our original timetable.

'Humph,' said Stephen, fortified by a shot of Henry's secret supply of Famous Grouse, 'I suppose it's to be alpine-style after all.'

The next morning we set off to reopen the trail. The full impact of the storm was really apparent, looking at John and Jim trying to dig out their tent at Advanced Base Camp. In the ice-fall, the fresh ascent to Camp 1 took seven hours (normal time three and a half). Every crevasse was wider, every snow-bridge smaller. It was all rather spectacular. The ascent to the new Camp 2 took four hours (normally one and a half). On the fourth day we climbed the headwall in seven hours and snuggled into the snow-cave, which was mercifully

unaffected. We slit the abused copy of Robert Graves down the spine with a knife. I got 'God'. Stephen got 'I'.

On the fifth morning we moved together on to the ridge across steep ice and rock, coming out on to a sharp arête that led through various deceptively receding peaks. Concern about thin black clouds across the Nepalese horizon made us wonder about future storms. We came across a solitary rock on the ridge that was ideal for a camp and about 150m below the summit of Pungpa Ri. Resolving to get at least one summit in the bag for ourselves and our sponsors before any potential storm, we dumped the gear and trudged up the snowy ramp to the top. Alex MacIntyre, after the only previous ascent, aptly described it as an 'uncertain affair', but it offered a superb view of the remaining 2½ km to Xixabangma. Time was getting tighter, and the lack of supporting camps left us with very little food. We aimed to get away early the next morning, bypass Pungpa Ri by traversing the SW flank to the col, and get to the main summit and some of the way back in a day. That way we could risk leaving our sleeping bags and superfluous gear. It took three hours to the col, and then again it was up and down over a knife-like ridge. At one point Stephen actually sat *à cheval* and slid part of the way. Unbeknown to us, a party of four had gathered on the edge of the glacier below Advanced Base and were watching us through binoculars. To them it seemed that we had little further to go. This was reported back to Base Camp, and then to Nyalam, by telex to Beijing and back to London via Reuters for the next morning's papers before Stephen and I had got out of our snowhole – the real cause of our disappearance. Just below a rocky knoll at about 7650m, when it was clear that we were not going to make it that day, we dug in. If the weather held we would make the summit in a couple of hours the next morning. With that happy thought in our minds we settled into the armpit routine, used for fingers and toes when you haven't enough gear at high altitude.

'This is a bit like a game young lovers play: up a bit, left a bit, oooh! that's nice . . . hee! hee! . . . stop there, it tickles.'

The temperature dropped to 35C, but still morale was high when we emerged on the seventh morning, only to be hit by howling winds and spindrift driven through every weak point of our clothing. Stephen battled up the first 50m. When I caught him up I said: 'There's no way we can do 300m of this. It's desperate.'

'Well, I expected it to be cold.'

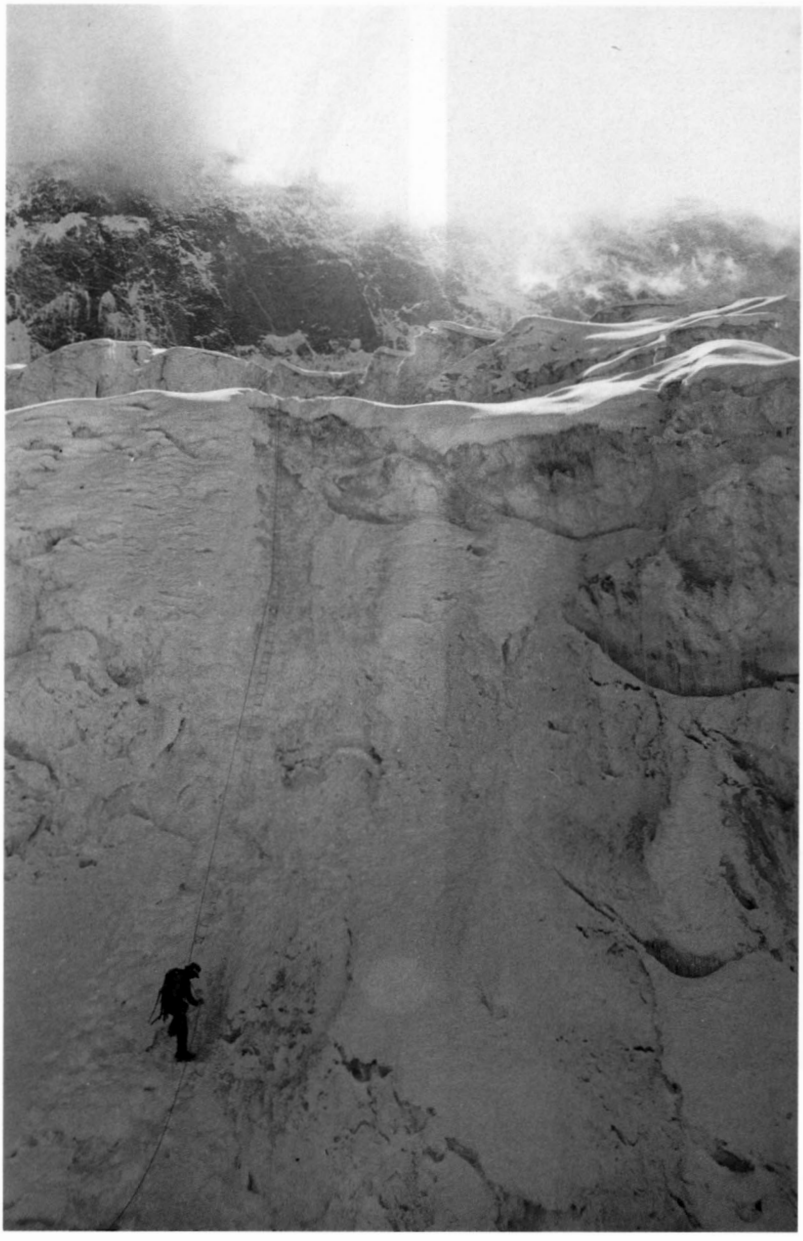
'There's cold and there's lunacy. It has to mean another night out, and we've got no food or back-up, and there's no knowing if it will go on for days like this.'

'I could go on myself . . . Good Lord, your nose is frostbitten. Quick! Back to the cave.'

With honour satisfied it was a joy to get out of the wind, now gusting at 60 miles an hour. In fact the nose was fine, but the spindrift had got around my glove inners. Hermann Buhl heroics aside, there was only one course to follow. We began our reluctant descent. We had been so close against all the odds, and yet so vulnerable when the winds really began to blow. Dragging ourselves back along the ridge and round the traverse seemed to take ages. We craved sugar. When we did get back I was aware that I had no feeling in the fingers which held

42. Duncan Tunstall using local transport to cross the Shimshal river.

43. The climbing team – Xixabangma 1987. Nyanang Ri (unclimbed) in the background.



24. Ice-fall between Advanced Base and Camp 1 on Xixabangma. Climber: Luke Hughes.

my ice-axe. I banged them against the side of a saucepan in amused despair. The message of that ominous metallic ring was clear. Either by conduction, or by the restriction of the circulation, the axe had contributed to frostbite. As the fingers thawed the pain set in. I retired to my bag with a big dose of Temgesic and let Steve look after the hot chocolate. The radio crackled.

'Camp 3, this is ABC. Any news?'

'Camp 3. No news, Henry. But we're moving out tomorrow to look for them.'

It wasn't just us. The radio batteries were flat too. We could hear the other stations but could not transmit. No one had heard from us for three days. Their anxiety was matched by our frustration in being unable to reassure.

Life was more bearable after the sun was up the following morning. Soon after we had begun to move down, we met the rescue party, Nigel and John Vlasto, coming up. Relieved to find us still going under our own steam, they went on to climb Pungpa Ri themselves. Lacing boots had been bad enough, but pushing a frozen rope through a descendeur with frostbitten fingers was a little trying. That night we were all safe at Camp 2, not a breath of wind or cloud in the sky. With the camps now back in place there was not much to stop a second attempt. But officialdom had other ideas. Through the LO we were informed that the CMA had deemed that in the aftermath of the great storm (and, unstated, the riots in Lhasa) all Western expeditions were to be terminated, and their participants were to leave forthwith. Those 25km back to Nyalam in what was now thigh-deep snow took its toll, but eventually the whole expedition regrouped before dispersing – some to Nepal, others to Beijing.

By the time we reached Lhasa, my fingers were looking like bruised Norfolk sausages, and felt as though someone had hit each one with a hammer – the pain of the initial impact had died, but oh! how they throbbed.

'You must go and see Charlie Clarke as soon as you get back.' I was assured he knew more about these things than most. On return to London I rang the good doctor. He was in Tokyo, back on Sunday. His wife said: 'Yes, you must see him. And don't for goodness sake show them to anyone else; they'll cut them off. Come and have a drink on Monday.'

I turned up on the doorstep and rang the bell. Charlie answered the door, wearing a butcher's apron and wielding a carving knife.

'Jesus, it's not that bad, is it?'

'Oh, no. Sorry, I was just doing the cooking.'