

EVEREST AGAIN—AND AGAIN!

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ALL mountaineers are aware that in recent years a succession of expeditions has gone forth in order to attempt the ascent of Mount Everest, the world's highest peak, a summit which was long ago triangulated by the Indian Survey and found to be 29,002 feet. It was the seventh expedition which set out last year for the mountain, and we broke very much with the past in the matter of organisation and resources. So much money was not available, and instead of a large and expensive expedition it was decided to run things on light, mobile, and economical lines. A minimum of stores and equipment was to be taken. H. W. Tilman was appointed leader, since it was he who, with E. E. Shipton, had on several recent journeys in the Himalaya put into practice the doctrine of extreme lightness and economy. No extras, nor specialists, such as scientists, nor other hangers-on, that might be styled transport officers or photographers, were to be allowed: in fact, no "frills," and every man a climber, and strict purists, if possible, at that! No "pansy" practices, such as saving up our strength by riding on ponies across Tibet to the base camp, were to be countenanced this time: we must go on our flat feet the whole 300 odd miles, and demonstrate the tough stuff of which Everest climbers should be composed! The simplest diet must suffice, no alcohol must be found in the stores, and few, if any, articles of spare clothing must be carried, whilst three candles per week must be sufficient for the illumination of our tents after early tropical sundown. In short, we must be a party of model stoics, self-renouncing, with our thoughts and eyes fixed on the great goal, and that alone.

Six of us, eventually, with this ideal in view, and accompanied by a dozen Sherpa porters, started off from Kalimpong, in the hills of northern Bengal, in early March, the

seventh member of the party, with other ideas as to a desirable modicum of comfort, not joining up until we were well on our way in Tibet. At the last village of Rongbuk we had such a sudden influx of coolies from Nepal, who wished to act as our porters on the mountain, that the expedition was seriously threatened with becoming a large and extravagant one of the régime of the "bad old days." But this tendency was speedily nipped in the bud by our watchful, somewhat "totalitarian" leader, and the greater number of recruits were sent home. Our punctual arrival at the mountain (April 6) put us in a good condition to establish ourselves for an unusually early attempt upon it, if conditions should allow. But no sooner had we commenced to carry forward stores and equipment, and establish our long line of camps up the East Rongbuk Glacier, than an absurd epidemic of so-called influenza struck us, and four of our party in turn were laid low thereby. The rest of us set to work to attempt the ascent of the North Col ice-slopes, but we found the ice so hard and the temperature so low that at about 22,000 feet we decided we had come too early, and the north face of Everest to be out of the question at the moment.

And so a pilgrimage of the sick and the halt, and the relatively fit alike, took place over the 22,000 feet Lhakpa La to the valley of Kharta, some 30 miles eastward. There, at a lower altitude and with the delights of opening spring around us, we endeavoured to recuperate, although a shortage of food somewhat hindered the process. Tilman became so ill that his condition suggested to our doctor a far worse malady than influenza. Storms and snow squalls blew up meanwhile over the mountains, and although only the beginning of May, and impossibly early for the monsoon, we began to have qualms that conditions looked uncommonly like the onset of that Himalayan climber's nemesis.

But true enough it was, for on arrival back at Rongbuk we found that Everest was white, and had been heavily covered in snow since, it was said, May 5. The monsoon does not strike the Himalaya in these parts usually until well into June, and sometimes not till July, although in the hapless year 1936, of the previous Expedition, it arrived in

May. Hoping that a spell of strong winds might arrive to blow the snow off the steep north face of Everest, we set forth again up the long glaciers, and quickly re-occupied our line of camps up to III below the North Col. The ascent of the slopes of the latter proved arduous and not without danger, for a great deal of the snow was in an exceedingly avalanchy condition, and on one tricky traverse the rope "usefully" stopped two of the party being swept away. However, a camp was eventually pitched on an airy shelf of snow on top of the North Col at 23,000 feet. Then a few of us commenced to struggle up the lower part of the great north face of the mountain, but the deep snow and the constant bad weather soon called a halt. Moreover, we were in danger of having our line of communication, or parties themselves, carried away on the treacherous slopes leading to the North Col camp. We must retreat, or a disaster comparable to that which overtook the German parties on Nanga Parbat might overwhelm us. Our responsibility for the Sherpa porters was, too, another factor in the balance of safety and obvious danger, discretion and glaring indiscretion.

A short spell down at Camp I, and a new effort was to be made, in fact, a last resort that had been condemned and turned down by most members of previous expeditions. A route was to be forced up the other (western) side of the North Col, and so avoid the avalanchy eastern side from which we had retreated. The main Rongbuk Glacier was ascended and a new line of camps pitched and equipped for this purpose. We were not reassured on arrival beneath the steep western ice-wall of the North Col to find that an enormous avalanche, perhaps a mile wide, and sufficient to wipe out a hundred climbing parties, had descended, perhaps a day or so before. With such a mass down, however, it was unlikely that more could come for some time. After much steep ice-climbing and step-cutting, with a long and rather sensational traverse thrown in, a route was worked out to the top of the North Col: but we were all agreed that it was no place for heavily-laden porters, but rather only for light-hearted Alpinists out for a day's sport.

The North Col camp reoccupied, and the weather ameliorating somewhat, parties at once got to work again on the great north face of Everest. It was hard work in deep snow, on outward sloping rocks and ledges, to force a route up to about 25,600 feet, where, on June 6, Camp V was pitched. The Sherpa porters did magnificently, some even returning, after carrying through their own loads, to assist their exhausted brethren still struggling up below. From here, Shipton and Smythe went on with seven Sherpas, and at rather over 27,000 feet established Camp VI, from which the porters were sent down. Next morning they started off early, but the intense cold drove them back to their tent, both hands and feet being in serious danger of frostbite. When the sun had arrived and warmed the air somewhat a second start was made. But the heavily snow-laden rocks soon brought them to a standstill, and all their struggles and efforts at upward progress were obviously hopeless. They must give it up, with the glittering final pyramid of Everest looking so temptingly close, yet still nearly a mile away and 2,000 feet above them. It was a bitterly disappointed party that slowly made their long descent to the lower camps.

Tilman and Lloyd, however, undeterred, determined to make another attack, the latter providing himself with oxygen apparatus in the hope that it might give him some advantage. But it was to no particular purpose, since neither he nor Tilman could, under the appalling conditions of deep powder snow, affect a lodgment on the upper rocks of the mountain, an altitude of perhaps 27,200 feet only being reached, and a long way from Norton's highest (28,100 feet) in 1924, and others of the 1933 expedition.

Two more of us were ready, if need be, to take up the attack; but our duties lay in another direction. A couple of the Sherpas who had been up to Camp VI, at 27,000 feet, were in a serious condition at the North Col camp. One was suffering from a sudden attack of pneumonia and pleurisy, and Dr Warren only kept him alive during one terrible night by constant inhalation of oxygen. The other porter had become completely unable to stand on his feet,

or to speak, and was altogether in such a paralyzed condition that we wondered how we should be able to get him down the 1,300 feet of ice-slopes and walls of the North Col. But it was accomplished, though under the greatest difficulty and with the utmost discomfort to the patient; while the pneumonia case put up such a demonstration of "guts" and resolution that he was able to climb down very largely under his own steam.

And so we once more left the great mountain with nothing further accomplished than previous expeditions, save perhaps the "technical" achievement of having crossed the North Col, the highest "pass" in the world that has been traversed! No more than this, indeed, with the exception of a fair number of scientific observations relating to geology, glaciology and meteorology, which the writer was able to fit in in the intervals of pursuing the main objective. Of scientific researches there are ample yet in this little-known region, and there is no necessity for members of an Everest party to feel bored, or even run into the danger of bed-sores, due to days of waiting in idleness, which one of our number this year claims to be the chief menace of these expeditions!

As to the future, Everest can and will be climbed, and it is hoped, of course, by a British party. But, given an amply experienced and able party—and there are more than a sufficiency of British mountaineers available—two conditions are necessary. One, the normal special permit from Tibet to enter the country, which is by no means readily come by; and two, a sufficiently long interval in May and early June between the cessation of the winter winds and cold and the arrival of the heavy monsoon snows, which, as we demonstrated this year, make the summit of Everest quite inaccessible.