Members of the Expedition:

Standing (left to right): Alain Barbezat, Roger Duplat, Paul Gendre, Louis Payan, Louis Gevri. Seated (left to right): The Author, Gilbert Vignes, Louis Dubost.
TO KISS
HIGH HEAVEN
NANDA DEVI

by

J.-J. LANGUEPIN

WILLIAM KIMBER
LONDON
This book is dedicated to the memory of Roger Duplat and Gilbert Vignes who disappeared on 29th June 1951 on Nanda Devi.
This story is for the most part a personal testimony. As regards the mishaps I did not personally witness, I have collected the testimonies of my comrades. This sometimes results in a change of tone; I ask the reader to excuse me on this score, but since, above all, I wanted the text to be authentic I have refrained, even for the sake of style, from using any embellishment to the detriment of strict authenticity.

J.-J. L.
Translated from the French
by
Mervyn Savill
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II
INTRODUCTION

The Country for which we were Bound: The Garwhal Himalaya

The dominant impression one retains of the Garwhal is one of isolation and poverty. It was extraordinary to be so near and at the same time so far from the rest of the world.

SHRI JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

The Himalaya mountain range runs for about 1,600 miles from the loop of the Indus to that of the Brahmaputra; it is the highest excrescence on the surface of our globe.

The central section of the Himalaya which extends on either side of 90° longitude, bounded on the west by the sources of the Jumna, on the east by the Nepal frontier, comprises the regions of Garwhal and Kumaon, in the neighbourhood of the 31st Parallel, on the same latitude as New Orleans, Marrakesh and Cairo. There is no single Himalaya chain but a number of parallel chains, often intertwined, which separate the plains of India from the high plateaus of Tibet. On leaving the plain one meets with a thick jungle region where the soil is often marshy: the Terai. Although some parts of it are under cultivation and other sectors serve as refuge for primitive tribes, the Terai is above all the home of big game. Then, further to the north, lies the region of the Siwalk Range, with an average height of 5,000 feet, usually cultivated or covered with pine forests.

In the far distance towers the main chain of great peaks crowned in the Karakoram by Nanga Parbat, in the Garwhal by Nanda Devi, in Nepal by Annapurna and Everest.
Further to the north are two great chains: the Zaskar and the Ladakh. Then come the decomposed schists of Tibet as far as the eye can see, an infinity of successive deserts.

Over a depth of a few dozen miles, in an inextricable tangle of narrow valleys, mysterious gorges, moraines, plains and mountains, all types of vegetation grow in stages. Up to 3,000 feet the flora remains tropical. At 7,500 feet the oak disappears and gives place to the sycamore and the sal, which, above 9,000 feet, dominates meadows so rich that, during the summer months, the sheep can eat during the day the grass which has grown during the night. At 11,000 feet there are still a few birches and blue pines. Up to 15,000 feet one finds grass and even flowers.

Beyond that comes the realm of the moss, the realm of the void, where life itself is a perpetual miracle, a brave challenge. Up to 18,000 feet there are still traces of vegetation. While the sea bottom is peopled with strange monsters protected by carapaces, their heads decorated with blind eyes, the last creatures that cling to life on the flanks of these huge mountains are spiders which only admit to defeat above 20,000 feet.

The vast natural reservoirs represented by the Himalayan glaciers give birth to powerful mountain streams: from hence flow the sources of the Ganges.

Here each trickle of water hollows out its tiny gorge of the type which geographers call convex; the slope increases as one nears the bottom. They indicate the regions where erosion is still taking place.

The Himalaya, in common with a great part of Asia and the rest of India, lives in the rhythm of the monsoon. The monsoon is not merely a convenient phenomenon destined to conclude Himalayan stories but also a periodical event which is self-explanatory when one remembers that cold results in strong atmospheric pressure and that heat brings low pressure. According to the laws of elementary physics the air has a tendency to move from the regions of high pressure to those of low pressure. Thus, during the summer
in Asia, the over-heated earth causes low-pressure belts which attract the masses of sea air. The winds laden with moist air coming from the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Bengal assail the continent and bend in their course westwards before hitting the Himalaya chain more powerfully at its extreme east than in its western part. Thus the terrifying tempests of Everest, after raging 1,200 miles over the vast Karakoram glaciers, die on the confines of the Russian Pamirs, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Chinese Turkistan.

In India the monsoon does not arrive, it explodes. For several days it rains. Everyone huddles indoors and waits. Why should one foresee rain since it lasts barely two months before giving place to fine weather, interrupted by very occasional showers which come from the mountains and not from the sea as in the summer? In the plain the monsoon is a long-awaited boon; in the mountains the peasants look anxious as they distinguish its precursory signs: the first rains—the chota barsat. Soon on the flank of steep valleys the earth, turned to liquid mud, will begin to slide, smashing and destroying every living thing. In this way villages disappear, roads and paths are cut, and in one night the torrents will triple in volume, carrying away bridges which have not been dismantled in time, shaking the foundations and causing a host of catastrophes. A supporting wall crumbles, a stony road sinks, a heavy car laden with forty pilgrims disappears into a river without a single one being saved. When winter returns the highest villages—some of them are perched at just over 10,000 feet—are faced with a new peril: avalanches on a Himalayan scale.

Despite such harsh conditions of existence, man has built his villages there since time immemorial.\(^1\) Five hundred years ago the Garwhal was a feudal kingdom dominated by fifty-two castles (garh). But in Central Asia peace is not very durable. A hundred and fifty years ago Gurkhas from Nepal invaded the Garwhal and the Anglo-Nepalese war was

\(^1\) Modern scientific theories locate the appearance of anthropoid apes in the region of the Siwalk Range.
necessary to chase them out. It was an excellent opportunity for the British to appreciate the virtues of the Nepalese soldier, for since that date the export of soldiers has become the principle source of wealth for the rulers of Nepal.

The region for which we were bound is inhabited by the Bhotias, whites of a Mongolian type supposed to be of Tibetan origin. In common with most mountain peoples the Bhotias are robust, upright, honest and evoke great sympathy. They live the most curious life possible, for they live in a part of the globe which experiences simultaneously the rigours of the Arctic and the heat of the tropics. In addition to this they are rather nomadic, and for the same reasons as the nomads themselves. Most of them possess two villages, one situated in the plain and the other in the hills, and to this wealth must be added the tent necessary for their travels. In the month of May the family leaves the village of the plain where each year the fields yield two meagre harvests. As soon as young and old, healthy and ailing, furniture and cattle reach the upland villages the merchants’ caravans set out in their turn. What a sight it is to see arrive in the narrow defiles of the Alaknanda whole families, groups of shepherd merchants watching herds of goats and sheep laden with sacks of tightly woven cloth, which is woven in the warm hours of the day so that it will be even tighter. They contain rice, grain, skins of beasts, borax and wool.\textsuperscript{1} The women who accompany the shepherds are dressed in rustic homespun. They wear a woollen blouse decorated with multi-coloured geometrical designs. Around their necks heavy necklaces of solid silver and red stones... The children, dressed in rags, run about bare-footed; they sometimes look weaklings but are usually bursting with health. The men arrive spinning the wool. This is an art in which all the Garwhalis are past masters. Whatever else they happen to be doing they can still be seen with a distaff in their hands which turns so fast and

\textsuperscript{1} A few years ago the weight of merchandise exchanged between India and Tibet was estimated at 1,000 tons in the region of Garwhal alone.
regularly that one expects to see a mechanical gadget instead of what it actually is: manual skill. They are able to watch their wool with one eye while keeping the other on the ewes of their herd. Here the custom is contrary to that of Europe where the women spin their wool while the men weave. At Mana, 9,600 feet up, in the beaten-earth floor of their courtyards the village women stick stakes which, with a few pieces of wood added, form the looms. The result of their industrious work is a coarse woollen material reminiscent of tweed. They gossip endlessly as they work, and as I watched them that day I had never felt such a desire to understand Hindi, even if only to hear what they were saying about us and know what was making them laugh so much.

When the melting of the snows has freed the passes which at over 15,000 feet lead to the other side of the Himalaya, the Tibetan villages despatch one of their men armed with a heavy stone. Should the barter introduce into Tibet some disease or evil spell which decimates beasts and men, the Garwhalis agree to send back a tribute of gold equivalent to the weight of the stone. After sundry taxes and offerings to the monasteries have been paid, an incessant trade begins which will last throughout the summer.

Each Garwhali merchant has in a Tibetan village—generally Gartok—his hereditary correspondent, his mitra. The contract with a new mitra gives rise to a ceremony primarily religious, but civil to the extent that the word signifies a gay libation. The Indians, of course, are forbidden to drink alcohol, but when you have drunk to the extent of remembering nothing, whoever could level a reproach at you?

In the Garwhal the Tibetans are called Khambas. The Ron Khambas are merchants and the Dulha Khambas are mendicants, not always of the best type. The Tibetan camps are poorer than those of the Garwhalis and can be recognised from afar because they fly flags covered with Buddhist inscriptions. The wind deciphers the fervent mantras—om
manipadme hum—and carried them to the powers of Heaven, thus bringing protection on all those who live in the neighbourhood.

In the village, in the terraced fields, the upkeep of which demands incessant work, they cultivate rice if it will grow well, a kind of millet, barley, lentils and chiles, little red pimentos which look harmless enough but which amply justify the name we gave them: atomic gadgets. Around the village will be found a few fruit trees: apples, mangoes, lemons and even apricots.

The inhabitants of the Bundhyar Valley seem to enjoy good health. We were to learn later that they live winter and summer on a little barley and a lot of apricots which they eat after first drying them.¹ The carved balconies of their houses are weighed down with baskets in which fruit of the colour of old autumnal gold is drying. Beneath the thatched roofs are suspended tree trunks pierced with a hole through which bees come and go. These are the hives which, apart from their honey, bring joy as storks do in other climes. They are a happy people, for in many villages men and women age quickly, wresting a harvest from a soil which has long since been exhausted, a harvest which they have to share with greedy wild beasts, the most terrifying being the wild boar, black bear, leopard, panther and tiger. The peasants face these most savage beasts of the animal kingdom without—or almost without—weapons. The wild boar flee in front of the beaters, the bears are surrounded and attacked with sticks. It is said that in the Danpur jungle women face the bears in single combat with a trident in their left hand and a scythe in their right. When the beast is about to leap they fling the trident into its jaws and kill it with the scythe. It is estimated that in the Garwhal region alone two hundred people fall victim each year to bears and tigers. If one adds that to have one’s fields pillaged by a

¹ On our return we were surprised to find in an evening paper the following headlines: “A new rejuvenation diet on the basis of apricots.” Incidentally it is well known that the principle nourishment of the Tibetans, tsampa—roasted barley flour—is sold by chemists in France for children suffering with rickets.
troop of monkeys is a divine honour one can understand the paradox of this land where the villages with the worst soil—naturally the poorest—are actually the richest, for the farmers have become merchants. The latter leave the care of the fields to their wives. Women of Garwhal, slaves who find only pleasure with your children, how can one describe your lot here on earth? I shall only give one figure. Seventy-five per cent of the suicides are women.¹ We often wondered in this country we were exploring what the word happiness could signify. We were frequently given answers but none was clearer than the one we received one day at Pauri, the administrative capital of Garwhal. We were being entertained by a rich landed proprietor, a very courteous man, a zamindar ruling over vast domains cultivated by peasants, each of whom was indebted to him for some years of work. When we asked him if the peasants of Garwhal were happy he replied: “From very early in the morning to very late at night the people work in order to live. They have no time to be either happy or unhappy.” But in the intelligent eyes of our host could be read a great melancholy. “Unhappiness is only for people of my kind,” he went on. “I had but one son, handsome, intelligent, eager as all of you. But he married a woman who was not of his caste and I cursed him. I threw him out and one day he and that woman committed suicide in Bombay. I have nothing left but my library and my books.” Not a hundred and fifty miles from Delhi he lived in the most remote past and was a victim of this past. When we left him he said: “I am happy to greet in you the representatives of the nation who gave the world the greatest man of all: Napoleon.” Although secretly flattered we had the greatest difficulty in keeping straight faces, and we lowered them suddenly over the lychees and ginger preserves—the highlights of the hospitality offered to us by our melancholy and generous friend.

¹ This figure has been given by S. D. Pant, to whom I am indebted for many details on the life of the Garwhalis, in his remarkable thesis: Social Economy of the Himalayans, 1935.
For anyone who likes to travel the world in an attempt to understand the connection between people and things—where the former go and what happens to the latter—a journey in such a country cannot leave him indifferent. That human beings, members of one of the greatest nations of the world by virtue of its thinkers and philosophers, should be reduced to a life so futile in its bestiality—this is what shook my half-hearted convictions. What does man become, lost in the middle of these vast mountains? What does he think of his lot and the world which surrounds, dominates and crushes him; of the spectacle of the titanic forces of nature, forces that set in motion the glaciers and the avalanches which sweep away whole valleys, falls of stones which light up the mountains with their fires? This grand ballet of stones, wind and snow possesses its god, and it is not surprising that the tallest mountains in the world are more animated by divine presences than anywhere else. It is not for nothing that the Himalaya has a religious aspect and that it has its place in some of those legends which do not live only for children.

Thus the Himalaya is the kingdom of Shiva, the god of rage, destruction, and death, the one who carries away, who terrifies, but also the god of life, dancing, and procreation. The Ganges in the sky is the Milky Way born from Vishnu’s great toe. It falls from the sky onto the Himalaya; Shiva receives it in his tresses of gold, where are born the mountain streams of Garwhal, the sources of the Ganges, which are among the most sacred places of pilgrimage in India. If Shiva is honoured at Kedarnath, Vishnu is the god of Badrinath. “The road which leads to Badrinath is such that it needs ten shepherds to lead nine goats,” say the Garwhalis. However, fifty thousand pilgrims visit it each year and even more every twelfth year when Jupiter enters Aquarius. They walk over the debris of a moraine and then over sloping firns. Water trickles beneath the snowy crust and pierces their bare feet. The temple is at 10,000 feet in the middle of the mountains, dominated by a tooth of ice—
the Nilcanta—one of the names of Shiva. After visiting the temple the pilgrims bathe in the sacred springs which spurt at more than 50° F. into basins hollowed in the rock a few feet above the icy waters of the Alaknanda.

Temples, idols, houses of carved wood, narrow streets paved with stones, cow-headed fountains, saris dyed in vegetable red drying on the walls, artisans beating silver, others who make necklaces and others who strike medals, the crowd whose faith alleviates poverty, the ecstatic visages, the halo of mystery—all this contributes to make this pilgrimage one of the wonders of the high places of the world.

And throughout the whole country each mountain torrent, brook, village, each animal has its place in the religious life. When one crosses a river one must place a modest offering beneath a stone. When one crosses a mountain pass one must add a stone to the cairns on top to banish the demons. And in all the villages temples to Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha and Hanuman, to a hundred divinities alternately terrible and familiar. At Martoli one finds a temple where every year, in the second half of September, ten buffaloes and three hundred goats are sacrificed to the goddess Nanda, to the daughter of the god Himalaya, to the wife of Shiva who is none other than Parvati. A complicated goddess who, in her benevolent aspect as the provider of nourishment, is called Annapurna, but who also possesses a redoubtable aspect under the name of Durga. She is then goddess of war, Destroyer of Men, avid of blood; she is Black Kali, still streaming from her crimes. Such is the goddess Nanda, Nanda Devi, who, in the minds of thousands of millions of people, dwells on the summit of the mountain towards which we were making. Annapurna had just given victory to the most courageous of French mountaineers, but had tried them sorely. What would Nanda Devi, the cruel goddess of the old Indian legends, have in store for us?

T. G. Longstaff, who made some six visits to the snows of the Himalayas, thought that the Garwhal was the most beautiful country in the whole of the Asian uplands;
neither the primitive immensity of Karakoram, he wrote, nor the solitary domination of Everest nor the beauties of the Hindu Kush can be compared with the Garwhal.

If one adds that in the central part of the Himalaya the effects of the monsoon are diminished, one will realise the reasons why the Garwhal has for many years remained the centre of interest for European mountaineers.

In 1830 Traill crossed a 16,500-foot col on the ridge which joins the mass of Nanda Devi to Nanda Kot. In 1855 Schlagintweit brothers made a more methodical exploration because they were geographers, and attempted to climb Kamet. They reached 21,175 feet. In 1883, accompanied by Swiss guides, the English mountaineer, W. Graham, was the first to try and force the natural defences which protect Nanda Devi. In the spring, when trying to make his way up a mountain stream, he was stopped by impassable ravines. Moreover, no one had ever seen the western side of the mountain, and he was not convinced that the route he wanted to take was the best one. In the autumn of the same year he penetrated the gorge by a roundabout path, but once more he was halted. He never saw the summit.

In 1905 the great English mountaineer, Longstaff, in company with the Brocherel brothers and Courmayeur, attacked the mountain from the east and reached a col to which he gave his name. From this vantage point he had a view of the two summits of Nanda Devi and, finding that the descent towards the inner basin was terrifying, gave up his attempt there.

Two years later, in 1907, Longstaff returned to the Garwhal and followed the tracks taken by Graham in 1883. By this roundabout way he penetrated the gorges of Rishi Ganga and on the 12th June, with the Brocherels and the Ghurka Kharbar—an Indian who was already associated with Himalayan conquests—he reached the summit of Trisul, 23,360 feet, at that period the highest peak in the
world to be conquered by man. From this campaign he brought back his passion for the Garwhal with its lofty peaks and captivating valleys, and a dazzling memory which would never die: an aerial pyramid of rocks and ice towered above the thunderous gorges of the Rishi Ganga—the summit of Nanda Devi, towards which he felt that all his efforts must be directed.

In a flash the ascent of Trisul gave the signal for a number of expeditions. Valley after valley of the Garwhal gave up its secrets. In 1910 it was Meade with Pierre Blanc, the guide from Bonneval. In 1911 Doctor Kellas, who swore to return. In 1912 Meade left for the assault of Kamet with Swiss and Italian guides, but the weather was bad. A new attempt in 1913: mountain sickness and a new setback. An attack in 1920 by Kellas and Morshead: the Sahibs in good form but the Bhotias would go no further. So far no one had discovered the qualities of the Sherpas, and Himalayan exploration hung fire. Worn out by his campaigns Kellas died the following year on Tibetan soil, in sight of the strange towers and fortress walls of the Kamp Dzong monastery, in view of Everest. For in Tibet another conquest had just begun which was even more exalting.

On 21st June 1931 the Trisul was no longer the highest peak to be trodden by man; towards three o’clock in the afternoon three Englishmen let their Indian bearer reach the first snowy peak of 25,447 feet.

Shipton, Smythe and Holdsworth arrived in turn to tread the summit of Kamet. Holdsworth smoked his pipe. To the south-east a peak rose on the horizon before disappearing in the clouds: Nanda Devi, the goal to which Shipton was attracted. He attacked it with Tilman in 1934, forcing the gorges of the Rishi Ganga before arriving at an oasis of luxuriant vegetation which he baptised “the sanctuary”. But the monsoon arrived and the two men and their three Sherpas turned back to carry on fruitful explorations in the Garwhal. In the autumn they once more explored the Rishi Ganga.
INTRODUCTION

In 1935 Shipton and Tilman were on Everest but the bad weather prevented them from crossing Shangri La, the north col.

In 1936 the team broke up. Shipton set out once more for Everest while Tilman went to Nanda Devi with six companions, three British and three American. On the 29th August, in blazing sunlight, the eastern peak of Nanda Devi fell away below the horizon. Tilman and Idell sat down in the snow. An hour later they reached a solid snow crest 200 yards long—the summit. “After the first joy of victory we felt a trifle sad that the mountain had succumbed and that the proud head of the goddess had been forced to bow,” wrote Tilman.

It is given to few men to accomplish a new work and to advance into unknown country, country which is marked white on the maps.

In the Himalaya more than elsewhere discoveries have been progressive, and very often the most incomplete achievements bore within them the seeds of the future. Each new expedition profited by the setbacks as well as the successes of its predecessors.

Of this nature was the path which lay ahead of us.
DEPARTURE

For myself everything began in an almost miraculous manner. A member of Paul-Emile Victor's expeditions, I was in the centre of Greenland when the first mail for weeks was dropped to us by parachute. After a travel prospectus advertising ten days in Italy and a traditional summons to the police station, I opened a letter from a dear friend informing me of the Himalayan plan.

As a child, like so many others, I had dreamed of the North Pole, of deserts, and high mountains. For three years already I had lived each summer on the icy desert which covers Greenland, thoroughly enjoying our struggles which were repeated each day and happy, too, in a few exacting friendships.

The 1950 campaign was drawing to a close. We were to return to Europe after accomplishing the first crossing of the 700 miles of ice which separate the Baffin Sea from the Arctic Ocean in a vehicle with caterpillar wheels; but this foray which began in luxury and comparative mechanised comfort was to finish in grand style with three days' dangerous travel over the unknown land of east-coast fjords.

One adventure had finished and another was about to begin. I do not very much like this word adventure; it is a word that has degenerated, but what can one use to replace it?

A bare ten months elapsed. In Paris, just before our departure, leaning on a café table, Duplat remarked to me: "You see how life turns out? Last year both of us were
reserves on the Annapurna expedition and this time we’re off. The whole thing is a gamble. It’s magnificent!”

It was a bright dawn over Le Bourget. A few friends whom the earliness of the hour did not discourage came to see us off. It is at such moments that one appreciates one’s friends best. The aircraft was empty. My travelling companion was a stocky Breton—a merchant-navy skipper rejoining his boat at Saigon. The eager attention of the air hostess did not prevent me from sleeping, because nothing makes you sleep so well as flying through space. About eight o’clock in the evening we flew over Cairo, the Paris of the Near East.

When the roar of the motors died down, the door opened, and a fat suspicious-looking Egyptian stared at us for a long time before making up his mind to spray us with D.D.T. It is true one cannot take too many precautions. In this respect countries really lack logic, for the following day when we left nobody would come and disinfect us. When we took off it was all blue and grey. A few minutes of flight and beneath our wings we could see the Suez Canal separating two deserts. I stuck my nose against the window-pane, which the engine caused to vibrate. What grandeur! Nothing can better symbolise the work of intelligence and human power than this canal seen from the air. The yellow-green shadows were outlined beneath turquoise-blue water. A hundred ships lay there peacefully in line, waiting. On the shore stood rows of strange corn stacks; reservoirs filled with the harvest of the desert—heavy black oil.

Our aircraft cleaved the thin air and for many hours we saw nothing but pale deserts and sand dunes cut by vague tracks.

About eleven o’clock a torch of flame and smoke showed up on the horizon. Cars sped past throwing up the dust in their wake. Somewhere in Saudi Arabia a petrol well was on fire. The wireless operator on board, Falloux, was an old acquaintance. Over the sands we continued a conversation
we had begun over Greenland when he was navigating the aircraft which had come to drop a few tons of petrol. It was
good fun, he said. Huge plateaus of red rocks and torn
crests sped past: the Pirate Coast. That evening we slept
in the stifling air of the Pakistan capital, Karachi.

Another three hours’ flight above a salt desert dotted
with dusty bushes. Here and there a meagre cultivation,
fields vaguely outlined on the ochre soil. Then at the very
edge of the desert at the bend of a majestic river alternately
chaotic and cut with straight avenues lay Delhi, the age-old
capital of India.

It was 22nd May. The heat was stifling. A grey lizard
climbed up the window. I discovered only one method of
struggling against my torpor: to leave the bath full and
plunge into it ten times a day. In this cellule of a vast hotel
where everything reminded one of an English club I found
it difficult to imagine that I was in India.
Chapter Two

The Team Assembles at New Delhi

It is 23rd May. The whole team is here at last; a group dominated by one man: Roger Duplat. When I speak of him, I shall try to describe him exactly as he was and not as another person whom memory transforms and magnifies. There is no need to do so.

Restless, with a body that seems much weaker than it actually is, almost skimpy, it is difficult to see in him the first-class mountaineer. He belongs to that generation of climbers whose vocation began during the war years. In 1947 he was elected a member of the Haute Montagne group at the same time as Jean-Paul Charlet, James Couttet and Louis Lachenal, the future conqueror of Annapurna. For fifteen years he has been mountain climbing, and what at the outset had been a hobby has become a burning passion. Anyone who has once seen his green eyes flash in a face more animated by thought than effort, will never forget that flash, that mixture of sternness and timidity, betraying the man of iron will and the privilege of a tempestuous inner life. When he speaks his voice, relaxing for a moment, knows how to rush, to come to the point, to stress, to relax once more, to emphasise his opinion, to illuminate, illustrate and impose it.

Feline in his swift movements, his hardness is enchanting and captivates more than it alienates. When he feels the need to charm, his tortured face lights up with a smile which is positively childlike. He can become a mocker but still remain the man with the sensitive smile, the man aware of true values, who will know how to find words to describe
The porters struggle up with the baggage
Camp II: The Sherpas' Tent
hours in camp, hours spent on a rocky traverse in the darkness on a mountain fraught with noises and mystery: “Hours which are too short, hours which one perceives with passionate seriousness, hours which doubtless have made you take a giant step forward in the discovery of your love, hours which are very beautiful to our faith.”

Gilbert Vignes, radiantly healthy and twenty-three years old; at first sight one can sense the calm eagerness of a self-confident athlete. With his tousled hair, laughing and attentive air, powerful and measured movements, a bright eye and a serene face, Gilbert always seems to be in search of some discovery. A printer by trade and very skilful with his fingers, tenacious in the extreme, he loves to make things. A Lyonnais by adoption he originally came from the Ariège, and has retained the solidity and frankness of his native mountains. He is a man of great climbs, of climbs which demand cold determination rather than a taste for exquisite pleasure. He was one of the first who dared to attack the west face of the Drus, an inhuman granite wall on which he bivouacked for six nights. His modesty is disarming. If you make him tell the story of one of his difficult climbs he will do it with great simplicity, quite surprised at himself.

Why did he go in for mountain climbing? What a question! One might as well ask why rivers flow to the sea. He has no enemies, but paradoxically enough he adores arguments and disputes. Moreover, he is always in agreement with his opponent. Although he is as obstinate as the donkeys in the land of Ariège one can always come to an agreement because Gilbert’s deep secret is his good nature.

I am certain that when he left Lyon he met friends to whom he did not even mention that he was leaving for the Himalaya, simply for fear of arousing their envy.

1 Quotation taken from the writings of Roger Duplat, as will be all those of him found later in this book.
Louis Gevril is the veteran and in this title figures as the wise man in a rather turbulent team. He knows the Alps by heart, all the mountain masses, all the crests, all the peaks and a great number of the very stiff climbs. Point by point he has everything it requires, in the eyes of our British friends, to be a perfect Himalayan climber: methodical, with a talent for organisation, he played a leading role in our preparations before departure. Of an inventive turn of mind, he has drawn up a general list of our material which is so perfect that he is the only one who knows how to find his way about it; this has gradually diminished its utility. With all the insolence of his twenty-two years Paul Gendre calls Gevril “the old man” and he in revenge has baptised Paul “the bumpkin”.

Gendre is the baby of the team. A long lanky fellow, he seems made for climbing, and in his climbing, too, can be seen the insolence of his twenty-two years. Tender, sentimental and rather romantic, the best of comrades, he is the absolute opposite of what one imagines a tough mountaineer who never gets scared to be. And yet his greatest pleasure is derived from the most daring climbs.

Louis Dubost is twenty-four, and physically he is almost as well endowed as Vignes, with whom he has been on many trips. Short-haired, inclined to gesticulate, he is always playing jokes and has an astonishing facility for being able to amuse. In an expedition this is worth its weight in gold. He tries to hide that he has a terrific desire to be the first up, to be on the first assault rope. Thanks to his gestures he can make himself understood by all those who do not know his language—Sherpas, coolies, V.I.P.s, everyone stares at him open-mouthed. Thus in four months he never bothered to learn a word of English or a word of Hindi. This is not really surprising, for he speaks and never listens.

Alain Barbezat, twenty-eight years old, is a chemistry student and belongs to the type of taciturn mountaineers. He is in fact a very fine example of them. He is so calm in every situation that there is no doubt he is perfectly suited
to live in the east. Moreover, he grows sunburnt very quickly and can pass for an Indian. A pair of small, wrinkled-up eyes give one the impression that he is laughing. Perhaps he is. Who knows?

To the six climbers must be added the inevitable slaves: the doctor and the camera man. Payan is head surgeon in a nursing home attached to a Lyon hospital. He did not hesitate for a moment before the inconvenience represented for him by such a long absence. Not a great mountaineer but a man of the mountains, he spent the war in the Alps with Lionel Terray. This gives him plenty of outlet—to tell war stories which I know by heart, for Payan never grows tired of recalling them. Beneath a rather sceptical and blase exterior which doctors like to affect Payan is full of freshness and everything for him is an opportunity for discovery and contemplation... to bend over men rather than over stones.

Apart from myself, all the members of the expedition are from Lyon. This entails, besides a particular mode of speech and a certain complicity, the duty of regretting, whatever the moment or the place, the absence of Beaujolais and hot sausage. Ascetic mountaineers may exist but they certainly do not come from Lyon.

I think we form a good team. The dominating factor is a certain friendship and the mutual esteem we feel for each other. On our departure we were all convinced that our companions could not have been better chosen. The members of the assault ropes discovered the art of mountaineering under the leadership of Duplat. Thanks to him they carried out stiffer and stiffer climbs each year and for them he is, to an incredible degree, the chief.

These are the men then who before leaving for the mountain have quite a lot of questions to solve in the Delhi jungle.

The Hotel Cecil, whose proprietor is secretary of the Himalayan Club, lies to the north of old Delhi which
one has to cross to reach New Delhi where are to be found the embassies, administrative buildings and the banks. Two steps from the hotel the street is swallowed up beneath an arch cut out of a thick red stone wall: the Kashmir Gate.

The India of shadow and light, of wealth and poverty, leaps to the eye. A metropolis of booths, shops, covered markets, cracked buildings newly repainted, stalls skilfully erected, sellers of fizzy drinks, jewellers huddled even more close to each other than those of Florence.

A strange blood flows in the arteries of the old town. Plump Indians step out of gleaming Cadillacs. Women stroll along with a child clutching to their fleshless thighs. Saddhus covered with ashes draw an enthusiastic crowd. A leper begs for alms. A Jain adept, his face hidden with gauze which will prevent him from killing and swallowing some fly which might be one of his reincarnated ancestors; Sikhs, whose religion obliges them never to cut their hair, with a chignon on the top of their skulls wrapped up in a white handkerchief . . .

I must admit that I love to stroll among these strange crowds, to look at some fleeting visage, to explore the banks of this river of life, the monotony and extravagance of which gives one an occasional glimpse into its soul. I loathe the picturesque and in these brilliant-coloured carnival-like crowds I like to catch the eyes of those whom overwhelming poverty has not managed to defeat. I want to see men without despair, men who know hunger and who preserve it as a jewel which you prize above all else, your intelligence of the world, your world of intelligence.

In the maze of complicated terraces another level of life displays itself without shame almost similar to that of the street. Above the rounded walls, above the bamboo mats, minarets waft their prayers to Heaven.

The overwhelming vastness of the greatest mosque in the world, vaster than that of Cairo, more extensive than the Ka'aba at Mecca. The almost evanescent lightness of its white marble domes. . . .
Further off to the left, walls of red clay hide possibly the most incredible monument that man has ever contrived to build. There the Mongolian tyrants reigned over India. In marble halls faintly lit by lacets of stone which allowed the scorching gleam of daylight to percolate, the Emperor of Emperors gave audience. From this palace issued orders as cruel as thunderbolts, keeping this vast country under a heavy veil of common poverty. How many men died for this palace which today other men have let fall into decay? And yet how could it have been otherwise? Five minutes from the red fort a plot of waste land shelters refugees who live in the most wretched poverty of all.

A hundred yards away from there masons are busy round a building in bright concrete. In graceful procession they bend beneath baskets full of cement. There lies the future. A wooden board announces that a laboratory of higher physics is being built. "From the vermin to the atom bomb", what a magnificent slogan!

The streets broaden out and grow cleaner. I was approaching the commercial centre of New Delhi: the double ring of arcades of Connaught Place which house the elegant cosmopolitan shops. Saris of gold lamé, mink capes, white dinner jackets rub shoulders with extravagant antique shops where an eager salesman offers you a cup of tea and makes you admire a piece of sculptured ivory furniture before selling you an ash tray for one rupee. Busy book shops. One of them sells cheaply sumptuously bound books which have come direct from the U.S.S.R., while another offers magazines, no less rich, stamped U.S.A. Which of these appeals to the Indian's dignity?

A ridiculous note: a half-torn poster vaunts the merits of French aircraft which have long since become obsolete.

In the shadow of the colonnades the merchants squat before bottles whose skilfully mixed contents are sold by little portions on fresh leaves. In New York chewing gum and in Paris hot chestnuts. Here a quid of blood-coloured betel which blackens the teeth of one Indian out of three.
In Connaught Place the idlers who hope to make a profit out of the presence of foreigners lie in wait. Another hideous beggar, then a child whose candid smile entices a few annas from my pockets. Alarming people leap on the traveller and catch hold of him with tremendous energy. The fortune tellers... One of them tried to convince me by brandishing testimonials signed by the best-known people from the diplomatic corps. One of these was written on a paper with a Figaro heading. Could a special envoy from the famous newspaper have attached some value to the revelation of a man so devoid of Christian charity that when I thought I had managed to shake him off, he began to chase me roaring: "You will soon die during a trip!"

I pushed open the door of a café decorated with a neon sign. In the vast two-storeyed hall young people sat at tables drinking boiling or iced tea and even the universal Coca-Cola. One of my neighbours entered into conversation with us. I was in the Dupont Latin and the Café de Flore of New Delhi. Some students had gathered and were discussing eagerly, making as much noise as a host of parrots. A few boxes, empty at the moment, had been built round the walls. Our new friend told me that they were reserved for women, who were forbidden by custom to sit alone in a public place. A few yards away was a bazaar of wooden poles with planks three feet from the ground.

"What is the reason for that?" I asked.

"The monsoon, sir."

At a later date we should see Connaught Place, the heart of Delhi, after a violent rain. The Indian capital has few gutters, and the soil is waterproof. Thus the vast square was transformed into a lake on which the cars threw up sprays of water, where the tongas¹ risked themselves timidly and where in all simplicity the children of the quarter bathed among the passing cars.

Connaught Place is a link between the old Delhi and the new. The old town is slowly dying; already its monuments

¹ Little horse-drawn carts.
are dead and at each step round the city one comes across the remains of cities which once prospered. India is a country where the towns know how to die.

In the distance south-east of Connaught Place lies New Delhi. Long avenues bordered with trees hide houses covered with terraces, still broader avenues, fountains, everything converging towards the most exotic buildings of red clay that one can imagine: in the middle of a vast empty space an austere monument combining the pomp of the law courts and an oriental orgy. Nothing could be better suited to house the great departments of the General Government of Independent India. But the magnificent arrangement of the streets cannot replace the agitation of life. New Delhi is a soulless and heartless town.

The long pavements are shadowed with cherry trees. Let the fallen cherries rot. If some poor creature tries to eat a few he will experience the policeman’s truncheon and the insults of the arrogant guardians who, with guns over their shoulders, patrol these splendid gardens.

I have always been a somewhat eccentric traveller and I wanted to cross Delhi on foot. My throat was dry and I was soon covered with red dust; the sweat stuck my shirt to my shoulders. I was about to ask the way, but as I turned into an avenue I read on a copper plaque which had just recently been polished: “Ambassade de France.”
Chapter Three

Clear the Decks for Action

Duplat was waiting for me in the hall of the Embassy where we were to be received by M. Daniel Lévi, the French Ambassador. He welcomed us in his huge office, and with a smile in his astonishingly young blue eyes knew quickly how to put us at our ease.

"Have you seen Maurice Herzog and Lachenal recently?" he asked. "How are they? Will they be able to climb again?"

Duplat told of the afternoons we had spent at Herzog's bedside, gossiping cheerfully, and of others when, instead of dreaming of mountains and discussing the latest rumours of the Chamonix Valley, we were forced to look at the dreary performances on early television.

"We have the best possible recollections of your Annapurna colleagues here," said the Ambassador, "and I'm sure it will be the same with your team. I attach the greatest importance to the propaganda which will result from your presence here. I have had to use a great deal of influence to obtain the necessary permits, and the vagueness in which you left me as to the exact date of your arrival did not make my task very easy. You will soon see that things are very complicated here. There is trouble in Nepal. In Tibet no one can say what will happen tomorrow. We have many friends here but for others the presence of strangers in a frontier region is still disturbing. And above all, never forget that you are in the East. Distrust yourselves rather than those with whom you will have to deal."
CLEAR THE DECKS FOR ACTION

The conversation went on for a long time while a silent bearer in a white turban brought in iced lemonade.

Then we were taken to the office of Henri Dumont, the attaché who was in charge of our affairs. He was tall, lithe, an obvious sportsman, and he welcomed us in the most friendly way.

It was not long before he produced a thick file with Lyon marked in large letters on the cover. He must have done a considerable amount of work before our arrival; how many people must he have telephoned or written to in order to obtain the entrance, duty free, of our 3 tons of luggage?

But that day we had urgent new problems to solve. Two sleeping-bags had been held up by the customs. He would take me there on the following day. The Post Office had reported the arrival of a watch, but in this case, too, permission had to be obtained from the customs. Duplat would have to look after the most important questions: see whether our monies had been transferred as arranged to buy provisions; see Mr. Naggar, the representative of France Presse (a great Nimrod—that morning he was hunting antelope) to try and collect some cartridges for our guns; see the military attaché because we should like a liaison officer from the Indian Army to accompany us. We had to get ordnance maps, and since it was the question of a frontier region where the most insignificant documents were apt to be considered top secret, we had to draw up a regular plan of battle. Gevril had prepared a list of objects to be bought: alcohol, rice, sugar, canvas jeans for the approach journey, mosquito nets and, on the express advice of Maurice Herzog, umbrellas. A press cutting told us that petrol was scarce in Garwhal so we took our own. Where could we buy jerry-cans? Untiringly Dumont telephoned in all directions and the work was quickly allocated. Barbezat wanted to meet a specialist of Himalayan botany who could not be found in spite of all our efforts.

That evening the French colony in Delhi invited us to dinner, and we set out in little groups through the town,
exhausted by the heat but happily surprised at so much consideration.

At eleven o’clock we returned to the hotel. Duplat was still up. For several hours he had been writing to our committee, checking the lists and running through the expense estimates.

During the days we spent at Delhi we never relaxed for a moment.

“Your jerry-cans look fine,” said Vignes.

“What’s wrong with them?” asked Dubost.

“You’re a bright lad, the holes are stopped up with soap.”

“If I ever find that damned merchant again in the suq near the mosque! I’d go there this evening but I have a date to get the cartridges.”

“All right, Jean can go.”

And each of us set out for the town.

We had waited three-quarters of an hour at the customs with Dumont and the eventual conversation was icy.

“Sir, on the telephone you agreed, and I was delighted to come down and thank you.”

“Yes, but you must understand that the person in charge of the matter told me that . . .”

“Well, 3 tons of material have been admitted free of duty. You’re not going to refuse to let through two sleeping-bags and a watch?”

“But the law, you know . . .”

We were chivvied from office to office. Dumont was getting impatient and his speech was becoming dangerously excited. The man from the East bowed before this western anger.

“You must excuse me,” said the official, “but our country is still young. It’s hardly three years old.”

“All the more reason not to complicate simple matters. You haven’t three centuries of bureaucracy behind you,” cried Dumont.

It took us half a day to collect our sleeping-bags. As regards the watch, it was a long way from Besançon to
Delhi. The customs refused the authorisation, but two days later to our surprise a postman delivered it.

"My chief told me to hand you this object because there's so much writing on the packet that only your address is legible. Sign for it, please."

"Long live India and the customs officials!" said Dumont.

At last we received the last of our necessary permits: the inner-border-line pass. In plain language, a safe conduct to the interior frontier. As soon as the Sherpas arrived we should leave Delhi.

One morning the Sherpas arrived. They had come from Darjeeling, but in the capital these mountain lords looked like lost peasants. Sirdar Tensing, their leader, has the physique of a young juvenile lead, a brilliant smile and a glance that was both candid and arrogant. He speaks very good English. The oldest of the Sherpas, Panzi, could also make himself understood. A member of the Himalayan Club, Professor Rohoul who, like the Sherpas, is a Buddhist, was our interpreter. We stared intently at these men who were to be for us more than simple companions.

Their bearing denoted calm dignity and rock-like solidity. We confirmed orally their conditions of service. The Sherpas were apart and we faced them in company with Rohoul and soon afterwards with Tensing. The first contact was swiftly made; it was rather on the solemn side but this did not displease Duplat. Was not this moment which bound our fates so closely together a grave one? They placed themselves in our hands and we entrusted our lives to them.

"You, Da Norbu," said Rohoul, "have already taken part in two small expeditions, but you are strong. You are now going to take part in a big expedition. Burra Sahib offers you 120 rupees a month. Do you agree?"

1 Broadly speaking the Indians are followers of Hinduism, a Pantheon dominated by Vishnu: 240,000,000 followers; or Mohammedans, particularly in Pakistan: 80,000,000 followers. The Tibetans and a large proportion of Nepalese, including the Sherpas, are Buddhists (followers of Buddha Gotama Sakyanuni).

2 Burra Sahib equals the big chief and is the name usually given to the leader of the expedition.
“Yes,” replied Da Norbu, leaning his head on his right shoulder according to Indian custom.

Little Angdawa, with the sad and smiling face, replied in a long sentence which was translated for us as follows:

“He says that he is in full agreement and whatever sum the Sahibs give he will go into the mountains with them.”

Such, then, were the men with whom we should be on the rope, men who were ready to serve us to the end and who for this hellish job earned something like £10 a month. The tariffs are fixed in the Himalayan Journal: Big expedition 100–120 rupees a month. Food, lodging and free cigarettes—ten a day per man (the cheapest brand). The expeditions have to agree to pay compensation in case of accidents or death: £10 for a broken arm or leg, £35 in case of blindness, or in the case of death when the man is a bachelor. This is the price of a Sherpa’s life. And the pamphlet goes on: “There are often complaints that foreign expeditions spoil the bearers by paying exaggerated sums. For example, £14 a month to a sirdar in 1950. A real scandal . . . particularly as we guessed the nature of the particular expedition and knew what a superhuman effort the Sherpas and their sirdar must have furnished.”

Apart from Tensing, their chief, the names of our eight Sherpas were Panzi, Sarki, Angdawa, Da Norbu, Pa Norbu, Gyalzen, Da Namgyal. The three first mentioned were on the Annapurna Expedition. That day their faces were impassive and smiling.

When the ceremony was over I took a good look at Da Norbu whom Duplat had allocated to me to carry my camera.

“Well, Roger, I shall get on all right with my fellow. Look, he seems to be hunchbacked!”

“Don’t be difficult. In any case, at altitudes he will probably unbend.”

Dubost’s and Jean’s rooms were transformed into a shop in which guns and provisions of all sorts were piled. Duplat assembled us all there.
“Well,” he said, “we’re all set. Tomorrow we take the train to Kotwara. This afternoon I laid on a complete carriage for the equipment. The only thing we’re lacking is the maps. Languepin will remain at Delhi for one more day and will rejoin us with Dumont. I’ve written to the committee and they’ve given me a free hand. They have adopted the decision you knew I would make: the first objective to be carried by the two men who are fittest.”

Vignes and Dubost exchanged glances.

“Normally,” Duplat went on, “the monsoon should not disturb us, but we have no time to lose. There’s only one thing that counts now, and that is to put on speed.”

The whole team was open-mouthed; the white walls, the ventilator which threshed the damp air, the green plants of the Hotel Cecil had disappeared from our thoughts. In a few words Duplat had conjured up ridges of snow, a simple world of rocks and blue sky, with men battling their way into the wind. Although for a moment we had been caught by the octopus tentacles of the city, we rediscovered in our hearts our great desire . . .

That evening, while we slept, Duplat remained awake beneath the light of a lamp round which huge moths flew. His silhouette enhanced by the harsh light, he wrote long letters to those who had remained behind at Lyon, to the people who had arranged this great trip, and to those to whom, in hours lived in the darkness and sunshine of the mountains, he had confided his dreams.

That evening he perceived his thoughts were in the recent past, and his conviction, illuminated by a kind of scruple, guided his hand as he wrote: “We shall be victorious, I am convinced, and I shall close by simply asking you that should misfortune occur, to accept the difficult task of not allowing anyone to cast a slur on us. Forgive me for saying this to you, but woe to the conquered! This is only an eventuality: never have the team or I been so strong and reasonably confident.”

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25th May. The whole expedition dined this evening at the French Embassy. The team was not lacking in glamour for we were better provided with mountain gear than with tropical dinner jackets. As a result of a complicated system of borrowing, each of us at least found a white shirt and a tie. The Ambassador received us with such kindness that we did not know how to thank him. How different everything was here as a result of a simple official support. Everyone gossiped freely—that means to say that Barbezat said nothing, Duplat was excited, Gevril related his memories, Gendre his plans, Vignes uttered three words to every dozen of Dubost's, while Payan and I listened to M. Christian Belle, First Secretary of the Embassy, who told us a thousand things about the India of today, which is certainly very different from the India of olden times.

To be truthful we rustics from Chamonix were rather at a loss at dinner parties where the cutlery, bearing the arms of the Republic, was much in evidence. The finger bowls caused some moments of hesitation and anxiety.

"By the next expedition we shall be absolutely house-trained," said Gendre.

Ella Maillard, famous for her journeys in Central Asia, arrived early in the evening. She has just come from Katmandu, the capital of Nepal. Ahead of the press she told us that Tibet has signed an agreement with the People's China (27th May 1951). Her southern neighbour is in an uproar and there were riots in Katmandu yesterday. The King, whose dynasty has been kept in the background for a hundred years by the Ranas, wants to take up the reins of power once more. The plainsmen are opposed to the mountain folk. The political parties are influencing the crowds. Will light come from the north or the south, from Tibet or India? And what about the people who are suffering from a great famine? Not from lack of provision but, ludicrously enough, by shortage of transport.

Through the open windows the heavy perfumes of the Delhi night entered the brightly lit room. And while Ella
Maillard, whose fund of stories was inexhaustible, spoke of Nepal, a lizard—which Jean-François, the Ambassador’s young son, has baptised Louis XIV—wandered over the ceiling.

It is wonderful this evening to be a Frenchman. Tomorrow we shall leave civilisation. When we said farewell the handshakes we exchanged were grave.

Outside a warm mist hid the stars. We returned home in our cars in silence.
Chapter Four

AT THE OTHER END OF THE WORLD: 
THE HIMALAYA

An Indian station! What an incredible sight. The central station of old Delhi is a real Indian anthropological museum. Every race and every custom can be seen there in a teeming cauldron of life. A peasant with heavy silver bracelets on her ankles suckled a screaming newborn baby. A crowd had gathered round a tiny fire where chapattis were roasting. Men with faces the colour of clay were dressed in rags. An old man covered with ashes, staring vacantly into space, his forehead marked with Vishnu’s two bars, was squatting on the ground. How long would he sit there? A very young girl with a golden star in her nostril was rocking a child. Was she the mother or the sister?

A lean cow with a garland of flowers round its neck wandered slowly forward, while long supple hands caressed its muzzle.

An army of coolies dressed in red cotton dealt with this disorder somewhat uncouthly. With a few yells, stressed by a great whirling of their leather straps, they carved out a path for us. A man lay there asleep on the concrete platform.

“But he’s stark naked!” said Gendre.

“And he’s dying of hunger!” added Payan.

The living skeleton came to life and moved out of the way with infinitely slow movements, helped by a six-year-old boy with blue-ringed eyes. He had no strength left

1 The three great Indian deities are: Brahma, remote and inaccessible, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, simultaneously the destroyer and the giver of life.
to beg and did not even smile when I shamefacedly gave him a rupee which had remained in the bottom of my pocket. When he discovered that it was really a whole rupee, he began to weep . . .

The Embassy car kept returning with a new load of luggage. A Sikh ticket collector looked flabbergasted at this performance. He was not mistaken: he saw pass before his eyes foreign Sahibs laden with enormous packages. We had not spoken, but we had all been struck with the same idea: to show our Sherpas that they were not our servants and that we had every intention of doing our share of the work.

Da Norbu caught on at once and grabbed hold of a chest weighing 125 pounds which he flung lightly into the air. At this rhythm our ton of equipment was quickly loaded into the dining-car so that we should not be obliged to leave our luggage, and so that the Sherpas could remain with us. A bearer brought in a zinc bucket full of ice which we hoped would cool us a little. Suddenly a comical thought struck me: how different this carriage was from the third-class carriages which until then had carried us towards the mountains. The train was about to leave. It would take the whole night to cover the 150 miles to Kotwara, the last village of the plain.

I remained on the platform saying a last farewell to my companions, who were all bubbling with joy at the idea that they would soon be in the mountains.

On the following day I at last procured the exceedingly rare ordnance maps and got ready to leave with Dumont, who was to accompany us on the initial stages. He was relying on his car to enable us to catch up the main party.

We left Delhi at three o'clock in the morning and crossed the Jumna, the sacred river which runs parallel to the Ganges for 600 miles. On the previous day we had already visited this quarter—a strange suburb of small monasteries built by the water's edge. Shores covered with log piles for the burning ghats, muddy-coloured water filled with all
manner of repulsive debris, but water considered beneficent by true believers. . . .

It was pitch dark, and the great spectacle of the Indian highway began. At first a long procession of men and women carrying cans of milk of all shapes and sizes . . .

"It must be very clean, that milk! I can understand why Payan forbade us to drink any."

Dumont did not answer. He was watching the contortions of his front wheels. Here they call a narrow strip of tarred surface raised about ten inches above two strips of soil, the great highway. As Gendre said yesterday: "The pavement is in the middle of the road and the cars borrow it." To pass or to overtake was a rather impressive operation for a neophyte like myself. The pedestrians gradually gave place to the bicycles of milkmen supplying the capital of India. The headlights lit up a thousand green reflections—the eyes of animals. Graceful antelopes who melted into the night, monkeys who vanished in a flash among the trees, stray cows, buffaloes pulling carts on which whole families were piled. Some camels were harnessed to big carriages, whose silk-draped cabins sheltered rich peasants on their way to market. We were speeding northwards, and day soon broke. Villages followed each other in quick succession. At last we came to a dilapidated notice-board: "Ganges Crossing Closed." It was the beginning of summer. The Himalayan snows were melting and the waters were rising. Soon the bridges would be out of action. The only means of communication with the north would be the railway bridge.

"It's odd," said Dumont, "but I telephoned yesterday to the Automobile Club and they told me that the pontoon bridge was still functioning."

I looked at the map and the next bridge was 40 miles away.

"That's typical of India," said Dumont, who was rather blasé after serving six years in the Far East.

The road suddenly disappeared and gave way to a bog. An arrow directed us to a sinuous path leading to a station
and then to a village with such narrow streets that the merchants folded up their booths to let us pass. There was a fair on. The women were covered with jewels and jostled each other round primitive ironmongeries.

At last we came to a town of some importance—Meerut—and a policeman who babbled a few words of English to rescue us.

“No,” he explained to us, “the bridge here is cut but you can cross 40 miles further south.”

“But we’ve just come from there and the bridge was closed.”

“It’s only Monday and it won’t be closed until the middle of the week.”

What else could we do but turn back?

The road, a good one this time, skirted villages, the earth walls of which protected the animals and probably also the inhabitants. Some vultures were attacking the remains of a sacred cow which no believer would have dared to touch. The burning air was filled with dust and we had to make the greatest effort to remain awake.

“There it is!”

“What?”

“The signpost.” We drove past it as far as a village where the inhabitants were weaving osier mats. The water could not be far away. At a crossroads twenty buses had stopped. We asked their drivers for information but with no success. So much the worse. We must press on.

The track was now of grey sand and only two plank rails prevented us from sinking in. A first arm of dirty water was crossed by a ford and finally we came to a pontoon bridge around which coolies were already working to dismantle it. We had crossed the Ganges. An old soldier who spoke English explained to us that on the following day the bridge would be cut and the notice-boards had been changed a little in advance.

We had been driving for twelve hours and we were only 60 miles from Delhi. More fortified villages enclosed with
mud walls. A leper came towards us ringing his little bell.

It was almost dark when we arrived in Kotwara. A hirsute beggar told us that the Sahibs had already left on two trucks. Where were we to sleep that night? The man showed us to a hotel . . . a hut full of filth and so cluttered with rags that we recoiled, revolted by the acrid stench. We were told that there was a bungalow belonging to the Department of Waters and Forests about 300 yards outside the village. The door was locked and the man who could have given us permission could not be found.

"This is a nice business, I must say. We are well in the soup."

"What's the trouble?" asked Dumont.

"Oh, nothing, except that the others have gone on and we have no provisions and no gear. I haven't a thing except my Rolleiflex and 80 pounds of photographic equipment."

"But you've got a sleeping-bag, and so have I. And I've got some provisions: two thousand cigarettes and two bottles of whisky."

"Ah, that makes things quite different. Where are they?"

 Providentially a young man came up who spoke English and with great politeness offered to show us the town. The local grocer dug out from overladen shelves, bottles of penicillin tablets, a few tins of food, condensed milk, sardines, and even a tin of pineapples.

In the shadow of the shops where copper pots were piled up—the local speciality—wireless sets broadcast Indian music, which is dreadfully monotonous to European ears.

No one to be seen on our return to the bungalow.

"Have you any idea what you look like?" I asked.

"What about you?" replied Dumont.

We were covered with a mixture of dust and sweat, so we went for a bathe in the lukewarm river. The sun disappeared and at the same moment swarms of mosquitoes began to attack us. It was a good thing we had brought some quinine.
Tired of waiting we arranged our sleeping-bags on the verandah of the bungalow and this sufficed for the custodian of the place—the chokidar—to take pity on us and open his master's house without his consent. The following day we got up at five o'clock in the morning to catch the Kotwara-Chamoli bus.

30th May. "After you!" What a host of useless courtesies to establish who should step first into a bus the like of which we would not leave for the next twenty-four hours. It was a very odd vehicle. My first is a chassis fifteen years old, my second a wooden box which began its career as a horse bus, my whole a bus originally planned to carry fifteen people, but which finally carries three dozen. Thirty of them are pressed together on the back seats of the compartment while behind the chauffeur six privileged, so-called first-class passengers know the joys of an imitation-leather seat. The road, with enormous ruts on each bend, was just wide enough to let us pass. It climbed the side of a hill into a pine wood and then wound its way round hills covered with crops. We reached 9,000 feet. As far as the eye could see the earth was sculptured with tiny terraces where at the cost of enormous effort peasants, even poorer than those in the plain, cultivated rice. The halts were innumerable and we drank tcha in nearly every village, where it was served boiling hot in metal cups. The chauffeur had to wrestle with his steering-wheel. A dozen times the back wheels skidded heavily. To our right the mountains and to our left the slope, and far in the distance, perhaps 3,000 feet below, a mountain stream . . .

Dumont stared at the steering-wheel and I followed suit. We did not exchange a word. My friendly next-door neighbour told us the story of a bus full of pilgrims which left the road some distance from the place we now were.

"And what happened?"
"It fell into the ravine."
"Were there any survivors?"
"Oh, no; there were some wounded but the tigers got there before the rescuers."

We were in the Kumaon hills, the haunt of the man-eating tigers. Yes, man-eaters!

At midday we stopped for an hour at Pauri, the capital of Garwhal, where we changed buses. We set out again. Dumont stared at the steering-wheel and so did I.

"Well," I said, "at least this one hasn’t got a play of a complete turn of the wheel."

About five o’clock in the evening, after two hours of continual hairpin bends, the road started to descend abruptly. The man sitting in front of me placed his joined hands to his forehead to salute the river we could see in the distance. It was one of the sources of the sacred river Ganges, and contains the miraculous waters of the Alaknanda which flow at the foot of Badrinath, the holy city.

Twenty minutes later we reached the little city of Srinagar where we were to spend the night.

Two coolies seized our luggage and Dumont went in search of the police officer to arrange for us to stay in the local bungalow. One of his superiors happened to be in the office and invited us to tea. His wife and his son, a brazen child with a brilliant row of teeth and impassive eyes, came to meet us. Satisfied with his job, our host painted for us the advantages of his post. His wife, to whom he did not introduce us, remained in the background and hardly uttered a word. The superintendent looked with great disdain at his subordinate, the police officer who had found us lodgings. These providential bungalows are to be found all along the roads and are the only possible accommodation for a traveller who does not want to go completely native.

Our police officer returned.

"Have you got a lot of work to do?" we asked him.

"Oh, no, I have a quiet job here. The mountain folk are honest and do not know how to dissimulate. In Rajputana, the village I come from, you had to beat people and take

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their money away from them before they would tell you the truth.”

“But what does this village live on? There isn’t very much land.”

“We have many silversmiths who sell jewels to the pilgrims, but they would not sell them to you because you are not Indians. The majority of the men in the village are professional soldiers in Gurkha regiments. They have fought everywhere—even in France in the first World War—and they are magnificent soldiers. They send their money back to their families. Their pay is 36 rupees a month and they save about 20 of this sum. Everyone lives in peace and we have no trouble between the castes. The Sudras send their children to elementary school. Some of them trade and grow very rich. Oh, the people are quite happy here.”

“But they often look hungry—the pilgrims for example,” I remarked.

The three of us were leaning over a rampart which had a view across the valley. Dusk was falling on the Ganges in a last blaze of violet light. Our friend grew animated.

“Happiness is in the spirit. The pilgrims do not know the meaning of hunger. They are sages, wise men. . . . That is how one ought to live. When a child leaves its mother he is given a necklace of three threads of cotton. On becoming the father of a family he will only have one thread left. When he takes off the last thread he will abandon his wealth and his family and set out on the open road in search of wisdom. He will go to the gleaming sanctuaries of the Himalaya. The gods live in the mountains; the water of the Ganges is holy. Here in the plain or at Benares it seems muddy, but there is not a single microbe

1 While Islamism is egalitarian in its essence, Hinduism raises insurmountable barriers of caste between men: the Brahmans or priests and intellectuals; the Kshatriyas or military; the Vaqyas or tradesmen; and the Sudras or farmers. These four categories of men rule without mingling with the innumerable untouchables who, having reached the lowest ebb of physical and moral poverty, stress harshly the terrible inhumanity of a system which is tending to relax despite, a defender among others, as illustrious as Mahatma Gandhi.
in it, not a single germ. Scientists have never been able to
find one . . . The gods are everywhere. Look, over there”—
he pointed to a corner of the mountain—“is a forbidden
path. A pilgrim wanted to take it one day. Well, he
received a blow on the head, a blow from Heaven which was
so violent that he had to tend it for a whole year . . .”

We were in the Garwhal region in the state of the United
Provinces, one of the units which make up the Indian
Republic of 30th May 1951.

31st May. At five o’clock this morning the bus left
Srinagar. The poorest and bravest pilgrims draw greater
merit from their journey if they go on foot and we passed
timid files of them.

Saddhus¹ dressed in orange yellow, their face covered
with ashes, looked disdainfully at our Mephistophelian
machine. Our chauffeur, sweating profusely, seemed to be
having an even greater struggle with an unleashed monster.
The hairpin bends which grew ever tighter gave him no
rest. Shaken, flung about, pressed together, thrown off
their balance and banging each other ceaselessly the pilgrims
of both classes began to look poorly. The female pilgrims
covered their eyes with a bandage before plunging into a
paroxysm of retching. In a two-day journey by bus we have
only advanced some 130 miles.

The bends and the jolting sent me to sleep, to the great
despair of Dumont, who smoked one cigarette after the
other.

In a muck sweat the steering-wheel slipped from the
hands of the driver, a restless, haggard Garwhali who drove
with bare feet.

Suddenly we were flung against the windscreen and
covered with a pile of rags which came straight from the
second-class compartment. Not a sound. The left front
wheel was simply hanging in the void with the front axle

¹ Sages who devote their lives to the spirit. They play the part of spiritual
directors by their example and their radiation.
on the ground. No one seemed particularly surprised. A team of coolie roadmenders—they are called gangs—came to our rescue. Numbers give strength and two coolies used a single spade. One held the top of the handle and the other pulled on the bottom by means of a rope. We stared open-eyed at this before deciding that it was extremely comical.¹

At Rudaprayag it was raining and the valley was covered with mauve cloud. At this point the Nandakini joins the Alaknanda; the clear waters of the tributary mingle in terrifying whirlpools with the grey dirty water of the holy river. In order not to be carried away the pilgrims, who are very eager to plunge in at this particular spot, have to clutch on to heavy chains. A few weeks previously Shri Tendon, the President of the Indian Congress Party, which holds a majority in the Constitutional Assembly, came to bathe here.

About two o'clock in the afternoon we arrived at Chamoli, the end of the carriage road. I had been waiting impatiently for this moment. After this we would no longer hear the deafening noise of tired engines. At last there would be silence with nothing but the din of a mountain stream in the distance. We had hardly wriggled our way out of our burning-hot vehicles than a very dignified Indian came up with a message from Duplat.

"We have left. Catch us up as quickly as possible."

This was really too much and this time we were furious. "They are taking the mike out of us. How can I ever photograph them if they never wait for me?" I asked.

"What an organisation!" replied Dumont.

Our rage was well-founded. We had nothing left to eat except two tins of milk, a packet of biscuits and—a terrifying thought—only a single bottle of whisky.

We shouted to the four winds of the public square in Chamoli: "We want coolies, horses and mules!"

There was no response and our message-bearer calmly explained to us that the expedition had taken away all the

¹ This is the method used in Europe for ballast on the railways.
coolies and all the horses . . . Anyhow, he would try and find us some.

An hour later we had a couple of pathetic-looking mules with rain-drenched hides. One of them would carry the luggage and we could both ride the other.

The two latecomers of the third French Himalayan Expedition looked a pretty sight. Dumont's legs were so long and his mule so small that his feet touched the ground. I preferred to walk. I remember Marcel Ichac saying to me: "Take care, the real danger is the horses." Then I had a vague twinge of remorse on thinking of a circular sent by Duplat before we left. He had begged us to take riding lessons.

After 6 miles our guide, in spite of our protests, decided that we must make a halt and install ourselves in a kind of caravanserai already full of pilgrims.

No sooner had we opened our luggage than our man, an old soldier who had fought against Rommel in Lybia, told us that he did not mind leaving.

It was dark when we arrived at Pipalkoti. All the darmshalas, the houses open for pilgrims, were the more overflowing with people the more it rained. Moreover, we were Sahibs leaving on an expedition, Sahibs who had not left the town for a long time and who were always inclined to raise difficulties. The streets were paved with white stones, and the houses had wooden balconies with simple carvings. The plains and tropical valleys of India which we had left that morning now seemed very far away. Not only were we breathing the intoxicating mountain air but also the mysterious air of Tibet. The shops were full of Tibetan products: fly-swats made from yaks' tails, salt, skins, furs and even the legendary musk.¹

A young curly-headed youth came up and got us out of our embarrassing situation. He led us to a grocer who offered us the first floor of his shop. His wooden shutters

¹ Substance used to fix perfumes. It comes from the glands of certain Asiatic rodents.
faced the street and his door opened onto a little temple dedicated to Hanuman, the monkey god, a vermilion carving of whom decorated the wall of his house. In chaotic English our friend told us that he had been born in this village and that recently he had finished his veterinary studies. I actually noticed that he had awarded himself the title of doctor. Very much the grand seigneur! Dumont gave him some of our whiskey, which had a very rapid effect on him. He began to talk faster and spoke of his extreme merits and of his servants of whom he was very proud.

"I have twelve servants. It is quite a big number, is it not?"

He insisted upon introducing them all to us, and disappeared only to return with a dozen men of all ages, dressed in the most appalling rags. We refrained from contradicting him, and we did well because, moved by the meagre meal we were preparing for ourselves, he served us a dinner of boiled potatoes and oranges.

Our departure was fixed for five o'clock in the morning, at the same time as the first groups of pilgrims left. Women went on ahead singing. An enormous tree was black with huge birds. They suddenly flew off. They were only monkeys, and the dead tree now raised its bare arms to the sky.

We should both have been in excellent humour had it not been raining and had our clothes not been soaked for so long. After an hour's march we arrived at a busy village. We were delighted to see Dubost's hat and the whole expedition, Sahibs, Sherpas and coolies. We spurred on our animals, and the joy we felt made us forget the list of just reproaches we had decided to utter.

On my arrival Duplat said to Gevril: "You see, I told you they'd catch us up."

"We might have left them a bit of the equipment all the same."

"The less luggage you carry the quicker you advance."

There was no answer to that.
The Sherpas were already offering us the tea they were about to drink, and Da Norbu brought some dry clothes for me out of his sack.

Gevril had a bigger growth of beard than ever in the dirty phase of growing expedition beards. Sitting in the rain, surrounded by a clutter of objects, he was paying a crowd of seventy-one bearers and forty-nine mules. The air smelt of wet wool. The coolies were muscular Nepalese with expressionless faces; laden with heavy weights they went forward almost naked. Gendre was still in his sleeping-bag. The horses were harnessed. Tensing blew his whistle for the departure. The sun rose and lit up an enormous valley where the cultivations clung to the slopes as far as the eye could see. A gigantic staircase of paddy fields was cut in two by a water-fall several hundred yards wide. A rainbow appeared in the centre of it which the Sherpas considered a good omen. To the north-east the violet clouds split up, revealing at last the snows which were calling us. Those powerful fantastic mountain masses, which looked slightly unreal, were Ghori Parbat and Hathi Parbat, which we looked upon a little disdainfully, for they were only mere 22,000-foot peaks.

The mountains were there. In front of us extended the Garwhal, a proud and mysterious country that wears a coronet of a hundred peaks.

The caravan set out and the blood beat faster in our veins.
PART TWO
OUR caravan slipped through a crowd of grey-faced people in striped rags, and, covered in dust, we passed almost unnoticed. Tensing recalled that he was once a horse-tamer in Darjeeling and gave us a demonstration at the expense of one of our mounts, which was quite remarkable for its protruding bones. He pranced along the paths above the paddy fields but soon the animal, gleaming with sweat, showed signs of weariness, and Tensing slowed down to a powerful feline trot.

The procession of pilgrims continued. Here a stumbling blind man, there a leper warning everyone with his casual bell. Old women with wrinkled faces were carried in baskets by coolies, each muscle standing out from their backs as a result of the effort. I shared a horse with Dumont. The sun dried up the soil from which heavy odours arose. I was thirsty. Springs were rare, and my head was full of well-meant advice. "As soon as you have passed the posts of canalised water disinfect any you drink and never drink any milk... Typhoid..."

The moment has come to admit that I usually respect this type of advice provided it does not tend to replace a remote danger and only entails a certain very remote risk. This was the case with the disinfection of water. The first product I had to try consisted of two kinds of giant tablets, and inside the tube was an amiable list of instructions which prescribed a number of highly skilled operations. I had carried them all out with the greatest possible care when I discovered, written in italics, that the mixture had to rest for at
least six hours before the water was drinkable. I flung the mixture and the tablets into the road, and in the next village, after a slight struggle with my conscience, I took Dumont to a public café where a delicious mixture of tea, water and polluted milk was served to us in a very dubious-looking cup.

We burned our fingers on the metal and waited a moment. After a while Doctor Payan joined us, sat down at our side, ordered some of the mixture and banished our last scruples. The café proprietor soon understood our condition and from the back of his cave produced some enormous succulent lemons. They ripened in the valley and the heat which grew more and more devastating did not even give us time to admire them.

We were desperately tired when the village of Josimath came in sight. We had to make a great effort to maintain a decent rhythm during the last climb. Mountaineers have this in common with orientals: they hate to lose face, and in any case we could not imagine anyone looking less at their ease than our Sherpas. If such an attitude of mind were to bring us happy tomorrows it had the advantage of speeding up our acclimatisation.

The valley is majestic with its distant torrent, its sheer rocks over which lazy vultures fly, its poison-green paddy fields, and its villages perched like eagles' nests on the crags. Wherever you look your eye discovers new cultivations, new villages, trembling forests, and waterfalls which leap over the cliffs in gigantic bounds. Where they thunder the air is full of mist, in which is usually to be seen a rainbow.

Huge blue and black butterflies flitted from bush to bush. The road continued to climb. A large doorway appeared to our right and we had reached the Josimath bungalow. The noises from the valley had warned the custodian, and as we passed the gate preparations were in full swing and the last spiders' webs had been brushed away. Some of the villages we had crossed reminded us of hasty encampments, but Josimath is a cluster of solid pale
THE JOURNEY EAST

granite houses surrounding seven temples with flag-stoned courtyards, clinging to a slope. A monastery dominates the village and as soon as night fell the air rang with the shrill sound of bells and the long plaintive cry of Tibetan horns.

Our Sherpas erected our largest tents on the bungalow terrace. Horses and coolies continued to arrive and soon a positive fortress of boxes rose in front of us. The noise, the disorder, the hasty movements of the men indicated the excitement of a red-letter day. A sombre drama was taking place on the other side of the bungalow. Tensing, Duplat, and the interpreter who had recruited the coolies were preparing the pay for the two preceding days. A crowd formed ten paces away round the three men. The bearers in three rows, squatting on their haunches, watched Duplat's smallest gesture as he piled up little heaps of rupee notes, all brand new. Eyes stared and there was a great silence. One imagined that at any moment a church service would begin. Tensing called over one of the coolies. He came over, counted the money he had been given and flung it down angrily on the ground. He began to speak and the others replied with a roar. With a gesture Tensing restored order and then the truth burst out. In order to recruit his people easily the intermediary had been to a distant village and said that the Sahibs would pay 20 rupees for two stages whereas the normal price was only 12. That his countrymen had tried to rob the Sahib infuriated Tensing, who grew pale with anger.

What could be done?

At the outset there were speeches, then some haggling which was as unpleasant for the man who offered as for the one who accepted. Sadly, with disappointment in their eyes, the coolies took their dues and started discussions in small taciturn groups before raiding the local groceries to wake up a few sleepy merchants, who were surprised at this windfall from heaven. Later, in the bungalow, we heard shouts. The coolies were taking their revenge on the man.
who had robbed them. The din was so terrific that Duplat, prudently armed with a revolver protruding from his canvas trousers, rushed up and succeeded in rescuing the intermediary, who was half dead after receiving a vigorous beating.

The cries, the cool of the evening and the novelty of our situation made us all feel on top of the world. We were all thrilled by nebulous and sometimes contradictory goals. Thus it was obvious that since our discontented coolies no longer wanted to go any further we should not be leaving until we had found others, that was to say in two days' time.

Nevertheless, Duplat and Gevril, seated at the general index file of which only they knew the secrets, proceeded with a hitherto unprecedented unpacking.

The containers, those cardboard tuns which held our baggage, were half open and from them emerged waves of socks, scores of electric piles, strings of snap hooks which Dumont hung round his neck. He could have been taken for the owner of a bazaar-grocery which had remained open although it was after sunset. Towards three o'clock in the morning the loads were separated into two piles: one of them weighing 2 tons would go to Nanda Devi, the other would remain here until our return for the second half of the campaign. The following day was a day of rest during which, as is usual after busy nights, one gives more importance to things that are no more than matters for the discussions they provoked. Our little group was rather noisy and soon became the centre of attraction in the village.

A host of visits ensued. A rich Indian pilgrim in a well-cut suit wearing chains of gold came to see us.

"Where are you going?"

"To Nanda Devi."

"Oh, a charming spot which I visited in my youth," replied our man, reluctant to admit that he did not know all the Himalayan peaks and their natural defences.

Then two people arrived of the type one is always surprised to meet because one imagined they exist exclusively
for the benefit of American films. They were dressed as ex-G.I.s and admitted proudly that they had come from Badrinath and spent their time reading the Old Testament to the pilgrims. They told us that there were three missionary women in the region but their position was a difficult one. The Indians have little respect for these women whose families must have had such a bad reputation that they had never been able to find a husband.

3rd June, Josimath. The tropical sun of yesterday has given place to a fine rain. The clouds trail lazily from one side of the valley to the other, tearing themselves on tall trees in which wisps of white mist remain prisoner. The raindrops stream down on the loaded horses. Their hooves slip on the road cobbled like the old Roman ways. The chestnut trees join their tops in a flowery vaulting . . .

The coolies, collected with great difficulty, arrived late, and it was nearly ten o'clock before the convoy set out. We left the main pilgrim valley, the Valley of the Alaknanda, to follow the one which leads to Niti and Tibet.

The pilgrims, too, had disappeared, and the only people we met were with flocks of laden sheep descending the passes. These crouched and shivered beneath rocky shelters where the shepherd had made fires of green wood which gave off a thick smoke. We gave each other a wide berth.

As proud as their parents, the children never tried to cadge even a cigarette from the travellers. The time passed slowly without the comfort of the milestones which we had found as far as Josimath. The rain ceased and the clouds dispersed. The flanks of the valley gleamed with damp, shone with the new green of spring, the light vivid green of young rice sprouts contrasting with the dark smoke-blue cedars. A red clattering patch suddenly appeared on the path. It was Roger Duplat prancing gaily on a bay horse. He patrolled the whole length of the column obviously exasperated by the slowness of our collective advance. He soon joined the head of the group, consisting
of Vignes, Gendre and myself, who had been chosen to select a camping place for the night. The reason that we had gone on faster since early morning was due to a hidden motive: our bible, by this I mean the works of Tilman, gave us hopes of finding a warm spring to be used as a bathing pool. The custom was apparently to give a small coin to a shepherd so that he could drive away people incapable of bearing the shock of seeing Sahibs in the nude. But Tilman did not tell us exactly where to find the shepherd, and we passed the smoking spring, for we were more modest than we were keen on hygiene.

A temple, with walls of dried stone sported a mast with an oriflamme the colour of old copper. A light bridge straddled the grey tortured water, which carried away big lumps of rock. The dull sound of their collisions reached our ears. We had just crossed Rishi Ganga. But where was the village of Lata? We asked a child this question but our appearance frightened it and it ran away.

"I tell you we ought to have had a bathe," said Gendre. "We look frightful."

A ruined temple with sculptured walls and then a new building . . . We had been on the road for eight hours. In a shady corner an ageless peasant, half of whose face was a huge scar, ran away at the sight of us. This obviously meant that people who travelled in these regions did not always harbour good intentions. Finally reassured, the man started to make a speech accompanied by confused gestures of which we understood only two things: that he had been wounded by a bear in his youth and that the village of Lata was above us. We had passed the road to it but there was a short cut.

With a naïveté of which we should have been ashamed we left in the direction indicated. An hour and a half later, furious with ourselves and exhausted, we entered the village of Lata as silently as though it had been deserted by its inhabitants.

I felt a stab of remorse at disturbing the lives of people
to whom we were strangers amongst strangers and to whom we could bring nothing but something worse than evil, a little good which would be missed on our departure, a little money which would make their poverty a little less onerous. At the sight of these worn-out streets all the reasons which had driven us here seemed blunted.

A few children were the first to assure themselves of our good intentions, then their parents passed, lowering their heads beneath the low doors of the grey houses.

In India I had already seen a great deal of poverty and subconsciously I had come to consider it as an inevitable part of the setting. But that day, after a tiring stage in a country which was reminiscent of my own, this poverty, which seemed to be blacker than that I had seen yesterday, seemed to me to be so near death that I was seized with a great disgust. We looked at each other in silence.

Were we going to spend the night here, in this courtyard strewn with excrement, in this crowd of flies, among these swarms of mosquitoes? Well, we were . . . And did we know that evening that when we returned to this village in a few weeks' time we should bless these drab houses, which would appear to have all the seduction of an outpost of civilisation?

It soon turned out that we were camping in the courtyard of the village school which was deserted during the harvest season. Many years before, the buildings had been whitewashed and the children had covered them with blood-red inscriptions. In places the game had consisted of dipping their hands in the ochre mud and planting them against the wall, repeating the gesture of prehistoric man who marked his passage in the grotto sanctuaries of the Pyrenees. Late that evening the coolies were still arriving, and in the distance we could hear their shouts and the trampling of their horses maddened by the night.

Were these noises the near presence of humans or the vermin which surged from all sides? In any case we had little rest.
On the following morning the village looked quite different. Its houses of light granite, its thatched roofs and wooden balconies were exactly those we used to pass in Aosta when we left the harsh fields for the stunted pines at the edge of the moraine.

The air seemed to be vivified by these slender memories. They amused me. It was funny that where we were going we thought up bonds to attach ourselves to our precious little universe. Had we not all wanted to leave it?

And that valley hacked out with an axe, was it not reminiscent of a certain canyon in the Midi?

The coolies left for a second trip to Josimath and we waited for them impatiently throughout an inactive day. We had hoped to find a good number of bearers as enthusiastic as ourselves at the idea of carrying loads into unknown ravines, but all the fit men had disappeared and we were almost inclined to deplore the lack of professional conscience on the part of the Garwhalis.

Duplat was preoccupied. Better than the rest of us he realised how difficult it would be to obtain men. He knew that almost a hundred loads had to be carried to the base camp, and he hardly knew any relaxation during the time we laughed in the sun and spent the fleeting moments enjoying the marvellous side of our adventure. An unquenchable ambition intensified his desire to see the mountain, to gauge its force and its splendour.

A recruiter was sent to Tibet after a long palaver with Tensing. Our sirdar turned out to be a man of resources. He listened, reflected, suggested, and carried out the plan with eagerness.

Barbezat was limping and had to consult the doctor. Payan diagnosed an inflammation of the knee which demanded rest for at least two days. This depressed Barbezat. What could we say to him? We could easily guess his feelings at seeing himself demeaned when we had hardly started on our expedition. Each one of us watched
and feared the sign of some weakness which would make him useless to the team and his own prisoner.

The villagers had discovered the medicine man; some from necessity and others out of curiosity crowded eagerly round Payan. One woman was a dreadful sight to see. The whole of her face was one living wound which had completely closed her eyes. She was pregnant, and when she felt her way forward the children behind her stopped their games.

Payan stroked his budding beard, bit his lips and shook his head. The villagers had recoiled and were staring alternately at Payan and the woman. The flies were attracted by the cruel malady, and I noticed that as soon as their buzzing was heard silence fell on the crowd. In a nearby house a child was crying.

"Tell Tensing to say to them that I will attend to them later on, and that Panzi should bring me some boiling water," said Payan.

The blind woman sat down in a corner of the courtyard and the pitiful procession started again. Those who had been treated did not leave but waited with their faces powdered with D.D.T. and their hair sprinkled with it. At last the woman sat down in the middle of the circle. Payan remained silent, at a loss and yet attentive. He scraped, cleaned, cut, and the light sound of the instruments which he laid on a nickel tray accompanied his gestures. The woman did not utter a groan. The whole village had assembled in the school courtyard. The minutes sped by. At last the woman stood up and staggered off. Three paces more and she would have stumbled against a low stone wall. A murmur rose from the crowd and a child leaped forward to guide the woman who could no longer see.

Something tight seemed to be bound around my heart.

"What were you able to do for her?" I asked Payan.

"Very little, poor woman. Only sulphonamides; it's the result of erysipelas. A month ago I could have... I did my best, but it began to bleed and I was frightened of a haemorrhage. She would have died."

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"That would have been the best thing."

"What could I do? I couldn't leave her. You can imagine her life. She must be in the corner of her house, the family is afraid and lets her die of hunger and she's pregnant into the bargain."

This village which has never had a doctor filled me with shame. We were partly to blame. We were guilty on account of our youth and the wealth which allowed us to be there. For the people in these houses, the twenty hearths of this hamlet, such a tragedy, sordid as it might be, was a little part of its daily life, a private affair between this woman and the black goddess of infinite power who lived in the little temple perched above the roofs. For this village at the end of the world possessed nothing save a temple which looked like a precious toy overlooking a courtyard where the weeds sprouted between the stones and round a carved altar with a pale halo. I so much wanted to respect the universe of the people of Lata that I entered the temple on tiptoe, being careful not to display my camera. I made friends with the children who served as guides. The children here had a look of calm pride which they would soon lose. One of them, more decently clad than the rest, followed me everywhere I went and his fidelity moved me. We spoke above all with gestures, and the way he understood and guessed my intentions was nothing short of miraculous. I had been with him a few moments before, and he disappeared to find and present me with dried apricots and a glass of milk. In the temple he climbed onto a roof to bring down a statuette I could not see clearly.

The walls of the temple were covered with bas-reliefs. One of them represented a goddess—I believe an incarnation of Kali—with her manifold arms and her cruel but gentle smile, innocent and mysterious at the same time. On opening the temple door one saw nothing at first but a greyish darkness until suddenly the forms of the goddess appeared. A black statue seated among rusty swords, draped with red, the blood-red colour which honours her,
and the sight of which she loves so much that she faces the altar on which young goats are disembowelled.

I questioned the child. What was in that shelter? By way of reply he rooted out a basketful of carved wooden masks: faces of gods, like the elephant god, faces of fear, joy and envy, faces which the men here would put on for feast days, when obscure rites would accompany their sacrifices, half-Indian, half-Tibetan. To the right of the temple stood a fountain whose water no longer flowed, a reminder of the time when the wars and the more intense traffic between India and Tibet brought some life to this village which now lies forgotten among its barley fields.

"Eh, boy, do you understand? Who could carve those marvels today? Who in this village and in this valley would still be capable of carving stone? The respect with which you endow this fountain makes me think you find it beautiful. Would you like to be a stonemason? You seem alive and sensitive, more secretive, too, than your comrades who have recognised this fire in you and obey you without your knowing why. What guru will reveal to you the knowledge of the world of which, in your eyes, we are the fabulous envoys? What can I do? Give you a few unworthy presents in token of all I wish for you..."

The day had been heavy and the damp air cradled the storm clouds which did not burst. That evening Dubost and the last convoy arrived at camp and the sweat had traced black runnels down their faces.

On the table erected in a courtyard the favourite toy of the expedition displayed all its colours: "Professor" Gevril's giant filing system. This work which comprised simultaneously art and technique had its friends and enemies. Those who knew how to admire it politely and get information from it; others who were convinced that since the famous night at Josimath, Mr. Filing Index had lost his memory. Gevril could not bear anyone to joke about his prodigy. A short while ago he had done his best to discover some tin openers and returned... empty-
handed, all black from the munitions of our secret weapon, the Japanese charcoal stove of bamboo bought in a sale at the Galéries Lafayette. A few moments later an order of the day forbade profane eyes from examining the catalogue of our stocks.

"Gendre! Light!"

"Gendre! We can’t see a thing . . ."

In civilian life Gendre is something of an electrician, so it was his job to look after the complicated arrangement of electric torches for the evening meal.

Despite Panzi’s unspeakable cooking against which Duplat, aware of his duties as a leader would not hear a word, the meal was enlivened by Dubost’s exclamations accusing Gevril of eating too much, Gendre of letting himself waste away and Vignes of getting in his light . . .

Relative calm was restored when Tensing came in to announce that nineteen coolies would be arriving on the following morning for the first departure. Everyone wanted to be in the party, but only Gevril, Vignes, Gendre and I were to leave. A terrified villager came up and stammered something. Tensing acted as interpreter. “There’s a big animal wandering around the village. The man says it may be a tiger.”

The word provoked a roar from Dubost which would have frightened the wildest of wild beasts. It did not, however, prevent him from grabbing my rifle and wrenching the electric torch from my hand.

Followed by Vignes, Gendre and Duplat he leaped into the night to hunt the tiger. The noises faded in the distance and we could hear nothing but the crackle of branches and the murmur of confused voices. When these excitable hunters returned they agreed on one point: that the animal was there and that Dubost had frightened it waay.

“Why didn’t you fire?” Gevril asked Dubost.

“I couldn’t see anything.”

“But the coolie showed you the bush where he was hiding.”
“Bah!” said Vignes. “It’s not surprising! He’s probably never shot at anything more dangerous than clay pipes in a fair.”

“That’s the limit!” said Dubost. “If you think that . . .”

“In the meanwhile you’d better fire the bullet which is still in the gun,” said Duplat.

Dubost put the rifle to his shoulder, aimed at the stars, thought for a moment, and in the silence of the night the trigger made a ridiculous little click.

“Who did that on me?” said Dubost, falling silent abruptly as he remembered that he had been charged to buy the ammunition.

“For a hunter I must say . . .” jeered Vignes.

On closer inspection the cartridges were all right but they were not the right kind. Another danger averted . . .

5th June. Up very early in a fine state of euphoria preparatory to departure. A few eager merchants not from these parts came out of the green jungle, and the Sherpas weighed pounds of atta, intoning as they counted the measures: “Ek, do, tin, car, punch, chi, sat, ath . . .”

Dumont got ready to return to Delhi after a visit to Badrinath. I should have liked him to stay much longer, but he assured us that the mountain inspired him with nothing but terror, although he watched us tie up our bags with a trace of envy and surprise. He appeared to find it monstrous that all our desires should disappear before the nervous anticipation of the mountain.

We shook hands a little more fervidly than usual and I felt that we had left behind a friend.

The path crossed cornfields redolent of wild honey before entering a silent forest which the heavy footsteps of our bearers did not disturb. With outstretched necks and lowered heads the coolies were tense with sustained effort. A strap ran across their foreheads; cotton ropes led from it to support the weight of their burden. Trees grew rarer,

1 This flour, made into chapattis or boiled, is the staple diet of the Garwhalis.
a few stunted larches . . . Winter had made them lose their bark and, ravaged by the wind, the whitened trunks looked lugubrious. Gradually the earth approached our faces and the climb began to grow stiffer. India was receding and old habits were reborn. How many times already had I marched bowed under my pack in this indeterminate region which separates the high ground from the forest? Here a trickle of bright water turns the luxuriant grass green. The foot crushes the soft earth and releases a smell of humus, occasionally interrupted by the smell of a wild orchid and the stench of wood lice. The mountaineer who knows the high regions where the cold air paralyses the sense of smell is very sensitive to odours. He loves the smell of schist, warmed by the sun. The rather vegetable smell of schist disturbs him and at evening when he climbs down the glacier in the darkness he cannot see the ground but he senses it before he has crossed the moraine . . .

Nothing marked the road, but one of the coolies apparently knew all the detours. We followed it along the bottom of a very narrow valley, cutting out footsteps in the tufts of grass. The sky was overcast and the heat grew clammy as in a hothouse. The coolies went so slowly that we were unable to forge on ahead. A few birches raised their meagre heads through giant rhododendron bushes with mauve flowers. It was an excellent reason for stopping and putting down our packs; the straps had left their marks on our shoulders.

Our altimeters worked well. That morning they had registered 7,450 feet, and now they stood at 12,025 feet. For 750 feet, we climbed a slope of yellow rhododendrons. What magnificent fellows those Sherpas are. Like ourselves they were taken unawares by this first day of effort, but as soon as we came to the grassy flat ground and our halting place was in sight, they strode out, and the fire was already lit as we took off our packs. In a flash the tea was ready and the tents were up. Since we were all old hands at camping it was not our way to be waited on. We had known our
Sherpas only a short time but one thing was already certain: these were men with whom we could not possibly cheat. They would not be servants but comrades, like those whom we had had under other skies. Each one would do his own job. Theirs is sometimes more arduous while ours is more dangerous. And their joy equals our own just as their troubles equal ours. That evening Vignes and Gendre took the tent which Da Norbu had begun to unfold and motioned to him to go and drink his tea. Obviously this procedure disturbed him, as though it violated the sacred code whereby during the approach march the Sahib has to foist everything onto the shoulders of the Sherpas so as to be free and in good form for the mountain.

To begin with this is a physiological stupidity, firstly, because physical work speeds up the acclimatisation to altitude, and secondly it is bad tactics, for the value of the rope parties which will be formed of Sahibs and Sherpas will obviously rest more on mutual esteem and friendship than on stupid subordination. I slumbered in my tent with a heavy head and a singing in my ears. The change from the enervating heat of the lowlands had been too rapid. Panzi soon brought dinner, and by his smile we could see that he was as pleased with himself as he was with his cooking. It was a surprising main dish. He had mixed a box of sauerkraut with tomato sauce profusely sugared...

"I wonder if he has any idea what it tastes like?" said Gevril indignantly.

It was fortunate that during the day we had climbed 4,500 feet with a full load...

Before retiring Vignes lit a huge bonfire to inform the village of Lata that we had arrived safely.

6th June. Reveille at half past five in the morning. The tents were bathed in an icy mist which a stiff breeze brought from the motionless shadowy valleys. Higher up, the morning rays of the sun bathed the crests. To the north the whole horizon was barred with peaks alternately massive
and pointed, in a disorder which no eye could unravel. As far as the eye could see, a new silhouette, another gleam of ice, visible signs of other crests, other slopes and other masses. To our right a depression still filled with darkness revealed the presence of Tibet. Even for a man of the mountains the great chains seen from afar arouse in him anxiety and a sense of mystery. On approaching them the most taciturn man is forced to speak. The chaos of the ice pinnacles, the world of glaciers, assumes a bare enigmatical countenance.

So that morning we bestowed a long silence on the north whereas as soon as we turned towards the south our tongues were loosed.

"Well, at last we know why we’re here," said Vignes.
"It was high time," added Gevril, "for you know a tourist’s life . . ."
"That must be Trisul," said Gendre.
"Give it to me. You’ve never been able to read a map," replied Gevril.
"All right, old man . . ."
"What do you think, J–J?"
"1/25th of a second at f4.5."
"No, I’m not talking about that. The mountain."
"I’m sure it’s not Trisul."
"It’s the Betatoli Himal."
"Has it already been climbed?"
"No."

These words woke Vignes, who immediately launched forth into a series of mental gymnastics of which he was very fond.

"Attack by the left-hand ridge, and then perhaps the first couloir, to join at a third . . ."

I have always thought that the mountains did not like to hear this type of conversation. Moreover, the rising sun made the mountain in front of us look even more stern and uncompromising.

I questioned Panzi, our fatalist cook.
"It does not like us, eh?"
"Oh no, Sahib. No good."

In our much-reduced society Panzi represented the precious wisdom of the United Nations.

Our camp was situated on a crest cut by rocky spurs which rose to 14,000 feet before descending again towards a col which we had to cross. Feeling a desire to enjoy the solitude of this first day of communion with vast horizons, I easily persuaded myself that I should get some wonderful photographs if I followed the line of the ridge, and since no one raised any objection, I left the camp before the coolies had strapped on their loads. I know of nothing more exalting then to wander alone in a terrain which is not too difficult.

The pack forces one to choose a simple route. The actual going required little attention, and by shouting words which the wind carried away, I held an aimless conversation with an imaginary audience, leaving the point of the questions in the air. In this way I reviewed the scenes of films I had already shot and could see their errors. This habit was not always very much appreciated by Duplat; I felt that he would have given me reproachful glances. That day, despite a slight headache, life was magnificent. The air was pure and icy. I walked for hours, only stopping to get my breath, to take some sticky nougat from my pocket, to take photographs, and cast an eye to the right into the gorge of the Rishi Ganga, which cascaded 6,000 feet lower down and from which rose a growl broken occasionally by furious outbursts of rage. To my left I could make out the file of coolies. Their pace was slow and they were now some 600 feet below me.

On passing the peak I came to a well-marked breach which for one moment I imagined to be our col, but it only lead to an abrupt unpleasant couloir. I made signs to Panzi who was at the head of the column that he would have to look further on. The sky was overcast and a few snowflakes fell which melted as soon as they touched the warm soil. At
about two o’clock I reached a breach which looked rather disagreeable. Gevril joined me ahead of the coolies who, he said, were making incessant halts and obviously did not want to go any further. A second examination of the breach confirmed my fears. This was not the right path. When the coolies arrived they dumped their packs and instead of asking for the ritual cigarette, gathered together in a scowling conference. After ten minutes when Gevril gave the signal for departure the men hardly stirred, but finally decided to shoulder their loads.

A hundred yards further on a couloir of soft snow barred the path. The coolies hesitated and came to a halt.

Gevril cut out a path, Vignes with a lot of gesticulating and speeches encouraged the bearers, and Gevril took them by the hand during the crossing of the couloir which was only about 10 feet wide. Slowly all of them decided to pass through, but some yards further on, as soon as they discovered that the going did not improve, they dropped their loads on the ground before squatting once more in a circle which was now more ominous than before.

We had wanted to struggle against stones and nature and now we had to struggle against men. The weather grew colder and the snow continued to fall from the grey clouds. The sloping rocky soil offered no flat surface on which to pitch a tent. It was impossible to remain there. Obviously the coolies were frozen, exhausted, and sick. Their leader was a thin Nepalese, swathed in a blanket we had lent him; it made him look very regal. He neither asked for nor accepted cigarettes or rupees but pointed to his men who seemed resigned to their fate. Panzi thought he possessed the means of making them leave and he threatened them with his fists. Gevril roared furious orders and shook a few of the sleepy coolies. This din and Panzi’s threats brought life back to the company, the coolies took up their packs and before we could stop them, set out in the direction of the valley. Three hundred feet were soon lost, and hardly had the slope become less stiff than loads were flung down and
THE JOURNEY EAST

the circle of coolies reformed—more enigmatic and reserved than ever and ominously silent.

"Eh, Gevril, don’t you think that the col . . ."

"What? Yes, he’s right. There it is. Pass me the binoculars, Vignes."

"You don’t need the binoculars. I tell you I can see a cairn."

Gevril let his useless binoculars swing from his neck. The col we had been looking for since early morning was 600 feet above us, about half a mile away—less than an hour’s walk.

"I’m going on ahead," said Gevril. "You stay here and at least you’ll prevent them from turning back. When I’ve got to the top perhaps they will make up their minds."

This apportionment of the work was very acceptable, for Gevril that day was in splendid form, and we enjoyed a halt even though it was a forced one. We did our best to revive the enthusiasm of our men by the usual means: cigarettes, smiles, and words of encouragement. But when Panzi approached they fell silent and paid no attention either to Gevril’s progress or to his shouts.

That day they would not stir except to go and shelter under their canvas tent, pitched beneath a rock. Gevril returned, and our indefatigable Da Norbu levelled platforms for the tents with his ice-axe. He worked so energetically that we were forced to calm him down if we wanted to preserve any of our axes. . . .

A neutral observer that evening would have given a sad commentary. In the tents slept Sahibs who had found the day long and who were full of anxiety with regard to their coolies.

Six hundred feet lower down the aforesaid coolies, utterly exhausted, tried to forget the terrifying mountain and their evil spirits. Even had the observer felt some pity for the coolies urged by the imperious need of earning a few rupees, he would hardly have had any for the Sahibs, conscious and willing actors who had behaved like children. They had failed to engage a sure guide, such as one of those
villagers from Lata who, twice a year, led their herds into the mountains. Thus they had lost their way and added to the ordeals of these coolies from the plain who were now exhausted both physically and morally. And this observer would have been forced to conclude that one could only expect the worst.

7th June. The worst happened. At half past ten the camp was still there and we had no escort left except two Sherpas and a coolie. In the damp, milky dawn, the chief coolie came and expressed his regrets.

"I, who am your friend, am willing to stay," he said, "but the others want to turn back. They're cold and it's snowing and, besides, they are afraid."

He added a long phrase which Panzi translated curtly: "Yes, they're afraid."

I remarked to Panzi that the man had certainly said something more.

"No, Sahib. Yes—they are afraid. It's a question of their gods," Panzi admitted, with reticence.

Our Sherpa was a tactful man who disliked producing arguments which were decisive but slightly irrelevant for occidentals who did not believe in Vishnu.

Da Norbu was sent as an ambassador with a secret argument up his sleeve, an extra rupee for each stage. Always a question of money! Our ill-luck did not very much disturb Panzi, and he assured me that it had been the same thing on all the expeditions in which he had taken part, and concluded: "Everest is the only good mountain because mules and yaks can go as far as the base camp."

"Everest is a good mountain," repeated Panzi. I liked Panzi. Things were so simple for him. They were profitable or not profitable. Restful or fatiguing. Good or not good. But never hopeless.

At that moment the coolies streamed down towards the valley. I saw them disappear, one by one, while Da Norbu climbed back to us.
We should not see them again and only their chief would remain with us. Gevril sent Vignes to Lata, to warn Duplat and to ask him for men. Then, setting us an example, he took up one of the coolies' loads to carry it up to the col.

Normally we were a rather gay team, who liked joking—good and bad jokes. But that day laughter was rare.

We made two trips and Gevril, with incredible activity, set out for the third time with our coolie. When the latter returned, he was weeping with the cold.

“If we lend him clothes and shoes he won't leave us,” said Gevril.

I shared my tent with Gendre, and as soon as Gevril was back we began an urgent task: to lighten our baggage by means of transfers, that is, by swallowing incongruous delicacies not usually to be found among the provisions of a light Himalayan advance guard.

Menu for that evening—6 pounds of tripes à la mode de Caen which plunged us in a heavy sleep and prevented us from thinking too much.
Chapter Six

The Sanctuary

In the village of Lata the daily shower let fall its light raindrops; they hardly wet the soil, making little, dusty marbles which fascinated the children. In the school courtyard Payan continued to tend the sick who appeared from everywhere, even from the remote farm perched on a spur above terraces of black corn and light-coloured maize. The woman with the diseased eyes was no worse and this was a good sign.

Beneath the shelter of a wooden balcony decorated with a bearskin Duplat received a ragged crowd. Some had come with offerings of milk and others to sell their grey flour. Disturbing strangers insisted that if they were employed they could find the coolies the white men desired. Tensing dealt with each speech authoritatively. Duplat was irritated and merely replied with a nod or a wave of the hand. . . .

For years he had lived only for those hazardous hours of mountaineering struggle, for those days during which he could feel at his side fervid comrades who, in the bottom of their hearts, were devoted to him. In this way he deserved the victories which were the crux of his life. In this particular life he rarely appreciated the actual moment. Was he happy? If so, he owed it to his friends, huddling close to him against the walls of the night, in the empty void outside the tents he liked so much.

Then he felt protected from the world, from this world towards which he displayed a certain anxiety, mingled with pride. For in moments of renunciation he dared to love the
pride which in his eyes always appeared to be adorned with the attributes of virtue. In the name of this virtue he had despised the ordinary paths in favour of the most dangerous and the most vain.

Now he was chief of a Himalayan expedition. An expedition which bore and would bear his name. Before realising his boyhood dream he had had to undergo struggles where every obstacle, even those he least expected, loomed before him. He no longer thought of all this past which, however, was so near at hand that a simple cry sufficed to resurrect it. Nearly always he carried an obsessive spectacle in his mind: a décor of razor-edged peaks where by his utmost efforts the traces of his pitons described a fantastic itinerary. A few weeks ago the world for him had been very real—as real as the clumsy elephants he had photographed in Ceylon. Since then things only existed for him when he stumbled against them. India itself, that tapestry of poverty and jewels, the marvellous experience from which another would have dreamed of benefiting, left him cold. Without cease, like those northern lights which die in one corner of the sky only to break out in another, these strange visions were only destroyed in order to be reborn.

Instead of letting himself be carried away on these journeys through space he had to face the mediocre grumbling of the approach trip. The stages, the loads, the yards of rope, pounds of flour, rations, piles of transport and even the accounts. How deceptive all that was, and those coolies who remained incomprehensible to the point that he had had to send a new recruiter to the village of Niti where it was reported that the men were better than elsewhere. But when would these coolies arrive? Moreover, he did not like to be separated from his team and, even less, to feel himself in the rearguard when he should have been in the van. Gevril, Dubost, and Vignes, the oldest of his comrades, had already left. Comrades of his great days, of the Noire de Peuterey, of the great challenges set by those climbs they had lived together. Fortunately Tensing was there. The
Sherpa had been completely conquered by his blue-green eyes which knew how to look so far into space. With him one could enter the closed ranks of those exceptional beings whom Fate ties up with a famous name—with Everest, which is considered a remote but accessible goal. And both of them felt themselves to be that type of man which the highest mountain in the world demanded. . . .

The fruitless muddle continued: shapes wandered to and fro over the slate paving stones of the school courtyard in Lata village, a man passed, and the children played with a few packages of brilliant colours. . . . A Sherpa brought some news, and Tensing came over to Duplat.

“Burra Sahib, Gyalzen says that Vignes Sahib is hurrying back.”

“What’s that? What did you say?”

His usual dreams had hardly vanished before Vignes was there, wringing with sweat from his speedy return, tense for a moment before his face broke into a smile.

“Everything’s all right. But the coolies have left.”

“That was to be expected. I thought so. But where were you?”

“A little beyond the Durashi col . . . not quite . . .”

“What about the coolies?”

“They’ve disappeared into the blue.”

“Did Gevril frighten them?”

“Not even that. It’s bad weather up there. It’s snowing, and barefooted as they were they very soon did not even care. They did not even ask for their pay.”

Payan and Barbezat came up and were listening to the news. We had often wondered what the approach journey would be like. We had thought, of course, that we might have difficulties with the bearers, but to come across these difficulties even before we reached the gorges of the Rishi Ganga—it was a bad omen indeed. Gyalzen made some tea which Vignes drank, and he had no sooner recovered his breath than he looked round for something to eat.
“There are seven coolies here in the village, Gilbert,” said Duplat, “and some are coming from Niti, though I have no idea when; but you can leave tomorrow morning with the ones who are here.”

“Tomorrow morning? You want us to be there on 15th August, don’t you? I’m leaving at once. I’ll have a bite and leave straight away. I’ll catch Dubost. I met him on the way down, and he was puffing more than he did on La Verte.”

“Anyhow they’ll never change you,” said Duplat. “Go if you like.”

The same day Vignes arrived at the Lata Kharak camp where he found Dubost and Sarki. Their total strength amounted to twenty-three coolies. Duplat, waiting for the coolies, Barbezat waiting for his knee to heal, Payan waiting because he had to wait, remained behind at Lata, livid at their inactivity.

8th June. The Durashi Col. On reaching the col we were rewarded by a view of Trisul and Betatoli, peaceful giants sleeping in the sun. That morning our two Sherpas and our remaining coolie went down to the camp to fetch the last luggage and we were waiting for them before setting out again. As soon as they came in sight we saw that someone was with them. Who was it? Perhaps Duplat coming to enjoy the air up here.

In the shade we could hardly distinguish them against the patches of yellowish grass where the snow had just melted. When they reached the little snowy crest which led to the col, the sun lit up their faces. A Sherpa ahead, outlined against the rocky needles from which rose trails of mist; then a silhouette carrying a gun: Vignes. Panting beneath the effort he glanced at the bundles which he had not expected to find on the col.

“Well, I see you haven’t lost any time.”

That was our Gilbert. In less than twenty-four hours he had climbed and descended some 13,000 feet, and his first word
was of praise for the work of others. Since he was accompanied by only seven coolies, as seventeen had deserted, we would leave a dump, and the Sahibs made each other little presents.

"Well, my friend, what do you say to this tent to put on top of your back?"

"You walk too quickly, Dubost. This valley tent which weighs 15 pounds will slow you down a bit."

"Go to hell! My bag's full of old iron."

It was true that he had rather a small pack that looked harmless enough, but it made everyone give him a wide berth. It contained pitons, snap-hooks and ice pegs—all objects the weight of which, as everyone knows, increases with the altitude.

Gevril took a light pack, but to offset this he was the leader and was already forging on ahead. The going was terrible, which means to say that it was terrifying. One only had to observe our coolies to see in their eyes the look they wore on our bad days. It was not that we were faced with insurmountable obstacles, but mountaineers are simple souls who like to reduce their problems to the simplest terms: to get a good hold and to get through, or to find it impossible and to look elsewhere . . . Here all the rules of the game were crooked. There was no precise danger to occupy the mind, but a hundred semi-dangers to preoccupy it.

There was no obvious route, merely a tangle of couloirs' grassy ledges which suddenly became impracticable. The slope became an overhang and gave one the impression of hanging in the void. That was a sensation the coolies loathed. One walked on clods of turf without roots or one caught hold of stones which came away in the hand. One had to cross couloirs filled with rotten snow—would it hold or would it give way? That is what Gevril had to ask himself, watched by the coolies, who stood there in silence, casting a glance from time to time at the bottom of the couloir, a perfect toboggan slope all ready to precipitate amateurs to 1,500 feet below.
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“Did you see their faces?”

“Another couloir like this and they’ll all leave us.”

“I’ll cure them,” said Dubost.

To show how easy the passage was, Dubost gambolled gaily on the dirty snow steps, and Vignes followed, carrying two loads. I felt obliged to follow suit. Impressed by these efforts the coolies crossed, guided by Vignes and Gevril. In order not to see the others some of them preferred to close their eyes.

“I should never have thought of that,” said Vignes in surprise.

A little further on the pass crossed some overhanging blocks and ended in a big valley carpeted with junipers on a foundation of unstable scree. The scree led to an enclosed firn, and instead of following the safest route we plunged into a drift. With soaking feet, pockets full of snow, and throbbing heads, we arrived at the foot of a stiff chimney encumbered with outjutting stones. From its top we had a view over 200 yards of grass and could make out ruins of a sheep-fold. Should we now be able to descend gently to our encampment? Not a bit of it! Freed from the anxiety of the coolies, we were to march like convicts until finally we lay down and dropped our packs for the rest of the day. But at 12,000 feet such a course pays dividends. Lying down in the grass we felt our heart-beats right in our heads. Lying on our stomachs we took in the wealth which surrounded us—the clouds, the sky, irises, anemones, and flowering strawberry plants.

9th June. Dharansi Camp. Reveille at five o’clock in the morning, with a cup of tea handed through the tent flap by our good Da Norbu. I could go to sleep again, for Gevril was to continue on his own that day. Dubost and Vignes remained here while the coolies, led by Sarki, would return to fetch the loads left behind on the col. I was woken a second time by Gevril’s shouts. He was in a furious rage, was abusing the coolies, and actually threatening the most
indolent. Dubost and I rushed up. Dubost calmed the coolies, distributed aspirin and cigarettes, made a great speech which no one understood, promised princely backshish, and with a great burst of laughter restored everyone's good humour. Our coolies were like children and listened to those they loved.

Dubost knew exactly how to talk to them, but Gevril had no idea. The difference of language irritated matters. Only the English believe that the whole world understands their language. Gevril addressed the coolies in long phrases and listened to replies which he did not understand any better from the very rough English translation given him by Panzi. But he thought he understood and produced imaginary agreements which caused a great many surprises.

That morning there was a misunderstanding of this kind, and it needed a great deal of patience to restore peace. At last Gevril set out with instructions to reconnoitre the Rishi gorges and to mark the road.

"And try to humour them," said Dubost, referring to the coolies. Dubost had inherited a part of the famous filing system and he remained at a loss in front of the cards, which were spread out as though he were going to tell somebody's fortune. He did his best to make a choice among the loads in view of next day's departure. An hour's meditation was enough to make a discovery of major importance: Gevril had forgotten the famous little sack which looked so insignificant despite its 75 pounds of mountaineering gear. We roared after him a concert of choice epithets, while one of our coolies volunteered to run after the fugitives and hand them the offending object.

Vignes and I went and had a wash a hundred yards from the camp at a slow trickling spring. It was fine weather and swollen cumulus hid the peaks. Where were we? Where did it lead, this trickle of water which meandered through huge tufts of grass spangled with wild irises? If we followed this stream should we find a village of stone and wood inhabited by easy-going Savoyards?
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But in the sky circled the huge Himalayan eagles, and the crests bore those stone cairns pointing to the sky which were a sign of the men from Tibet.

10th June. It was not yet nine o'clock when I arrived at the Curtain col; it was given this name by Shipton because it is the last screen in front of the mountain mass of Nanda-Devi.

It is always exciting to cross a col. I automatically put on speed, impatient to enjoy that precious moment when the solid line gradually descends and makes you the conqueror of a new region of the sky, of a new domain. Here pleasure and contentment vanished beneath the violence of the shock.

As far as the eye could see was nothing but the lavish disorder of nature—a world of rocks and mountain streams which tolerated more than demanded an audacious vegetation. Green patches of ice armour which give off an icy breath. To the left incredibly fine and cunningly contrived peaks rising to 15,000 feet. Ahead of us, well above the layers of mist, near and yet remote, a snowclad peak rose above the earth in a jet of immaculate white, challenging the immensity of the blue sky. As we stared at it we felt the tension which all of us had experienced for the past few days disappear. And beyond, Nanda Devi lay before us, the mountain which was as sacred to us as to our coolies. The sight of it sufficed to fill us with a new joy, to quicken our blood and revive our desires.

The curtain was no longer the screen which separated us from the mountain, it was the one where the world in which we had longed so much to live began. Now everything was simple. No obstacle could stop us any more. Did a few loads wait for us at the pass? We felt strong. Let us share them. Was the scree very steep? We would not walk, we would run.

"Which way do we go now?" asked Dubost.
"Make for the trees. I mean the birch wood."
Here, when the wind blows, it scores the roots, but we were making our way to a valley which encloses an oasis of green. The pink, purple-stained flowers of the rhododendrons, pale trembling leaves of trees, outlined against the background of snowy ridges... Already the distant valleys were hidden by the warm mists which rose slowly, each day at the same hour, from the Indian plain. Leaving the scree we entered a forest. Tall moss hung from the branches like lianas. The bark of the birches peeled off in strips of white lace; the wood was pregnant with mystery. Our footsteps made no sound for the soil was so soft. When we came out into the open the sun blinded us. A mountain stream cascaded over stones whitened by water and light. The crazy garden of an Alpine meadow offered us blue mecanopsis and huge yellow bells bathing in the bitter perfume of wild shallots. No one would come and collect the brushwood piled at the foot of these dead larches and black pines which stood as sentries over our camp. Was this not perfect happiness? To think, in this Eden, of France, of men and women, and of all whom we prized.

"It's wonderful here," one of us said.

But one needed new words which had never been used before. None of us was capable of them and thus the charm was broken. As on every other evening it began to rain at nightfall. One stage less separated us from the Sanctuary.

That same day Alain Barbezat, who had forgotten the pain in his knee, went from Lata Kharak to Dharansi. He was accompanied by thirty-nine coolies, all men from the village of Niti and all well-acquainted with the mountains and the passes leading to Tibet. They were robust, and their faces were more sunburnt than the men from Josimath. They were also better clad, and the roguish fellow who led them was the notorious Kalu. During the 1936 expedition Kalu was promoted to rank with the Sherpas, and his knowledge of the country was a godsend.

Nobody got on better with the coolies than Barbezat.
He was so equable in temper that a cataclysm would hardly have made him raise his voice. One sensed a calm will-power which no one dared to oppose. His silence in the Far East was a great asset and he immediately realised an essential truth: that it was far better to follow the coolies than to lead them. In this way things went better.

Payan left the village of Lata the same day with a group of coolies and his Sherpa, Gyalzen.

Now the rearguard consisted only of Duplat and Tensing. He was still lacking coolies, and the loads indispensable for the assault were still at Lata.

All the villages in the neighbourhood had been combed, but what could they say to peasants who wanted to harvest their corn and remain with their own people? The men who owned a certain amount of land were not impressed by our rupees.

Duplat was very anxious. Should he go on ahead? But then who would look after the transport? Should he put Gevril in charge of them? He was far too harsh with the coolies, whom he despised. Gendre was, of course, too young. Payan? The doctor had to be on the spot where there was the greatest threat of an accident. There remained Barbezat, Vignes and Dubost, but they were the thorough-breds who would carry out the attack which the others had to prepare. Could he ask them to leave the stage before the curtain had gone up? He would not be able to face their black looks. To give orders was a matter of indifference to him, but in his eyes not to have the worst place in his team seemed a treason, so he would go on playing the game to the end as usual. He was the leader. He would look after the last transport, then he would fly towards the assault, covering two stages in one if necessary. His orders were given so that the altitude camps were ready installed before he arrived.

Now he had to wait and scour the valleys with a fine comb for messengers. If no new coolies turned up the men who were already there would have to make two trips. The
Sahibs were already carrying loads, as he knew from the messages which came back down the column. But they would not give up. They would attack the summit later—even during the monsoon if necessary. He made new plans, for he would have to organise a more rapid assault than had been foreseen.

Now, more obsessing than a few days ago, the great milky pictures of the Himalayan paradise took hold of him and cradled his dreams. This precise methodical man, this volunteer, was carried by his dreams 10 miles away to where his men were looking for a path in a dense stony jungle in the gorges of the Rishi Ganga.

11th June. Dibrugheta Camp. A long climb through a dense forest which muffled our shouts. The slope lessened and the summit appeared through the whitened arms of a dead tree sculptured by the wind. We climbed the right bank of the Rishi Ganga about 500 yards above the stream.

Had we not known that Gevril was so solid as the rocks we should have been anxious about him. Where could he have got to? He had gone on a stage ahead to mark the route with cairns and so far we had discovered neither path nor cairns.

"The bloody fool hasn't even put up a cairn," said Dubost.

"You're being a bit tough on him," replied Vignes, absorbed with his telescope.

"No, I'm not, it's always the same thing. He has no sense of direction. He'll get lost like the day we came down from the Agneaux."

"That was your fault . . . There's the cairn . . ."

"My fault, my fault! Where's the cairn?"

"You jogged my arm. I've lost sight of it. It's your fault again."

"Oh, stick your cairn!" shouted Dubost angrily.

One of the privileges of very old friendships is that they allow hefty disputes. Those of Dubost and Vignes were so
severe that one often wondered whether they should not be taken seriously. The Sherpas were very offended. For my part I always looked upon these disputes, which occurred several times a day, with pleasure. They were never resentful, constantly repeated and always the same, and acted as a tonic. They were absolutely essential when looking for a cairn. The Tibetan type can be seen a mile away but has the disadvantage of only indicating the path from one distance to the next. As for Gevril's cairn, it was rather small and odd, generally well-hidden. When by chance we discovered one it was obvious that its creator was not afraid of vast detours or of acrobatic passages—the very ones that horrified our coolies. For if the latter condescended to advance they did it with dignity, that is to say, by having to be constantly cajoled. The smallest incident or some geographical peculiarity was the excuse for a halt, followed by the despatch of an ambassador to ask for cigarettes, which were usually given. After ten minutes one of the white men would stand up and give the traditional call: "Chelo, coolies! Chelo, coolies!"

At the outset our pronunciation was so odd that they burst out laughing and, forgetting that it referred to them, they set out again without demur. At later stages the ceremony became more complicated. Thus at the moment of this much-feared call one of the coolies would make a sign that he had a headache or a bad foot or knee. All these little difficulties had to be dealt with by Dubost: headache—aspirin; a bad foot—aspirin; if the sick man looked like disappearing into the blue to look for a problematical trickle of water, Dubost took out his water bottle and the troop had no further excuses to leave. If a rather stiff climb made them despair and they began to speak of giving up everything Dubost intervened. The best argument in his favour was that he was carrying a load just as heavy as that carried by the coolies. He did a great deal of gesticulation and made magnificent speeches which no one pretended to understand but were nevertheless very impressive. He
ended his performance by a few familiar conjuring tricks, in particular one known as the Japanese planchette, bought for 20 francs at a Lyons fair, and thanks to which he could make appear or disappear little circles of red paper as though by magic. His performance took place before a more attentive audience than would be found in the Théâtre français, and made the spectators so oblivious of their present condition that they would rush at the loads they had flung down a few moments before.

12th June. The Deodi Camp. At least now we knew where we were going. A cairn towered above the camp. No one was really satisfied, for we were separated from it by an impressive wall, the repeated sight of which brought to Sahibs and coolies alike a sense of discouragement. Panzi alone, with wrinkled eyes, laughed into his beard which was comprised of a score of curly hairs.

Vignes had twisted an ankle, and Dubost went on ahead to encourage the coolies. I fell into step. Which of us was to be the first to embark upon those slabs of golden granite covered with a leprosy of yellow lichen?

A beautiful fissure; a providential rhododendron which I ruthlessly clutched; a host of oaths from Dubost, yelling that only a cameraman could be stupid enough to get himself into situations which were no bloody good at all. All right, Dubost could go on shouting. I knew exactly what he was doing. He was looking for another fissure to pass me on the right and to arrive on the top before me. However, I noticed an elegant little passage which led to an easy chimney, and the game went on, a stupid foolish game which left us, broken and panting, near the most comforting cairn that Gevril could ever have imagined. It is unnecessary to mention that left to their own resources the coolies knew how to find a much easier passage. In any case they must have been very scared, for their usual delegate, the white coolie, tried to tell us that they had decided to go no further. This was an occasion for Dubost to give a gala performance,
during which he managed to pull off a double miracle: to make the illiterate coolies read a text which was even more hermetic since it was written in a language they did not know. We had the greatest difficulty in keeping straight faces, but in this demonstration the coolies found the necessary strength to face the beige-coloured scree which stretched out before us—an incredible chaos where a lands-lide occurred every moment, leaving an odour of recently broken stone in the air; bizarre architecture of cairns which our coolies did not pass without adding their own stones, dropping their shoulders a trifle more beneath the leaden sky. A long climb. The spikes on our soles left their imprints in the sand, crushing the poor flowers and biting into the stone. In the devastating midday sun the men carried their loads without a groan. A last effort, the foot slips, gets a grip again, trembles and has repercussions throughout the whole body like the echo of a sound in a grotto. A last climb and there nearer than yesterday lay Nanda Devi, no longer a dazzling peak but a complicated organism in which one could see the secret of its ice faces, hanging ice pinnacles and rocky walls. However familiar one may be with a mountain there are days when the terrain is obliterated, to be suddenly replaced by an enclosed world which is the essence of coldness and hostility.

Vignes sat down and handed me the telescope.

"I shan't go that way," he kept repeating as though to give himself confidence.

But for the moment it was a question of rejoining the stream which glittered at the foot of some great rust-coloured rocks. From close at hand the gleam of light became water, laden with clay, growling between rocks smooth as enamel. A waterfall, a sly whirlpool, another fall, and then nothing—or, rather, an explosion of drops, a cloud of mist rising from the infernal cauldron where the waters of this torrent joined other sandy waters: the confluence of the Rhamani and the Rishi Ganga.
The Sherpas brought up a dead tree-trunk and secured it with ropes which Vignes and Sarki made fast to their shoulders. The men began crossing. The din of those waters hurt the ears. The bare feet of a coolie slipped on the bark, damp from the foam. Dubost saved him. The turbid water and its eddies which came from afar were as fascinating as the void. Once more the coolies were afraid. This was no ordinary fear, but the particular torment of taking part in an evil action for which one would have to pay. One of them made a gesture. Fifteen hundred feet above our heads two bharals stood motionless watching the barbarians penetrate their domain.

A hundred yards further on, after crossing a smooth block and after a few necessary frolics on the rope, the air suddenly grew silent. But after a while another din took its place: the powerful moaning of the Rishi Ganga, which had to be crossed at a spot which a weary British wit had baptised “the bridge” on the fallacious premise that a few imbeciles had already managed to cross from one bank to the other, over the boulders against which broke the bestial fury of the waters.

If you wanted to cross the bridge the recipe was simple enough: descend to the bank on a 45-foot rope, get a footing on the first boulder, catching on to a small fissure with the right hand—third degree according to mountaineers; once on the summit jump to the second boulder and climb it with a few handholds to the left which are hardly visible—fourth degree, in other words the easiest part of the whole trip. Now you are on the centre boulder. Follow its crest for about 10 yards. Scramble down to the third boulder and you are on the opposite bank, with the help of a tree-trunk you have brought with you to this end.

Gevril and Gendre were waiting for us on the middle boulder, and, despairing of being heard, made wild gestures which only managed to make us laugh. This was not a bad thing considering how exhausted we all were. Their

1 Himalayan blue buck.
Left to right: Louis Payan, Roger Duplat, Captain N.-D. Jayal
They leave for the summit.
gestures were designed to show us two ropes stretched from one bank to the other. As though we could have taken this white gleam of nylon to be some excrescence from the local vegetation! By now we were utterly sick of the loads we were carrying. Moreover, we had realised that by suspending them on a snap hook from one of the ropes we should prevent having to do a lot of acrobatics above the whirlpools. As for Gevril and Gendre, let them go to hell! It was high time they beat it! It was all right for Sarki and the three Sahibs to transport their loads and for our stiff, shaking arms to clench as they hung on the cable, but it was really too much to do this under the critical gaze of two gentlemen of leisure who were supposed to be our friends. Let them buzz off!

As for the coolies, they no longer existed. They were huddled beneath a sheltering rock, slowly lighting their little fires. We did not exchange a word. An order, a nod of the head and the loads were passed from one to the other. For an hour Vignes, his face plastered with cream to prevent sunburn, looked like a weary clown who has laughed too much. “Come on, take this load, or, rather, pull the rope!”

We crossed the bridge. We had left the camp thirteen hours by the time we arrived at Gevril and Gendre’s tents.

“You look pretty glum,” said Gevril.

“I suppose we do. Is that your camp?”

“Yes, we’ve pitched your tent,” said Gendre, helping me off with my load.

“Come and have some grub. Everything’s ready,” said Gevril. “You’ve got a treat. It’s bharal.”

“Well, if you put it like that,” said Dubost, “we’re pleased to see you.”

Without waiting to be asked, Gendre told us how, making his way round a boulder, he had come face to face with a young goat which was rooted to the spot at the strange apparition and allowed itself to be seized by the horns.

“Good old Gendre!” sighed Dubost.
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13th June. We were so close to the mountain stream that when we lay on the ground we could feel the earth vibrating with the effort of the waters. The damp oozed from all sides, nourishing the flood of thick mosses... Trees plunging their roots into gleaming schist, clutching to the walls and raising their twisted trunks to the sky.

The gorge was narrow, deep, dark, and hostile in every respect. On the narrow strip of soil separating the stream from the rocks grew trees and a few plants and flowers, but they received so little light that all the greens were paler than elsewhere. Towards nine o'clock, however, a sunbeam glided between the lips of the gorge and lit up the underside of the trembling leaves of a beech, at the same time reviving our ardour after the day's effort. This was the moment that the coolies chose to come from the other bank where they had spent the previous night. They assembled in the patch of sunlight and smoked a clay pipe which they passed from mouth to mouth. They looked calm and a trifle weary, and soon the unaccustomed silence from their circle began to weigh heavily on us. What thoughts did those weary foreheads conceal? The white coolie blew out a large puff of blue smoke and stood up. He slipped over to Dubost who was still sitting by the fire and in a couple of words in Hindi, a few words of English and three gestures uttered his claims.

"The road is steep. We want three measures of flour every day instead of two."

Dubost's reply was the only one he could make: "No."

The white coolie accepted a cigarette, tried to argue, and then went back to the coolies. As soon as they had understood they got up and disappeared, calm and silent as they had arrived that morning. Gevril said something, and Dubost suddenly, in a temper, chased them as far as the bridge. On the middle boulder above the din of the water he caught up with the white coolie, who was so emphatic that no promise of money would make him weaken. The troop was already on the other bank, and Dubost returned,
nervous and exasperated by these deserters who could not be brought to book.

"The swine!" said someone.

There was no reply. How could one judge actions the motives for which escaped us. Had these men been engaged in some ordinary work our reproaches would have carried more weight, but for some reason which they did not understand we involved them in a supernatural adventure. These mountains already held a strange mystery for us which we could not explain. What heavy shadows had gone through their minds? What irrevocable power had made them give up—for they had renounced the money they could have earned. We were armed with a simplicity that the Far East considers ridiculous. For us good consists in fulfilling our engagements. Who has ever treated them in the same way? To what fidelity had they ever been accustomed?

If one admits that they had more amused interest than admiration for our perfected lighters and what they represent, what are we for them? Rich people with a screw loose. Had we not come to carry out some business at their expense? On this subject their ideas are arrested. Probably they had heard the tales told by some of their relations, soldiers of the British raj at Tobruk or elsewhere—men who returned not always whole, after having defended a mysterious goddess whom their chief would swear was more visible than Vishnu: Liberty, the Lion God of Great Britain . . . Liberty, with the face of a French woman.

"There's no getting away from it, we shall never understand those fellows," said Gendre. "They're impenetrable, that's the word for them: 'If we treat the oriental as impenetrable we have neither reason nor excuse, our indolence and our ignorance are the only cause of misunderstandings', thus spoke Lawrence of Arabia."

"Villagers from Garwhal," I thought, "if I knew how to speak to you, knew the language of your lips or of your heart, what should I say to you? Is there any good reason why you should risk your lives for the mere pleasure of
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Sahibs from a far-off land? Because they hold their own lives in little esteem is there any reason why they should expose yours to danger? In actual fact, Villagers, you come—you go, and I have no rights over you. Our plans are going to be disrupted by your departure, that’s quite obvious, but we should have known how to keep you.” I think we could all feel this in spite of our harsh words.

“Ah, the swine!” repeated Dubost. “But one must admit no one would care for their job.”

“Apart from the fact that it’s we who will have to do it now,” replied Gevril.

“Yes, but that’s not the same thing. We wanted to do it,” replied Vignes with a smile.

All these events came as a shock to our little team. Gevril saw our coolies leave for the second time and felt powerless in face of this problem which was so different from the problems he was used to solving. Dubost and Vignes, furious for form’s sake, let a weariness be seen which had the sole effect of exacerbating the desire they had to get this approach march over and done with.

Gendre’s tact was badly strained by these disputes. Moreover, since his victory with his bare hands over a bharal he fancied himself as a hunter, and with a melancholy eye took Vignes’ gun. The latter, too, thought the moment had come when his talents as a shot would be appreciated by his companions.

We breakfasted in the sun like a party of holiday-makers, in the place the coolies had just vacated. Voices were hushed, as at the bedside of a sick man, and none of the usual jokes were made. Even the Sherpas abandoned their noisy quarrelling. Da Norbu smoked by the fire, Dubost recovered his strength by digging into a bottle of jam which Vignes immediately pinched from him. He stood up to fetch another and pretended to know where they could be found according to the card index. How naïve of him! Ten minutes later he found himself in the middle of a pile of tinned food and a few cardboard boxes the contents of which
he explored in vain. His face had turned an unpleasant violet, and he roared into these wild gorges the most unfavourable comments on the designers of card indexes, their descendants and antecedents. The flood of abuse was so heavy that the Sherpas could not get a word in edgeways, and this was a great pity for they knew exactly where the jam was, the object of all this swearing.

Dubost’s anger was the inevitable and long-awaited signal for the return to normal life.

“Well, what do we do now?”

“I’m going on ahead with Gendre and two Sherpas to mark the route,” said Gevril, “and you can start humping the gear. It won’t take long. Duplat will soon be here with some new men.”

“And perhaps you’ll try to make a few more intelligent cairns!”

“You don’t realise,” muttered Gevril, already busy with his sack. Gendre was thinking of the miraculous hunting ahead.

“You’ll see,” Vignes said to Dubost; “he’ll manage to get to the base camp before we do.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll do nothing without us and we’ll do nothing without him, and it’s been going on like this for ten years.”

We spent the day not grumbling about our misfortunes but in packing up our provisions from their different boxes to last us for several days. Dubost suddenly changed into a talkative grocer’s boy while the Sherpas prepared hot drinks which they took more pleasure in concocting for us than in actually tasting.

14th June. The Bridge Camp. This was the eve of the date foreseen for the arrival of the monsoon. The sky was overcast and the clouds were coming from the south-west. Since we had abandoned all hope of the coolies returning I suggested that we should carry the loads to the foot of a vertical cliff where they could be hoisted up on a rope. The
slab passage. To be cameraman to an expedition always holds some surprises in store. Thus that day I found myself carrying the famous or notorious sack full of pitons and other toys of the same type, and, beneath Da Norbu's compassionate gaze, I should have to suffer this for the whole stage.

The departure was really terrifying. A vertical scramble through a wood in which our loads got caught in the branches. The soil was slippery and the branches were the only solid holds. Then short stretches over damp rocks, with tufts of grass into which we plunged our fingers as the only holds. The Sherpas asked for help. After an hour's climb the road grew more human until about 12,750 feet. But what a grind! Only one thought in my head: to place one foot before the other, keep up the rhythm, and get rid of this weight which crushed me, body and soul. Nothing else existed, neither the view, the wind, the rain—only the muddy shoes, the right one with its laces ready to break, the left with a deep cut in the thick leather.

Four hours after our departure we saw a big cairn dominating a valley, on the other side of which towered a grey wall 60 feet high—the slab passage. We crossed a feeble mountain stream and reached a slope of rocks with over-folds covered with sand.

The coolies would only have crossed on the rope and they were quite right!

At last we laid down our loads in a cave and were free to dance, leap and run. Far away on the other side of the Rishi Ganga the Sherpas, whose eyes are every bit as good as our binoculars, had spotted the silhouettes of coolies. Obviously a group of them making their way towards the Bridge Camp. An hour before, we had been heavy beasts climbing this slope. Now we descended it at a crazy speed, and the Sherpas joined in the fun. It became a sporting fight such as takes place on the mountain paths of Chamonix or the Oisans, where the locals like to chance their arm with the heavy though powerful carcasses of the mountaineers.
That day no English lady in pink silk would give a little scream of fear.

As long as a vague path existed, the Sherpa continued the assault, but over the rocky passages the victory went to Vignes. To have resumed our games made us happy, and it was in the best possible mood that Dubost and Vignes clambered over the boulders of the bridge to give a hand to the newcomers: Barbezat and thirty-nine bearers. He had met our deserters of yesterday and had been soft-hearted enough to give them a little flour. His example was not contagious, except that two of his own men were replaced by two of ours.

That evening we took an inventory. Everything was in order except that there was not enough flour. A group of coolies would return to the valley with the Sherpa, Da Namgyal. A long evening spent in friendly and relaxed conversation . . .

15th June. The Bridge Camp. Our troop of coolies was now commanded by Kalu, who is famous for having served under Tilman in 1936. “I was there,” he kept repeating, but he had a short memory and remembered nothing. At least he commanded his men with authority, and his sing-song roars generally had their effect. His men were the valiant bearers from the village of Niti, a gay bunch. Three of them were almost naked in spite of the rain and shivered hopelessly. Another wore jodhpurs and a long tunic buttoned to the neck, which suited him. The garment was made of cloth which was once white. All of them wore that cynical air which people put on when they have decided to be surprised by nothing—not even at the surprising behaviour of the white men.

In honour of the rain we sported a kind of poncho, a sleeveless cape of waterproof cloth designed by Vignes. The result exceeded all hopes. The very ample cut prevented one from seeing one’s feet, and on a grassy slope of 50° entailed the greatest possible danger. If in addition to this

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the climber tried to use his ice axe he made matters worse, for the point of the axe got caught in the seams of the garment, and this would have brought down the most solid walker. After a few skids on the damp stones I preferred to get soaking wet rather than risk the worst.

"I have never been so scared in all my life," said Dubost, as he removed the offending poncho which only its designer persisted in wearing.

Since morning we had covered the terrible opening stage of the previous day which the rain had now transformed into mud and then into snow as we attacked the slab passage.

Vignes secured two taut ropes. One served for the coolies' empty hands and the other was used for hoisting the bundles. Slowed down by the snow the manœuvre took two hours, and as a result of some mistake we discovered that we had one load too many. The Sahibs shared it. Above the slab stone passage stood an old cairn, a relic of the British expedition. Beyond, a series of valleys, torrents, traverses, and climbs on the damp rocks which were traversed along overfalls. A succession of tensions, efforts spoiled by the feeling of being mistaken, for the mountaineer likes to feel master of himself. On a rock face he feels defended: on granite he clings with his four limbs, the rope and piton hold him, and even when they are useless their actual existence is an encouragement. Thus when his reason is satisfied he discovers his pleasure, but here, soaked through and muddy, clutching on to stunted rhododendrons, insensitive to the austerity of the landscape, we advanced, frequently upset by our impotence.

At last we reached one of Gevril's cairns on which we found a message: "We are striking camp after trying in vain to find the way up the slabs." It would be impossible to print our remarks. Let us hope that the wind carried them away.

There was a big discussion. Should we pitch our tents here or carry on? There were two schools of thought,
Dubost and Vignes wanted to carry on if possible until nightfall or when they and the coolies were exhausted. Kalu was for stopping immediately, and quoted his 1936 trip. Yes, we knew all about that! Personally I preferred to take advantage of a favourable camping place and thought it better not to overtax the talents of our men. My view was usually supported by Payan and Barbezat, but today I have no allies. I must admit that I am always afraid of being accused of having placed the general interest of the expedition second to my professional needs.

At the cost of a few cigarettes, the smoke of which veiled the memory of 1936, Kalu gave the order to depart. Did the evil spirits assail the Sahibs, who had little respect for tradition that evening? At the outset a mountain stream which had hollowed out a gorge in the polished rock with rounded and worn fissures ... A fine climb, but why did the rain suddenly double itself so that we had to bring out the ropes to instil confidence in the coolies, who hate wet stones? If only we could have seen a place to camp, but there was nothing. A torrent, a stiff slope, a rocky spur, another stiff slope, another stream ...

About five o'clock we were forced to level platforms for the tents and to go a long way to fetch wood. Soaked and exhausted, the coolies stared at us with a gentle reproach in their eyes. Dubost, feeling slightly remorseful, consoled them with his favourite weapon: an extra rupee.

But the victories won by money are transitory. The following morning, June 16th, the coolies remained seated round the fire, busy cooking their chapattis, little flat pancakes without yeast which they place on the hot cinders as the shepherds in France do with their potatoes. Kalu considered that his men were tired and only gave the signal to depart after being pressed.

While we were looking for the way we noticed a coolie coming towards us. Where had he come from? Was he Gevril's coolie, or had there been an accident?
The messenger was a skinny Nepalese who handed us a letter from Duplat telling us that he had left Lata at last and that he and Payan were two stages from the Bridge Camp. Our orders were confirmed. Our first mission was still to install the Base Camp, the camp on Longstaff col, and Camp I. The messenger had already passed our present camp without seeing it and reached Gevril, who had killed a barral and had stopped at the following camp. That morning the messenger started on his way back and counted on finding Duplat the same evening. At the foot of his message we wrote all our news: "Excellent form. Morale at its height. See you soon. Signed, Dubost."

Vignes looked open-mouthed at the messenger, who was smoking his cigarette quite calmly. In two days this man would have covered eight stages.

Since leaving the Bridge Camp we had come into the most enclosed of the Rishi Ganga gorges. The walls where we traced our path the night before rose gradually and reformed into a crushing bolt. Neither Nanda Devi nor any other peak was visible and our march lost all its meaning. The event of the day was the crossing of the "bad patch" which had made such a great impression on our glorious predecessors.

Kalu pointed out a way up a kind of chimney where we had to cling on to jutting stones; it really looked most unpleasant. That must be the "bad patch". Dubost, always meticulous in his duties, unrolled our best red nylon rope and with skilful manœuvres safeguarded the coolies, who were flattered at being paid such an honour.

After they had been calmed down by an extra cigarette we set out again, and ten minutes away found another passage which Kalu crossed with studied nonchalance. This was the real but not the only "bad patch": a narrow grassy traverse which skirts a spur. The overhanging rock forces one either to scramble or walk on the extreme edge which looks down 900 feet onto the Rishi Ganga and its grey waters. The coolies rather ostentatiously flung stones into
the torrent and with amusing mimicry made us understand that the trajectory of a man carrying a load is very little different from that of a stone in a free fall.

Dubost and Vignes stood at the dangerous spot and gave a hand to the coolies who, once they felt reassured, turned out to be magnificent climbers who knew how to use their bare feet. Further on the prospects were not particularly promising, and beyond the heart of still-warm ashes abandoned that morning by Gevril we carried on our exciting chase for his cairns. Dubost sped on ahead, attracted by a wall which was obviously the least propitious spot in the whole countryside to organise a passage of laden coolies. Vignes, who would never leave his old friend in difficulties, hastened to join him, and all that remained to me was to make a huge detour followed by the faithful Kalu who, since his earlier prowess, decided to remain in the background. At last we were in sight of a stem of brown rocks 600 feet high. On the summit we could see the clear outlines of a cairn around which an eagle was slowly circling. The idea that the bird was about to make off with the bharal which was destined for us was so infuriating that our trio attacked the slope at full speed; the coolies dispersed among the rocks as best they could.

Those are the joys of existence: after a few weeks of food with too many vitamins, the sight of a leg of mutton with bright blood on it made Dubost's eyes wrinkle with pleasure, without our knowing whether he was recalling good Lyons cooking or discounting the alimentary satisfaction of a Himalayan expedition. While we were occupied with our leg of mutton the coolies came out on the top. They hardly glanced at us, and at the sight of the peak of Nanda Devi prostrated themselves on the ground. The same gesture the pilgrims made on catching sight of the River Ganges.

Our altimeter showed 12,650 feet and the encampment was not far away. As soon as we put down our bags Kalu rushed up to me. "Yes, Kalu, I know. You've come to tell me that we have reached the 1936 camp and that had we
listened to you yesterday we, too, would have camped here and saved ourselves a lot of trouble. But such are the fortunes of war, Kalu. Didn’t you understand that? Here, take a cigarette. I’m going to photograph some flowers. Come with me and you can carry the tripod. You see how evil the Sahibs are. I could have taught you that this nickelled toy is a camera. Would it have helped you at all? One never knows. But no, I’ll tell you that it’s called an assidia—the name the Eskimos gave to my equipment. Yes, Kalu, the fortunes of war. Well, come along. Your country is certainly a funny one. Flowers at 12,000 feet, and for whose benefit? For your God or mine—one of them is very generous. And suppose he were the same, what would you say, Kalu? You do not reply. Perhaps you would say he was an evil spirit. Normally the Sahibs do not speak to you. Yes, that’s it, you take me for a maniac. For, Kalu, I am a maniac.” I burst out laughing. “Always provided that you don’t think I’m mocking you. No, I see you have many other things in your head. Let’s go and look at those poppies with the hair stalks and the mauve and blue petals.”

The time arrived when everyone was busy with his own affairs. The Sherpas hastily prepared tea. Vignes and Dubost finished erecting the tents. The coolies settled down in a cave and tore to pieces the roots of dead junipers. Light clouds distilled a fine rain. Dubost prepared the meat, Vignes, with ruffled hair and looking romantic, was dreaming as he stared at Nanda Devi. This calm evening was not like the others. Moreover, we were delighted with the pink halo above the clouds which hid our mountain, and did not that forgotten smell of meat bring back many a memory? We were in the camp of the Allée Verte. Roger was there with Monie and Claude…. We no longer felt tired now, even rested. Stirring his coffee with his nose in the air, Vignes interrupted our dreams.

“Hmm . . . I shan’t do any more mountaineering this year.”
THE SANCTUARY

The milky clouds swirled at the bottom of the ravine, the moonlight outlined a hundred peaks, and the coolies' camp fires pierced the darkness with living patches. At last it was cold.

17th June. Tilchaunani Camp. The sky was blue and the coolies were in no hurry. Nor were we. Kalu had just been entertaining the white men, not because he had anything in particular to say to us but because he guessed that we liked gossiping round a pot, and because the odour of early morning coffee did not leave him indifferent. Later he would light his monumental pipe, and as soon as he had smoked for a while would shout the orders for our departure. His load consisted of a chest of soldered zinc heavy with sausages, coffee and the clumsiest of my cameras which, when I was about, he treated with the greatest care. Soon the caravan was advancing along a stony way and I discovered that everything was different from the preceding days. Of course, I thought, we are no longer climbing! We are walking, and this gait suits us so well that I have never seen white man and coolies make such progress. Above a shelf on the top of a plateau carpeted with small chrysanthemums Nanda Devi could be seen in all its glory. No longer a Matterhorn of ice enthroned at 26,000 feet, but a real mountain with a stream at its feet, with grey expanses of scree, beige-coloured rock faces, couloirs of dirty snow which turned white higher up, then other walls of black rock cut with hanging glaciers, ice pinnacles glittering blue in the sunlight, a round spine of gleaming ice, a neck giving one a glimpse of a skeleton of yellow rock to which the snow flattened by the wind clung, and then, on the very top, a proud but sightless head, crowned by a very clean-cut cornice.

We had arrived. We stared at each other without a word, for we had already marched so long together that we had had time to learn the language of silence. Ahead of us stretched huge green meadows which
seemed to have no end. There was no need to order a halt.

Dubost was very excited. He walked up and down the column examining everything. I wanted to shoot some film but it was impossible; I had to pursue the convoy. Were we going to stop? Again impossible. We had to go quickly and in the general interest of the expedition... Ah, now that started all over again!

I tried to arouse Vignes' sympathy at my lot by every method, even the most disloyal, which consisted in reminding him of his native country, but I was wasting my time. Vignes knew that when Dubost was really excited it was better to wait. The latter suddenly rushed up to us with a tiny revolver, the only weapon we had left since Gendre had commandeered the rifle.

"Keep your trap shut! There's a herd of bharal ahead, between twenty and forty of them!"

"And in the general interest..." I began.

"Keep quite, you bloody fool!"

"It is essential that I should take a picture because my telephoto lens will get them whereas your revolver which only fires 10 yards..."

"I'm going to crawl..."

But the revolver was still 200 yards from the herd when the huge beasts with their heavy horns got wind of us and fled towards the stream, which they crossed in one leap before climbing a cone left by an avalanche and then scrambling vertically with amazing agility high up the mountain until they were only small bright dots against a background of russet rocks.

"They're pretty cute, those animals," said Vignes. "They haven't seen a gun for years, and they realised immediately that we were not vegetarians."

The whole of that day we crossed gentle grassy slopes cut by mountain streams which had hollowed deep beds in this ancient moraine, a testimony to the distant past when the glaciers were ten times vaster.
THE SANCTUARY

Looking for some solitude I lost my way and had to wander some distance before reaching the place of encampment.

Gevril and Gendre were encamped about half a mile away, busy with their hunting. Dubost, who caught sight of them, was at last able to explain what Gevril’s messages meant: “We have killed a bharal.” It was neither he nor Gendre but their coolie, the only one whom we had kept from the first day, a Nepalese with a gleaming skin called Sirbadour. Not without some regret Gendre had to admit that their respective talents were rather unequal. The Frenchman’s eye was nothing compared with the eye of the Garwhal coolie. Armed with our hunting rifle Sirbadour had climbed, taking advantage of the folds in the ground, and got within 50 yards. When I looked at these heavy and yet so lightfooted beasts which our coolies were hastily cutting into pieces, I felt a slight twinge of remorse.

In this sanctuary,—this is the name given to it by the first explorers—where nature defends itself so savagely, we had arrived with weapons, and already our shots echoed and disturbed the silence.

“It’s a pity, all the same,” said Vignes.

“You see, Kalu, once more the fortunes of war. The people of your race are like myself. They turn their eyes away from the atrocious look which death gives to the proudest beast. Moreover, if we were not in the mountains you would not eat an animal killed in this manner. You would have insisted that it should be killed according to the rites: an incision in the breast, a hand slipped in to tear out the living heart which, placed on a stone, continued to beat before your horrified eyes. Then you would tell some rubbish about the soul being given the time to take refuge where it wants to. They are ignoble gestures which put you in harmony with your world . . . Yes, Kalu, your ancestors sculptured the goddess of Lata and mine the smiling façade of Rheims. But we are both a couple of pretty savages. And you, Da Norbu, the Sherpa—are you interested in my
camera? No, not at all. The most recent demands of my tyrannical Sherpa was that I change my socks at the end of each stage. There was one who was no savage. Plump, amiable, always smiling. After a meal he looked at his belly with a satisfied air and made so many jokes that from time to time his colleagues got annoyed. At times he admitted that he missed the village women, then went to sleep like a bear, only bothering his head about the next meal—a real man, the best possible type for the approach marches of an expedition. The whole evening he watched me with wide open eyes as I methodically explored the delicate innards of my camera. Obviously he found it very complicated and was full of admiration for these Sahibs who know everything. If only the poor fellow knew!

18th June. The Sanctuary Camp. In the distance above the innumerable 20,000-foot peaks which no one has bothered to christen the sun rose in all its majesty. Its rays merely caressed our tents covered with ice that had formed during the night. Near the fire Kalu banged his chest a dozen times, swearing by 1936 that by nightfall we should be at the Base Camp. The loads were lined up as though on parade, and at a roar from the chief each coolie rushed on the one he thought the lightest.

Gevril, whose beard had made great progress, joined us with Gendre, and to our delight we had a moment to discuss our most recent experiences. Gevril had seen an extraordinary monstrosity of nature: a crow which was so big that he mistook it for an eagle.

"It flew off going: Caw . . . caw . . ." said Gevril, moving his arms and ears at the same time. "Caw . . . caw!"

After this necessary little chat Dubost and Gevril went on ahead. I followed them with Da Norbu, who carried my camera for the first time. Crossing the right bank of the Rishi, then a bridge of snow on an avalanche cone, a flowering moraine, the dried-up bottom of a lake. Limpid air and
small black dots, men lost in the chaos of gigantic moraines. Altimeter recording 14,500 feet. One of the coolies fell sick and Angdawa took his load. Now we began to feel the altitude. Bare-footed, the coolies suffered from these stones which are less weatherbeaten than those in the gorges. A sombre dispute between Angdawa and Kalu on the subject of the sick coolie's load. The column halted and Dubost had to intervene. Angdawa, in a temper, bent his back beneath the two loads, pushing aside the help of the white man. Fifteen thousand five hundred feet—almost the height of Mont Blanc. I took photographs. Crumbling scree . . . Numerous halts. Kalu sped on ahead, disappeared, and returned brandishing an old bar of rusty iron. He had reached the Base Camp. I caught him up, out of breath. The ancient kitchen emplacement had been waiting fifteen years for us, with the old original Primus stove and rusty tins. Did they contain any message? No, they were empty. Dropping their loads the coolies sank down exhausted on the ground. The zinc box with the coffee and sausages which Kalu had been carrying was empty. That damned savage! Angdawa arrived with his 150 lbs. At the end of the plateau we found the grave of Kitar, the Sherpa who died in 1936, with his rusty ice axe stuck in the mound. Angdawa began to play with it, but this caused an explosion from Dubost. Angdawa misunderstood and flung the axe far away on to the glacier. How could he have been expected to know? Gevril and Kalu explained to him and the culprit made good his misdeeds in all contrition. Kalu continued to chatter.

The hollow masks of the coolies were suddenly wreathed in smiles. Yes, Gilbert, Paul, Loulou, Tonton, we've arrived! But shake the cobwebs away: that stone on which you are leaning is the southern ridge of Nanda Devi in the Himalayas. And look, there are still flowers. 16,076 feet—might as well say, 16,000 feet. And the monsoon has not yet arrived. Look at the sky: have you ever seen anything so blue? Would you believe it?
Everyone in his own particular way was happy that evening of 18th June at the Base Camp of Nanda Devi.

During all those days of climbing and descending already confused with everyday routine, after the clashes which had united and disunited us, we had so much pleasure in being together that we could never envisage that things would not always be like this.

On the following day the assault of the mountain began.
PART THREE
THE EVENING OF 18TH JUNE Duplat, Tensing, and Barbazat foregathered round the fire which threw its shadows on the stone wall of the Bridge Camp. With them was a man with calm eyes, round features and smooth skin who was questioning Tensing in sing-song English—Lieutenant N. D. Jayal, liaison officer attached to the expedition from the Armée de l'air staff, but an enthusiastic devotee of anything concerning mountaineering. This Garwhali aristocrat already knew our sirdar not only by reputation but because they had been together on an expedition. Had it not been for the particular cut of his shorts—the starched model which so many brick-faced British colonels adopt—it would have been difficult to distinguish Jayal from the rest of the troop. He observed, asked questions, told us what he knew, listened to our information, and was immediately accepted as one of us, for he did not disdain to carry one of our clumsy loads like everyone else.

"An attack of malaria and bronchitis," announced Payan, stepping into the circle of firelight. "Da Norbu will be laid up for three days."

"We shall push on in any case," replied Duplat. "As soon as Da Namgyal's coolies arrive with the flour you can leave."

Duplat was so calm and self-composed that one was inclined to wonder if he ever grew tired of all these difficulties, these desertions on the part of the coolies,—
nineteen one day and twenty-one the next—this spacing out of the camps over nine stages along the ravines. Had the memory of this week of exhausting inaction which he spent at Lata been effaced by the sweat of his forced marches? In the very heart of the Rishi Ganga, with no laggards, knowing that the Base Camp had been reached, assured by Tensing that the Garwhal monsoon was not an insurmountable obstacle, he sensed in himself an unlimited strength which told him that the goal he had set would be reached. Moreover, in the fraternal conflict he waged with the mountain he was not the type of man to know doubt or anxiety. His goal remained the same: not only to reach the summit of Nanda Devi but to cross the long ridge which joins the main summit to the eastern peak.

On the flanks of Everest men had reached 27,500 feet. He therefore knew that the ascent of a 25,645-foot mountain would not bring him great glory but would be an exploit of which he need not feel ashamed. His desire, as it had always been in the Alps, was to extend the limits of the known world. Among men, when he walked along a crowded pavement in the shadow of black houses in the streets of his home town where everything—the barred windows, the thickness of the stones, the damp—reminds one of prison, he felt a stranger. He did not love cities, only their cathedrals. He only loved the mountains. Not a particular mountain but all mountains, and not half-heartedly but with a frenzied intoxication, with the passion of a crusader.

For a moment his memories took the upper hand; the inkstained red notebook where in his jagged writing he opened his heart . . .

Heed the mountain,
It will make you dream, will make you weep,
It will be for you *
The most ardent, the most faithful,
The purest of mistresses,
Of whom you will never tire.
In this red book he noted down his joys. He was neither indifferent to the contact of objects nor insensitive to the beauties of the struggle. But the brightest moment in his heart was the conquest of a summit: "The joy of a summit is a bursting joy, a violent pleasure marked by a little constriction of the heart, and yet I have known foolish individuals to whom a summit brought nothing but bitterness, pain and deception . . ."

When he reached a summit he was so exalted that he felt his heart would cease to beat. Now he hoped to prolong this violent joy the whole length of that fantastic mile and a half ridge. A march of two long days; a terrible mousetrap where it would be unthinkable to turn back, enclosed as it is between such cruel barriers. For several days in the open air, in a world twice cut off from that of men, he would experience his joy of the peaks. The technical problem was complicated. A very heavy mountaineering equipment would have to be put in position so that the assault pair would not come to grief. All this he knew.

"Will you take oxygen?" he was asked.

"What should I do with it?" he replied.

He could not see himself otherwise than with his face lashed by winds others had never known. He did not want a complicated equipment of tubes, bottles filled in huge factories, masks, and all that rubbish, which turns a climber into a machine. He treated all the dangers, all the risks, all the demons of the Himalaya with which the books he had read trembled, as he was wont to treat every other mountain obstacle: he ignored them, and he always got through to the other side. The silent warnings of fate had no terrors for him. Falls of rock, jagged rocks which came loose under the ropes, handholds which gave way under clenched fingers, had become messengers whose secrets he no longer penetrated.

Not that he was unaware of death. There is no other world, apart from the world of war, where it is more present than in the fierce sport of high mountaineering. How many
times had he met those processions, carrying a sack of brown canvas, descending towards the shores of men, followed by faces more grim than exhausted? Had not his own brother been killed on a peak of the Oisans? Was he afraid to die in the mountains? He did not often ask himself this question for he did not believe himself to be an immortal possessing some magic power which would spare him the common fate. When he was among men, or, rather, facing a crowd of men, when he was tired of that strange leader's power which could be read in his eyes, such an end did not seem to him desirable, but to some extent suitable. In the red notebook he had written this verse:

If one day I die in the mountains,
It is you, my old rope comrade,
To whom I write this testament.
Go see my mother,
And tell her that I died happy . . .

And later on, in this notebook, he admitted: "I don't like men. I am a confirmed misanthrope. I do not like them, firstly, because I am one of them and I judge them as they judge me: so far removed from a concept approaching divine perfection . . ."

He made a few exceptions. They were not famous men, whom he found too bound to the world, but people like Alain Gerbault, a taciturn guide from the Oisans, some friend whose carefree ardour distinguished him from among the drab dwellers of the town.

"I envy those who have been able to detach themselves from body and spirit," he once wrote.

His climbing companions were the type he esteemed despite their uncouthness. Men to whom he gave a friendship which he placed above love.

After the long ordeal of this forced march he felt his men to be stripped of non-essentials and to have grown clearer in outline. To be like this round the fire with them, to feel that the flame gave birth to warm waves that passed from one
to the other—that, too, was his life. For him the camp fire was a mysterious yet simple life, noble yet vivid, during which he was invaded by a great happiness. He found confidence in his power, and the horizon was swept of its presages by the magic of the flames. He loved fire because it is pure, because it is not jealous, and needs nothing. And besides, does it not by its ultimate bouquet of sparks represent the whole immensity of our magnificent desires?

The weight of his presence had made itself felt round the fire of the Rhamani Camp, and now everyone fell silent. The air was filled with the deep growl of the torrent which, in this calm and peaceful hour, seemed more unusual than ever. Its black waters, which we could no longer see, exhaled other torrents, long ribbons of cold air which licked the earth.

Duplat had drawn closer to the fire; its gay flames had died down now. Now it fed only on live embers which radiated a penetrating heat. Duplat stared at the fire. His motionless eyes caught the gleams of the flickering little flames. He could see into the future. He imagined himself advancing in the darkness. He was the fire. The light of its flames conjured up in the darkness the same fantastic silhouettes which always smouldered within him. It wanted to fight against a hundred dragons, but hardly had it brushed them with its great gleams than darkness took hold of them once more. This was his power...

The air suddenly grew chillier.

"What about turning in?" said a voice.

Duplat seemed to be shaken out of his reverie and replied, as he often did, with another question: "We’re lucky, you know. Do you realise that we’re lucky? Well, good night."

Alone in his tent he reflected that he had just enjoyed a few moments of happiness, but a happiness he no longer appreciated all that much, for he knew the recipe. Never before until that evening had he felt so acutely that the great hours of his life—the red-letter days—were those of the peaks, of bivouacs beneath the stars and the camp fires,
He was wide awake, but eventually fell asleep deciding that he would not get up too early, for there was no need. He guessed more than saw the mug of boiling tea which the Sherpas always prepared at daybreak. He opened his eyes and, startled by the clarity of what he saw, thought that he was wide awake and had to make an effort not to slip away once more into sleep. During these last days life had not always been so smiling. Later, when the sun reached his tent, casting a halo of golden light on the canvas roof, accompanied by a stifling heat, he got up. The tea was cold, and he made his way towards the Sherpas' fire. Tensing made room for him and they spoke together. He loved questioning Tensing, asking him where he had been in his journeys to Tibet, making him speak of the south face of Everest and his life at Solo Khumbu. In Tensing he had discovered an upright man, a fine animal with gleaming teeth, a thoroughbred whose alternately gentle and harsh metallic glance he loved. Ever since he had grown used to sitting round the kitchen fire he had sensed and then discovered another Tensing: a man who did not stop at the appearance of things but who was always in search of the reason why... someone who was fully aware of the world of the spirit. At first he had doubted, but had been surprised to find that Tensing and he by a few half-uttered words could understand each other, so similar were their actual values. The other Sherpas were different. Playful children like Da Norbu, violent brutes like Sarki, old rogues like Panzi or even devout Buddhists like Angdawa. In Tensing, on the contrary, he was aware of a proud and sensitive soul. The sirdar realised the respect in which the French Sahib held him and responded as best he could by opening his heart. On one such morning Tensing said to him: "I never heard about Sahibs like you."

He had not known what to reply.

Barbezat got ready to leave camp. Payan and Jayal were sitting by the fire as they had done the night before, but
it was no longer the same now. It was broad daylight, and Duplat came out of his tent sucking at his empty pipe, which he filled absentmindedly. He opened the big aluminium box and took out a sheaf of files full of papers. A few moments later he had begun to write in his tortured handwriting which sloped alternately to right and left.

"As a technician I want to speak now of my precise plans. Now, in a short while, we complete the attack on the traverse of Nanda Devi, which has so far gone according to plan . . . This interminable approach march should pay off in the last analysis by a very quick assault. On consideration I have decided that it would be intelligent to profit by our presence in a region so difficult of access by trying a few other peaks. This, then, is the programme. Everyone duly returning, I shall split up the expedition as follows: Two Sahibs and two Sherpas for Trisul, two plus two Dunagiri, two plus two to be sent down the line. Two plus two on the northern glacier of the Rishi (north of Nanda). I think that a snowy spur, which Tensing tells me is possible, leads to a snowy unnamed peak of 22,948 feet, and that a flat crest joins it to Hardeol and possibly to the two peaks of Tirsuli . . . This tour is improbable but tempting.

"After this programme reassembly at Lata and a joint return to Josimath, a little rest if it's possible . . . two days to install a camp near Mana, and the second part of the programme.

"To the west not far away—Chaukhamba and Nilkanta.

"To the east Mukut Parbat (virgin) and the possibility of Kamet.

"To carry out a third of this programme would be an enormous success.

"This mail is the last before the assault and more serious things. I think that the next one will confirm our victory."¹

Now the sun shone on his handsome lined face and showed how eager he was to be en route for the next obstacle-ridden stages of crossing streams with rocks

¹ Letter to Pierre Chevalier.
glittering like mica, of catching on to the foliage of rhododen-
drons which gave a welcoming air to these gorges, often
more hostile and perfidious than any mountains.
For another three long days he would be a prisoner in
this Bridge Camp, a prisoner of these coolies whom he did
not want to leave behind him. On the 22nd he wrote to
President Montel, to M. Livet and to Jean Guye—the
men without whom he would never have been able to
leave.
"The day before yesterday, normal departure of Bar-
bezat. Return of a group of coolies from the Base Camp.
Yesterday, refusal on the part of the latter to leave, and a
discussion. The Indian officer is very useful, but this hold-
up is serious. I have stopped their rations . . . We have
gone through all the phases . . .
"This morning, without explanation, they were all ready
to leave. So Payan, the Indian officer, and the group of
strikers left. Two have returned as was to be expected.
Everything went off all right. Arrival of two Sherpas and
fourteen coolies with provisions (from below), therefore
nothing left behind except the mail.
"Tomorrow early I am going on ahead (two days) and
shall attack the Nanda . . .
"According to messages received the morale ahead is
excellent. Here it is even better. If the weather holds out
for a week, we've won.
"Yours ever,
"ROGER DUPLAT."
Chapter Eight

First Contacts

19th June. Camp I. The world was still half drowned in darkness when the Base Camp awoke, and life had never seemed richer or more passionate to those who pushed back their tent flaps.

The Sherpas had already rebuilt the stone walls of Tilman's kitchen and covered it with greenish canvas. A trickle of smoke rose from it, showing that the "infant martyr", Da Norbu, was on duty. Gevril, the first to rise, risked his beard in the cold morning air. What air! So pure that the distances no longer existed. How far away was that blade of ice which cut the sky? One wanted to reach out an arm but this motionless air, devoid of dust and mist, would not allow its depth to be measured. It is rarefied... so rarefied that sounds are swallowed up in it and lost for ever. Among these tall stone walls, these icy mirrors, I should have liked to hear endless echoes which would have made the void sing. But in this part of the globe the mountains are so wild that they are content to groan and tremble.

Thus the glacier of Nanda Devi, a damp monster with a chaotic carapace, carpets the bottom of the valley where it climbs imperceptibly, betrayed by the creaking of its carcass and its dragon hiccoughs, drooling with huge boulders.

The camp leant against the southern ridge which descends from the main summit of Nanda Devi and the eyes can explore only the southern half of the compass. To east and west the eye sees a snowy ridge which, beyond a rocky

1 For the detail of the camps and the itineraries see endpapers.
buttress, culminates in a badly defined peak of 20,475 feet. Beyond this again stretches the great wall of Nanda Khat which encircles the southern glacier of Nanda Devi and rises to the 21,500-foot Panwali Doar, a white pyramidal summit to which cling a thousand ice pinnacles.

Opposite the camp is an anonymous peak of some 21,000 feet. The main glacier alone separated us from the heavy ugly ridge which descends from it.

Farther away to the west the two rounded peaks of Devistan display their soft snowy cruppers before dying in a gentle slope among the meadows of the Sanctuary.

Only the towering schist and granite walls of Nanda Khat, where shadow and ice play on ice and snow, corresponded to our desires.

The Himalayan sky was deserted in its own fashion. Pale only for a moment at early dawn, it was already a dense blue while the camp still breathed the cold mist of the night.

I joined Gevril at the Sherpas' tent. “Do you think they’ll soon be getting up?” “They” in an expedition always refers to the others. For the moment, Vignes, Dubost and Gendre, whose capacity for sleep was both an object of admiration and distress. “I’ve done my best,” I said, “but they’re sleeping like the dead.”

At last Vignes came out of his tent, followed a little later by Dubost who always began his days in a somnambulist state from which he only emerged with an explosion of swear words, cursing objects and people. That morning he was annoyed with Vignes who, apparently, had been so restless during the night that it was a misery to sleep in the same tent with him.

“And if you think that at high altitude I’m going to let you sleep in my tent . . .” “You’ve got a nerve. It’s your fault not . . .” “Well, at last they’re up,” said Gevril. Gendre in turn came out of his nocturnal coma.
“Well, you can talk of your Base Camp. I’ve never been so cold in my life. Freezing all night. And this morning what a view! A moraine like at Albert Premier and that’s all . . . As for camping, I prefer Aiguebelette. You can go on talking about Nanda Devi. Where is it? Where do you see it?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll see it all right,” said Gevril.

Gendre was right. We were stuck against the mountainside and we could not see it. From the extreme end of the terrace on which the camp was pitched one had to twist one’s neck to make out above scree and a ridge of yellow stone a vague barrier of rocks distorted by the perspective, behind which the peak was hidden.

The only advantage of such an encampment was that the slope began 10 yards away from the tents. “Doesn’t even give you time to warm up,” complained Vignes.

“And where are you gentlemen going to play the first great scene—the first contact between the mountaineer and the Himalaya?” I asked.


“You’re going with Gendre and two Sherpas,” said Gevril.

“And I’d like to see what that descent looks like,” said Vignes.

Vignes was never pleased when he was separated from Dubost, and to avoid this was actually his greatest preoccupation. Both of them wanted to be on the assault rope party, but they knew that only one of them would be chosen by Duplat and they watched each other out of the corners of their eyes. But that day curiosity more than deep calculations attracted us to the col. Its climb was the first objective fixed in the orders.

The goal: to reconnoitre the possibilities of descending from the main summit towards the ridge, and the site of a camp to be used for the eventual crossing.

1 A lake near Lyons, famous for its calm and gentle resorts and the good food to be found in its inns. It plays a great part in the subconscious of the average mountaineer from the Lyons region.
And what are you going to do?" I was asked.

"I'll see. But I may not be ready very quickly. I have to install the radio and put some order into my equipment."

Everyone got ready, and altitude clothes, jackets of yellow nylon, blue hoods and canvas boots were brought out of the chests. In a padded jacket which came out of its sack for the first time we found a little slip of folded paper: "Good luck, boys. Signed: Jeanette, packer at Lyons." This warmed one as much as the actual jacket. Familiar faces were recalled—all those who helped us so willingly, like our friend Revolat, who, after a hard day's work, devoted his nights to us. As for Gendre, this crumpled piece of paper made him dream.

"I should like to kiss that little Jeanette."

"You're a lecherous devil," said Dubost.

I fixed up the radio, which we should use to receive weather bulletins and also to facilitate liaison with the altitude camps. I fiddled with a few knobs but nothing happened. Once when a long wave crossed the field there came a flood of Indian music, suddenly transforming this moraine at the end of the world into a civilised country. The coolies were still in camp. They ran up and sat round the set. For a moment I lay on my belly fascinated by the dial. Like them I am still sensitive to the miracle, and my hand was no longer turning a bakelite knob but a ray of light wandering in the night. The B.B.C., Washington, Goa, a Jamaican singer, a Russian choir, the intermittent crackle of a short-wave station transmitting streams of propaganda, ships at sea, little huts here and there, aerials rising above the polar snows of Greenland, the Antarctic, the world of one's friends, the world of Jeanette and the others . . . how far away it all seemed. I could have remained for hours in front of this little dial with its green numbers, particularly as I was tired. We were at 16,000 feet, so to walk for 20 yards was exhausting, and I had an almost perpetual headache. I managed to forget it but it never disappeared. I
The long wait at Camp III. Louis Gevril and Da Namgyal

The Base Camp
must pull myself together. It was high time to go and see this mountain.

"Da Norbu! Da Norbu, where are you?"

"Call him if you like," said Gevril, "but you won’t be able to use him. You can laugh. He has to carry a load up to the Longstaff col. You’ll get your Sherpa when the others have arrived."

The troubles began. Since this was the case I should have to be content to go with Dubost as far as the foot of the col wall. This would not be a waste of time because I should see the southern face and the eastern summit of Nanda Devi. I put a sleeping-bag and two cameras in my haversack—one for black and white and the other for colour—and I was ready. The Sahibs and the Sherpas were busy adjusting their climbing-irons. Never have pieces of metal received so many swear words as those mountaineering climbing-irons. Dubost attacked his dumb adversaries and even replied on their behalf. Gendre cursed his as though he were going to throw them away, and it will never be known what the Sherpas said to theirs. As for myself, whenever I met the maker of these climbing-irons in the streets of Chamonix I was very polite and said: "Bonjour, M. Simon!" but here, when I came to grips with his products . . .

About two o’clock we left the camp, sliding down the long, gentle slope of crumbling scree which separated us from the glacier. The Sherpas tried to avoid this rash exercise, but by not having stood on their feet they arrived at the bottom on their backsides, loudly applauded by Gevril and Vignes who watched us leave with a trace of envy. As if the fact of leaving to install an altitude camp would give us very much pleasure! On the contrary, the glacier, or to be more precise the moraine, was of the very worst kind: a chaos of icy slopes with unstable sliding blocks of ice, craters filled with green water which had to be skirted and which suddenly emptied allowing a glimpse of grey abysses from which rose the distant roar of subterranean rivers.
TO KISS HIGH HEAVEN

At the summit of a slope where Dubost cut a few steps we had our first discovery: the Longstaff col.

"A nice spot and one which looks to me prone to avalanche," said Gendre.

"That happens in the centre, in the bottle-neck, and then on the right towards the rocks and the spur. On the whole it looks all right to me," said Dubost, cheerfully.

Since we should have to take this road several times we marked it with cairns at every few yards. A mountain stream had hollowed a long valley in the ice, not too far off our course, and we made our way up it. After crossing a wall of ice we arrived at a tortured region: the spot where the currents of ice from the Panwhali horseshoe meet those of Nanda Devi. From there at last we could see both peaks of the mountain. To the left a ridge takes root on a large foundation of brown rock and rises in an uninterrupted curve to a second mountain superimposed on the first—a rocky mass with clear faces ending in a white fringe of such expanse that it is difficult to say precisely where the peak is.

Almost horizontal between the left- and right-hand peaks a rampart of rocks closes the horizon and one could imagine it bordered with a fine snow ridge. This rather disturbed us. It dominates the sheer yellow quartz-veined rocks and an enormous glacier—smooth and without crevasses at first, then wrinkled with them, with new snow blurring the outlines. Lower down the ice hollows out, rebels, and the viscous fluid blossoms into monstrous ice pinnacles, finds a moment of calm, and then launches itself in a tragic last leap before hiding its beautiful green beneath the drab rocks of the moraine on which we were walking. I do not know whether the impression I felt came from the strange dimensions of the mountain or from that secret pleasure one discovers in seeing spectacles which few men have ever contemplated before. We remained oppressed, silent, and dazzled for several moments, which slipped by like so many seconds. After this first shock we concentrated our atten-
tion on the ridge. Was it unbroken, edged with cornices, or narrow? Was the descent from the main peak practicable?

"We shall see tomorrow," said Dubost. "Come along. Let's press on. Cheeloo, Sahibs."

Da Norbu burst out laughing. Sarki, Gendre and I echoed his laughter, for we had hoped so long for this sight of the mountain that we were seized by a kind of light-hearted gaiety to the point that we continued quite nonchalantly over this infernal glacier. Dubost and Gendre strode out, and we reclimbed the moraine which led to the foot of the col. The heat dried us and drew up from the soil a light steam which hid the sun. We gained height over flat-stoned scree which slid beneath our feet. I wanted to film the passage where the fully laden men were outlined against a horizon of ice pinnacles but they were too fast for me.

"Hi, there! Hi!"

The air swallowed up my cries and no one stopped. It was a painful moment. We were at 17,000 feet and I was already tired. What should I do on the following day?

Near the vague frontier between the stone and the snow my two companions lay down on a ledge, looking up at the sky.

"You're a nice lot. I get ready to film you and you disappear. What about my work?"

"If it's any consolation we're both done in."

"I'm glad to hear it."

With our ice axes we levelled the grey marl to pitch our tents. The Sherpas got busy and we ate with heavy heads. Before going to sleep wrapped up in our orange padded jackets, which made us look like tropical birds, we remained outside the tent. The clouds had vanished and everything was calm. Our cigarette smoke rose straight into the air. The sun disappeared in a blaze of orange in the direction of the Rishi Ganga. There is no silence in the high mountains. As on the sea, a far-off rustle rises, disturbed by the roar of avalanches, clouds of snow or dust, sprays of sparks
which crackle in the darkness. A trickle of snow slowly glides into the bottle-neck of the yellow rocks which indicate our path for tomorrow morning. But tomorrow the snow will be hard and no tiny avalanche like that could damp our ardour.

We huddled in our tent and hardly spoke. A little anxious perhaps about the morrow and perhaps a little weary. As we crept into our sleeping-bags, Gendre said to me: “Don’t play the goat, you’ll come with us tomorrow.”

“You know I haven’t got my climbing-irons on.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll see about that.”

Gendre is a good fellow. At that moment we were very close, and when Dubost blew out the candle the three of us were in harmony.

We woke up long before the alarm clock went off: we had brought it along as a precaution. The Sherpas made tea which helped us to shake off the torpor of the night. Getting under way was a long business. We were unaccustomed to this life of altitude tents and we were too generous in our movements and in our disorder. Since I had no climbing-irons it was arranged that I should climb alone as well as I could without risk. The mattresses were deflated and the padded jackets put back in their holders. Hands rummaged in the bottom of packs for gloves. I wondered if I should find mine, the pair that Jean Deudon had lent me—doeskin gloves from the 1936 expedition. I looked with envy at Dubost and Gendre getting into their outer garments of nylon, the light diving equipment of the Himalaya. Mine was at the Base Camp. “Come on, we must get started.” Dubost attached himself to Sarki on the rope, Gendre went with Da Norbu, while I set out to the left in the snow of an avalanche where a single footstep was enough to cut out a step.

At the beginning the pace was slow, the pace of a loaded bearer, but it was still too fast; the sack was heavy and legs began to feel it. The air grew rarefied and made our hearts beat fast. We had to make a halt. The weight of the sack
buried me in the snow and I had to lean my forehead on crossed arms on my ice axe. I could come to terms with the snow for it was not bad. And I also came to grips with fatigue. I did not feel exactly weary, merely incapable of expending any energy. One feels powerless and alone in the mountains and then gradually comes the creeping doubt. Shall I ever get there? You have to be obstinate, force yourself to place one foot in front of the other . . . to be obstinate, ten steps . . . to be obstinate, another ten steps. Above all not to speak because that makes you out of breath. Ten steps, sit down for a moment, look round, to the south a crest turns pale and then to rose pink. A few moments ago the sky was grey. It has turned pale blue and the stars are still there. On the wall of the Longstaff col five men rested, five hearts beating far too fast.

"Come on, we must press on," said Dubost.

He said that but he would not be able to forge ahead any faster than ourselves. Da Norbu’s face had grown serious. "Ah, Danou, you don’t know how to use your climbing-irons. You must cut steps . . ."

"So much the better, and I’ll use your steps."

We crossed the couloir without a halt. The mountain was lit up on all sides. We were still in the shadow. The couloir was slashed with gutters left by avalanches. They were smooth, smooth . . . This was the right moment to be obstinate . . . Should I ever reach the snowy spur? Dubost was already there.

"It’s bad here, very bad," he repeated.

The cold nipped. My toes grew numb from kicking into ice broken up into huge crystals. How stupid I was. Fancy having come without climbing-irons, and why so obstinate not to have asked for the rope? Come on . . . I have a headache. I should think so, too . . . This is the right moment to think about that. I mustn’t worry. Dubost is asking himself the same question and so is Gendre . . . As for the Sherpas . . . but look at them . . . just look at them. They’re on the rope. I’m cold and can’t use my left
hand. That’s quite in order. If only I could breathe a little more regularly. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, halt. Glances at the col which is now in brilliant sunshine. Panting heavily, set off again. Right foot, left foot. I must be obstinate... obstinate. This word which buzzes through my head reminds me of something. No it doesn’t, so what am I thinking of? I should like the thousand people I know, who open their eyes wider when you mention the Himalaya, to see me and my pals, poor fellows, dragging their legs up a slope, looking pathetically weary.

“I’ll lead you up. Two lengths of rope and we’ve done it. I’m cold,” said Dubost.

“So am I.”

“I can’t feel my hands.”

“Well, blokes, shall we get on?”

That is the way it goes. Come on, boys, two rope lengths, you are told, which means perhaps three, four, five or ten. And then after the last few yards at 60° you’ll get the sun full in the face. You won’t feel the wind immediately but the sun, a liquid warmth trickling within you. It’s fine, fine. Take care, it exposes you to a thousand pains, in the fingers, the feet, in all the places where the cold has begun to do its work. It hurts like hell but that’s the way it goes. And now you are happy, happy that you are there breathing the raw air. You laugh and feel that you are men. Well, all the same, you discover that there is some wind and you go and shelter at the foot of the Red Pinnacle. In any case you don’t ask yourself any more what you are doing there and you begin to speak.

“Well, Sarki, you look a pretty sight.”

“Yes, Sahib.”

“And you look a bit grim, Da Norbu.”

“Yes, Sahib.”

In any case, Nanda Devi is still in the clouds.

Thus, on this 20th June, five men sat for a moment completely exhausted on a few piles of frozen scree at the
FIRST CONTACTS

foot of a 150-foot pinnacle at about 19,000 feet altitude on the line of the ridge which joins the eastern summit of Nanda Devi to Nanda Khat. They had done nothing particularly extraordinary. The first stage had been reached. The acclimatisation began its gradual work. For an hour, with great blows of the ice axe echoing in their painful heads, they would cut out platforms for their tents, drink a great deal of tea and spend a bad night. This is invariably the case on the first night. On the following day, at the hour when the great peaks are vessels of lights emerging from a sea of shadow, they would emerge into the harsh air to gaze intently at a peak, a wall of schist or an extended ridge. They would make a sour grimace and not utter a word.

“A lousy job.”
“A very lousy job.”
“Perhaps it’s not impossible.”

Leaving two tents unstruck they would leave the Long-staff col to return to the Base Camp and they would never have dreamed that they had had so much difficulty in climbing 20 yards of scree on the descent they crossed in one fell swoop. They would begin to learn that acclimatisation at altitudes is a very slow phenomenon and that this was only a start. Moreover, the Base Camp was empty. A letter left on a stone informed them that Gevril and Vignes had left to install Camp I. The previous night they had climbed with their loads, accompanied by Angdawa. About four o’clock in the afternoon a noise of stones heralded their return.

Gendre was the first to attack Gevril. “Ah, so there you are at last!”
“Did it take you all that long? What’s the Longstaff col like?”
“Tough. Soft snow, prone to avalanches, rotten ice, 60°.”

Gendre was silent for a moment and went on:
“What about higher up? What’s Camp I like?”

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“Tough. Crumbling scree, rotten rocks with bits to climb.”

“Did you get through all right?”

“Yes.”

“So did we.”

“What about the descent from the summit along the ridge?”

“Slanting ledges, difficult, and not pretty to look at.”

“Duplat will have to see,” interrupted Gevril.

“Cana, cana!” called Da Norbu, which meant that we were going to eat. The Sherpas had lit a big fire and since it was only right to celebrate the installation of Camp I we laid on a proper meal to satisfy Gevril’s appetite. We learned that on the previous night Vignes had gone on ahead and not found the good passage to cross the yellow rock ridge which towered above the camp, and that he had been forced to descend again. That morning, with Gevril, they had attacked further to the left, swearing at the scree, for they slipped down three steps for every two they climbed.

They had reached a breach in the ridge and had come out opposite the glacier to climb further to the left along a greyish moraine sheltered from the wind, where they found a little moss and a few spiders. Gradually, in distress and panting heavily, they climbed the slanting ledges and installed Camp I at the spot where the slope began to stiffen. To pitch the two tents they had to build platforms of flat stone. Gevril’s altimeter recorded 18,420 feet and the tents were well above the ridge of yellow rocks.

“As far as I can see,” concluded Dubost, “you seem to have wasted the whole day.”

What an extraordinary idea to make such a statement when the first day’s effort made so many demands, particularly as a quarter of an hour later everybody was in agreement that the following day should be spent resting in the Base Camp!
22nd June. Base Camp. Check-up of equipment, a haunch of bharal and trying out the radios. They had suffered a little in transit and two of them were out of action. Inside number three a valve wobbled and nothing would keep it in its socket. The mouthpiece resting against the throat gave one a sensation of stifling which was already unbearable at 16,000 feet. What would it be like higher up? A bharal cutlet... We talked of Lake Aiguebelette, and heard the latest variation of Loui Gevril’s story of the crow which he mistook for an eagle.

“That blasted quack!” spluttered Dubost, who had undone two Red Cross packages without finding a tube of aspirins.

A pleasant evening round the fire.

“Well, Paul, what are you thinking of?” Vignes asked Gendre. “Of Jeanette?”

An odd thing, Gendre could be made to blush after all.

At least we all knew what Vignes and Dubost were thinking about: the summit, the slanting steps, and a certain ridge...

There was a general impatience in the air and a longing to be in action. Duplat was at the Bridge Camp, Payan at the Bujgara Camp and Barbezat at the Sanctuary. No sign of the monsoon any more than there had been yesterday. In the late afternoon a few clouds which dispersed at nightfall.

23rd June.

“I want him!”

“You can’t have him... The general interest...”

My old friend, the general interest, apparently demanded that my Sherpa, Da Norbu, should carry a load up to Camp I when I had to penetrate the bottom of the southern glacier to get a general picture of the mountain mass. I was a trifle annoyed. All was well, and the general interest had to make do with...
"All right, off you go, Da Norbu! Make it snappy. Now's the time!"

What a sight this glacier was! Only a volcano in eruption could represent better the blind forces of Nature. I walked with my eyes fixed on the thousand grey stones among the ice; they looked like bright new toys. A giant factory had just broken this quartz shell so that my eyes should be the first to marvel at its crystals. I picked up a blade of brown streaked with yellow. It was as furry as a tongue without a trace of being weatherbeaten. That silvery star shining in the shade was a pyrite crystal. I adored the infinite variety of these stones. In places they disappeared, allowing a glimpse of the fine living flesh of the glacier. Breaks in the ice revealed dry tunnels abandoned by the streams which had hollowed them, and grottos of glistening ice—yawning, sinister maws. Everything was rounded. The smooth walls undulated as though the frost had gripped wind-ruffled water. To slip between its green lips was an agonising experience. Beneath the blows of sacrilegious ice axes the black walls burst into transparent needles. The light followed the strangest paths. Here a ray cut the darkness, there a greenish glimmer in the transparent wall. Each patch of sunlight was reflected a hundred times. At the back, where the daylight had died, a fissure had opened from which rose the echoes of a far-off tumult. We must leave this cave and get back into the sunlight.

The sun was already high. Da Norbu and I went forward, our backs aching beneath our loads. When we stopped, the sweat ran from our hair and stung our eyelids. Its salty taste assuaged the thirst but burned our swollen lips.

Now I could begin my photographic work. To be stuck against the mountainside made one live in a world of inverse lines, of fleeting masses. To retire a mile brought things back into perspective.

The ridge where we had installed our camp became a brown fold at the foot of a concave face which filled the eye; the purity of the air seemed to magnify it. All the lines were
simplified. There was nothing here to remind one of the chaos and romantic disorder the mountains at home affect. A powerful balance . . . A classic, harmonious mountain which gave a bewildering impression of strength. What violence, too, there was in that ocean of ice which had fallen against a vertical wall, towering into the blue of another world of rocks with its gullies, ledges and ridges . . .

Da Norbu watched me fiddle with my camera. It intrigued him, and to pass the time he melted the snow on the hot rocks. With head thrown back he drank the water which trickled drop by drop. The magnificent panorama made us forget the time, and retracing our footsteps we came across corners of snow which hid pools full of water. I took an unwitting bath which delighted my faithful Sherpa, but as revenge, a few moments later he, too, found himself sitting in a brook. We arrived at camp, happy but with aching limbs, shortly before Barbezat arrived with nineteen coolies. I plied him with questions. He was in good spirits and his face was wreathed in smiles at being at last at the Base Camp. He was on the top of his form.

He had left Duplat at the Bridge Camp. His troubles with the coolies were very nearly over and he thought that our leader would be arriving in two days’ time.

I told him that Gevril, Dubost, Vignes and Gendre were sleeping that night in Camp I and that at the hour arranged for the liaison I would try and get them on the radio. A tremendous crackling in the earphones, but it was impossible to have a conversation. Coolies and Sherpas were obviously amused at hearing me roar: “Hallo, Camp I! Hallo, Camp I!” Da Norbu took up the refrain: “Allou, Kanhun! Allou, Kanhun!”

“Well, Da Norbu, aren’t you a little impressed by the knowledge of the white man?” I thought.

I persisted in shouting myself hoarse in my tangle of wires and piles of aerials, and to amuse Da Norbu I pretended to carry on an exciting conversation with Camp I,
but the creature continued to roar: “Allou, Kanhun!” and I think if either of us was heard at all it was probably he.

Up above, however, we could make out two forms in the grey of the evening. Vignes and Gevril had approached the edge of the cliffs to look at the Base Camp. Soon tired of this, they returned to their tents pitched on that giant beam of stone which plunged into the depths of shadows dominated by tall golden walls on which the setting sun lingered. The shadows rose from the glacier and engulfed the peaks. For one moment there was a blaze of colour. From the sky fell a green light which clung to the snow. The last rays were a coppery red, a russet bronze, which finally died. Everything returned to normal. Very high up near the peak a spur of rocks turned red, while in the dark blue the rosy clouds died. The sun of Asia had gone into hiding. Day was rising in America and the Himalayan night began.

24th June. Camp I. (According to Louis Gevril’s account.)

Gevril was the leader of the team installed in Camp I. The first to rise, he shook the tents where Dubost and Vignes were asleep. Gendre filled his pack with the slow gestures enforced by the rarefied air. The camp was on the edge of the great Nanda Devi glacier, so vast that one can rarely see the avalanches and the falls of ice of which only the dull echo can be heard. Sarki was the only Sherpa who remained with them. Angdawa was sent back and would climb up again with Da Norbu. Gevril looked in the direction of the invisible peak, hidden by its immense foundations. The route up was obvious: follow the shapeless ridge which narrowed after a time and bordered with snow before losing itself in the face. The immediate problem posed no difficulties: a succession of stony ledges separated by smashed rocks. In the Alps this would have been an easy terrain and we should have crossed it without a thought, but here there were always our packs and that air without sufficient oxygen for the lungs. Beneath the nylon hoods the heat soon
became unbearable. Progress was slow and unexciting; a bar of sulphur-coloured rocks 6 feet high, a small chimney to be cleared of its loose stones which fell slowly towards the glacier. This was a job Gevril liked. To climb among these unsafe stones reminded him of so many previous climbs. He felt at home. Like a reaper looking for the clod which might break the blade of his scythe, he ferreted among the disorder to find the solid stone which would bear his weight.

Gendre was bent nearly double. The party went forward to the noisy rhythm of their lungs, exploring a new world. Each of them enjoyed this intriguing game: listening to the movement of the human machine, walking as fast as possible but watching for the least warning on the part of the body; the stab in the ribs, the bitter taste in the mouth, the panting breath—all those signs which announce a flagging heart which flings you to the ground, suddenly powerless.

Gevril was in his element. He felt a latent strength suddenly rise within him, a strength which responded faithfully to his summons. To hump a heavy pack, to advance across a dubious terrain, was all part of his life as a mountaineer. A real mountaineer is probably richer by such hours than by those precious but rare ones which pass so rapidly in the excitement of a difficult climb. The mountain was the salt of his life, and he was not in the least surprised to be there. He felt no anxiety. He was fully aware that he would not be the one whom Duplat would soon be choosing. He assessed his rôle and knew its importance. He had to equip the ridge with camps, and he would do it to the end, to his last drop of sweat. That was only right and proper.

Dubost and Vignes might be 300 feet above him, he could not have cared less; he knew exactly what would happen. Despite the tough work, they would embark upon a stiff climb which they would carry through for pleasure, merely for pleasure. He would make a detour on the rock
face, balance his pack, brace his thighs, and soon be above them. That, too, was perfectly in order. Up there where the ridge suddenly rose abruptly in the snow he would rope Gendre and Sarki and his steps would leave blue holes in the snow. He would go forward like a smooth well-working machine. When the ridge curved in a fragile cornice he would sound it with the ice axe and use the rope. When the ridge came to a stop against a block of granite he would stop and say: “We’ll pitch Camp II here.”

Gendre might look around, but he would have already foreseen everything. Under the block of granite a platform would shelter two tents and if they had to pitch a third they would level the crest of snow. Everything was quite simple for him.

Sarki collapsed in the snow, white in the face. He said nothing, but there was no mistake about his appearance. Dubost and Vignes were there. They helped pitch the two tents, solidly secured to pitons stuck in a rock, and then went down to pick up Sarki, a huge giant who now had no strength left. Gendre was already in the tent, intoxicated by so much emptiness and incapable of movement.

Gevril saw to it that the second tent, in which the provisions and the alcohol were stacked, was well pitched. When the cotton-wool mass of afternoon clouds rose towards him he took off his canvas boots and went into the tent where Gendre was half asleep. He placed the Primus at the back of the tent and piled snow in the aluminium frying-pan. He held the match to the wick but the spirit would not catch. Now he had to find some paper. This time the manœuvre was successful—so successful, in fact, that the tent caught fire. Gendre opened one eye...

“Have you gone crackers?”

“Quick, some snow!” Everything went out, including the stove. Start all over again. Gendre woke up.

“I’m thirsty,” he said.

“Do you want to eat?”
“No, I’m thirsty.”

It was essential to eat, but their swollen lips called for liquid. The stove would not be put out until nightfall. Nothing is very appetising at high altitudes. To eat a biscuit, nibble a dusty sausage, flirt with the idea of cooking spaghetti, or of warming some soup, and to give it up, boil some tea, nibble a bar of chocolate and a couple of sticky sweets—that was it, dinner was finished and they were still thirsty. Gendre was asleep. A trickle of water ran down onto the tent. To put out a tin to catch it was an undertaking which one thought about until, as soon as the cold fell, the drops took longer to fall and finally stopped. A light wind sprang up which made the tent rattle.

The tent was now closed. Gevril lit a cigarette but it seemed tasteless. His sleeping-bag was too small and the zip fastener had got stuck. He tried to keep on his padded jacket, to slip into the nylon suit. The mug of tea which he had put on one side was now covered with ice. Gendre had slumped against the canvas wall. The cold penetrated everything. Breathing condensed into white clouds and finally covered the inside of the tent with hoar frost. It was a long time before they could get to sleep. The glacier creaked... The hands of his watch were phosphorescent, his pneumatic mattress was too short and his feet touched the snow. He was cold. The tent began to swim before his eyes.

He fell into a restless sleep, tossing from one side to the other, from Gendre to the void. When would it end? At last he was at peace. Every fibre of his body was at rest; the warmth began to invade him. The sun touched the tent and the frost melted in trickles which stained the sleeping-bags. The wind had abated. Why not go on sleeping for a bit? It was broad daylight when he finally awoke.

“Hi, Gendre, are you asleep?”

“Hmm, let me be.”

“Come on, get up! Are the matches wet?”

“There are some more in the waterproof pack.”
“Gendre, get dressed.”

Gendre was as white as a sheet and tried to eat. He emerged from his sleeping-bag and without saying a word put on his balaclava and his trousers. Next came his boots... The door of the tent was opened. Gendre was blinded by the sun. Gevril had got everything ready.

“You know, old man, I shall never make it. I feel sick. I shall never get up there!” sighed Gendre, who looked in a pitiful state.

A nice business Gevril said to himself. I rather thought in the state he was in yesterday that he wouldn’t get much further.

“All right, we’re not in very good fettle. Go back to bed and I’ll bring you some tea. We’ll wait until tomorrow to set out for Camp III. In any case, I’ve got a splitting head. You must take some aspirins. Don’t worry, Bumpkin, you’ll feel better tomorrow.”

The whole of that day of 25th June, Gendre remained in his tent at Camp II enjoying this unexpected rest but irritated at not being able to push on, a prisoner to his sickness, and alone.
Chapter Nine

Towards the Light

25th June. Base Camp. Yesterday Duplat arrived at last at the Base Camp, after covering two stages in one day. He was feverish, resolute, and never let up for a moment. The worst part of the approach march was well behind him. What had we done before he got there? Made a reconnaissance of Longstaff, set up Camps I and II, and that day probably III. He was anxious about everything. What was the climb like up to Camp I? Why didn't the coolies go up?

"There's no reason why volunteer coolies should not join in the trips organised by Barbezat," insisted Duplat.

No sooner said than done. Four coolies, Kalu, and four Sherpas would follow Barbezat to Camp I.

"Well, cameraman, did you climb up the Longstaff?" Duplat went on. "What do you think of the ridge?"

"Not much. It's impossible to make sure that there are no chasms. In any case cornices, a descent, slanting slabs... And I'm far less pessimistic than Dubost and Gendre."

Gilbert Vignes had returned from Camp II.

"What about you, Gil, what do you think of it? Is he speaking the truth?"

"Yes, it looks lousy," said Vignes, lowering his eyes.

"You're only kids, you shouldn't be left alone. I'm going to have a look for myself."

Duplat grabbed an ice axe, a pair of binoculars, and left for the glacier. He was back within the hour. Turning to Vignes he said, looking him straight in the eyes: "I've just seen the ridge, Gilbert, it's fine. It's as flat as a billiard table."

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"If you like . . ."
"Won't you go if I ask you to?"
The reply rang out dry and definite: "Of course I'll go. You know that only too well."
"All right, we'll go together, then. Dubost will go to Longstaff."
"Just as you say."
Vignes did not utter another word. He sat down near the fire, then stood up and went over to his tent as though he wanted to prepare his pack.
"We shan't go today. Tomorrow at the earliest. I've got a bad foot. I'd like to see the quack."
At that precise moment Payan and Tensing came up the last small slope leading to the Base Camp. Five minutes later they were on the spot, Tensing showing his gleaming white teeth and Payan smiling into his beard.
"Greetings, doctor; there you are at last! It is high time you arrived. First of all the medicine chest, and above all a bit of conversation."
"That's a fine welcome. You haven't got a drink by any chance? The sick can wait for a bit. In any case the medicine chest is lagging behind. Let them go and see Dubost."
"He is at Camp I," said Vignes. "Sarki looks all in, you know. He came down from up there."
"And where is he now?"
"Asleep."
"That's fine, then; don't wake him up. There's nothing better than a good sleep!"
We crowded round Payan and, as every occasion was a good one, we took the opportunity of having a solid meal at which the "gamey" flesh of the bharal made us curse the abominable cooking at high altitudes.

The tardy monsoon gave us an unhoped for respite, and since Duplat had made his decision known the atmosphere of waiting had vanished. The game had begun in earnest
and now we were all of us in it. Never so much as that evening had we had the feeling of belonging to the same team.

A new attempt on the radio. Without waiting for a reply I roared until I was hoarse for Dubost to return to the Base Camp on Duplat's orders. On the short wave of my receiving set a murmur allowed me to think the message had been received.

26th June. From early morning onwards the activity at the Base Camp was as feverish and nervous as on the eve of a battle. An invisible frontier had been erected which separated us from Duplat and Vignes. They only had to bother about the loads they had to carry. They did it with the greatest care, weighing each object, trying countless arrangements of gloves and socks. A decision was taken which was not a light-hearted one: no radio apparatus for the trip. Payan made up a medicine box: sleeping pills, heart and pulmonary stimulants, coramine. Duplat and Vignes did not altogether agree on the provisions and started a disagreeable discussion which lasted most of the morning. Duplat had a bad foot: an ulcerated sore as big as a 5-franc piece which for some days would not heal. He improvised a combination of short socks and canvas boots which allowed him to walk without being seriously in pain even when he wore climbing-irons.

As he carried out the simple movements of filling the pockets of his haversack, and noticed the steel gleam of his light Italian climbing-irons, Duplat remembered nearly every occasion on which he had fastened on his pack in the past. For more than ten years he had attached an almost religious importance to this banal gesture: slipping a leather strap in an iron buckle. When he made an effort to reach the last hole in the strap it always seemed to him that this was enough to make him pass from the world where everything was so complicated to that world where
everything was so crystal clear. In the old days he was methodical, each detail taking on its importance when he put on his old canvas balaclava, an old torn pullover, down-at-heel rope soles—"stupid as a rope sole", he thought for a second—rusty iron snaphooks, twisted pitons, and a sharp-pointed hammer; then in another pocket the mediocre wartime provisions including a brownish, sweating mass of dried bananas. He used to stroke all these objects, aware of his wealth; at that time they were more than tools, an armour which was almost part of him, an armour more magnificent than the bright costume which the toreador dons before entering the arena. Today it was done mechanically with his mind elsewhere as he looked at the transparent nylon, the silky clothes, the scarlet rope, the light-coloured biscuits wrapped in cellophane—all this luxurious baggage. He no longer believed in the virtues of the ancient armour and he was seeking for his salvation within himself. The uncertainty and excitement of the past few days had given place to a smooth inner calm and to a terrible resolution.

He and the mountain had met and he knew that he belonged to the mountain. For others the mountain was a pile of elevated rocks, a place designed to arouse horror. He had never considered it horrible nor had he ever looked upon it as a huge geological formation. For him the mountains were great cruel fertile gods who created and destroyed, who made and unmade men of his calibre. Not to affront them was a cowardice which prevented one from living in peace. To flout them was a dangerous game, but in this very danger lay his pleasure. If good fortune willed that he should survive the ordeal, he was not only rewarded by those happy hours, but above all by the transformation within himself. From the chrysalis of yesterday a new man was born, a new man who for a while had ceased to doubt. And now, more than ever, he felt himself attracted by this duel which was to be fought in the open air. Not for a second would he stop to reason or wait, to climb slowly,
methodically, to ensure the safety of the undertaking. But then if success were assured in advance why should he, Roger Duplat, undertake the ordeal? Already those around him no longer looked the same. Yesterday he saw in them warm-hearted companions, people with whom one loved to share one's life; today he saw in them only subjected slaves. Had he not, a few hours before, tried out his glance on the best of them? So he had lost nothing of his ascendancy over men, and tomorrow the rocks would submit as they had already done so many times. Tomorrow he would be victor on this ridge of which he had dreamed until it had become an obsession, victor on this ridge which he could still see even when he closed his eyes.

For a second his smile became bitter. He thought of all those who tried to tell him that man should be humble in face of a mountain, that his plans were insensate . . . For him humility was the sister of weakness, the most rational actions have been crazy audacities which have succeeded. This was his approach to everything. Those who tried to stop him by talking of humility obviously did not understand him—this man who only understood the language of pride. Did he not live in a world which reserves its applause for the proud and which despises the weak? A mad action! He had often heard that expression. But those who had conquered deserts, the poles and mountains, those to whom a statue had been erected in their native town, those whom the schoolmaster mentioned to the children on feast days, were they mad? Admittedly, he was mad because he wanted it with all his willpower, because it was only right that he should be like that, because in his case it was what other people called honour.

For the moment he felt well and pleasantly warm. He lay on his sleeping-bag beneath the harsh sun at 16,000 feet. He moved his arms and legs, contracting the muscles as he liked to do. He lit a pipe, smoked it slowly, and as the grey smoke rose to the sky, felt supremely calm and serene, convinced that he would do a good job.
“Tea, Sahib?” asked Tensing.

Oh yes, simple everyday tasks awaited him. He had to pay a few coolies who wanted to leave. He had to write letters, and had already begun to address an envelope. Who was the Sahib that the Sherpas had just caught sight of? It was Dubost descending from Camp I. Well, so he got the radio message. He would certainly be in a very bad temper, for he had hoped to be on the final assault. He must have understood that if he had been told to descend it meant that someone else had been chosen. Why Vignes more than Dubost? He had hesitated for a long time. At the Bridge Camp he had asked the advice of the doctor, and Payan had considered Vignes the fitter athlete of the two. That had simplified matters, but Dubost was going to be furious all the same. Even more so as he would have to forbid him to go to the eastern peak. He knew Dubost well. He was a man who did not know how to resist—when he was allowed to set foot on a mountain he would immediately be found on the top. But there he was now.

“Cheers, fellows, so you’ve got here at last! It is high time—we would have done Nanda Devi without you. So you don’t want me down here? I understand. Where are you off to?” he asked, turning to Vignes.

“Hm, you mustn’t be annoyed, it was Roger . . .”

“Cheers, Dubost!” said Duplat, who had just come up. “It’s all arranged. Gil and I are leaving tomorrow at full speed. You go to Longstaff col with Tensing. Your mission is to wait, to pitch a tent on the other side of the Red Pinnacle, but that’s all, do you understand? Nothing more.”

Dubost stared before him, his legs wide apart, arms outstretched, leaning on his ice axe as though he had just heard too many things at the same time. He was red and the sweat was running down his face. He hesitated for a moment as though he were going to say something important, then he caught sight of Vignes.

“But, Gilbert, you blighter, you’ve taken my canvas vest. Well, it’s a good one.”
Everything went well. The Sherpas brought tea and Duplat went back to his mail. On the blue expedition paper he wrote to President Montel, to Livet, and to Jean Guye, to the "trinity" as Dubost called them:

"My dear friends,

"Tomorrow Duplat, Vignes, leave for the assault. Sufficient equipment is in its place at Camps I and II. Radio liaison very mediocre, but not nil. The team, Duplat-Vignes, will climb in echelon with Sherpas as far as Camp IV. There will no doubt be a possibility of establishing a Camp V.

"For the trip: no radio, a tent, normal clothes and sleeping-bags, camera, medical box, ten pitons, two pikes, one hammer (to abandon if necessary).

"Route: an easy snowy curved ridge as far as the barrier of slabs at 40–50°, 1000–1250 feet higher—a big problem. We shall have fifteen yards of ten-millimetre rope and eighty yards of small red nylon for returns and handwork; probably, afterwards, bivouac—then long snow horizontal ridge—crossing a pinnacle? Then an easy but long and obviously exhausting climb to the eastern summit with a bivouac in the region.

"Easy descent (snow), an easy pinnacle, shortly after leaving the camp a big rocky tower.

"Dubost and two Sherpas will occupy the camp on the col and will pitch their tents above the rocky tower.

"That's it.

"The morale is remarkable.

"We found Tilman's camp intact—a Sherpa's grave which we have put in order. Morning and evening raising and lowering of the colours.

"Today I sent this telegram to Tilman:

"'Base Camp installed on your location June 18th stop We thank you for your example which we will always bear in mind.'

"Roger Duplat."

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Now that all his papers were in order he could close the aluminium tin with the red-paint stripe. He had a clear conscience and all the objects around him had resumed their importance. "Well," he said to himself, "next time we shall have to modify the zips of the trousers and the overgarments; the climbing-irons can get caught in the nylon laces and that would be ridiculous." He decided to take a few photographs. He took his Foca, came out of the tent and raised his head for a moment, fascinated by the unreal spectacle of the icy curtain walls with their gleaming fluting which the evening sun had already striped with yellow. He went to the far end of the camp beyond the 1936 tomb, where a few yellow ranunculus were in flower and the brown rocks were covered by a thick moss dotted with little pink flowers. He sat down on the extreme edge of the moraine, his feet swaying in the void. Obviously he would never tire of contemplating the mountains. The lights began to fail. Above the Rishi Ganga the sky was a dull blaze of scarlet. He stood up and returned to the tent. The coolies had just arrived from Camp I. They had lit a few roots and were watching their chapattis cooking. The reddish embers cast a gleam on their tired faces. Kalu smiled at him.

"How goes it, Kalu?"

The table was laid in the great tent of the Base Camp. Jayal, Dubost, Vignes, Payan, and Languépin were all there. They ate as usual, that is to say, enormous quantities and badly.

Once more the old recipe was determined to show that it was infallible. Huddled together round the food the men were gay. They told mountaineering stories which had whiled away many an evening, but which had not yet lost their power. As usual they spoke of those who were not there that evening, of Gevril and his crow, of Gendre and his Jeanette, of Barbezat and his butterflies. A bottle of brandy was opened, not to drink toasts but to enjoy the subtle warmth coursing through the veins. The same gossip continued. Vignes alone was wrapped in his own dreams.
and somewhat detached. Payan and Duplat laughed noisily. All of them felt that these hours were the ones during which one stole a march on time. The magnesium flare preserved the memory of this evening but broke the charm. Suddenly Duplat saw nothing but the night and his loneliness. He stood up and said: “Tomorrow it’s the real thing. Good night!”

The laughter died away and the camp lapsed into silence. The sky was a blaze of stars and it was a bitterly cold night. In his tent Duplat felt a great sense of relief, almost an emptiness. He remembered those lines which he had written in France a few weeks before: “Over there we shall be ourselves, full of ardour and generosity, but also with the sense of efficiency which permits success. We shall win and we shall bring back our victory.”

He felt prepared and fell asleep.

“Tomorrow we shall be the spoilt children of adventure and luck because we shall have deserved both.

“Whatever the outcome of the battle we shall be among the true winners because we shall have killed doubt.”

ROGER DUPLAT

June 27th. Base Camp. (According to the accounts of Louis Gevril, Alain Barbezat, Sirdar Tensing and the Sherpas, Angdawa and Da Norbu.)

No one woke early that morning. They waited for the sun to linger on the tents before the camp came to life.

Roger Duplat and Gilbert Vignes got ready leisurely. Languepin, surrounded by a mass of equipment, was soldering tins for he had to leave the Base Camp for the main ridge. Dubost went from one to the other laughing, joking, busied about a host of useless activities. Gendre came down slowly from Camp I, leaning heavily on his ice axe. He was exhausted. When he arrived near the camp he tried to smile, but his lips were as pale as his face. He had already realised that as far as he was concerned the adventure was over before it had ever started. Payan diagnosed fatigue
from altitude and ordered him to rest at the Base Camp. He told the company that Barbezat and Gevril had left that morning to equip Camp III. Everyone was busy. Vignes was searching the camp with a look of suspicion in his eyes.

“Someone’s stolen my things!”
“Don’t be a bore.”
“If only you were a little tidier,” thundered Dubost. “You’re always the same. Every time you lose something someone’s stolen it from you.”
“Like my gloves . . . the ones I found in your pack.”

Another question which it was useless to raise. Angry shouts echoed from one end of the camp to the other, and already a mystery surrounding the disappearance of three snaphooks, and dating from 1948, was being recalled. But the green canvas sack which Tensing brandished bore Vignes name in large red letters. It had been waiting that morning for its owner propped up against the kitchen wall.

“Well, isn’t that the pack you were looking for?” asked Dubost.

“No, or, rather, yes it is. But I’m telling you, you get on my nerves.”

Duplat was sitting on the ground near the radio set and three coolies were listening to its drawling melodies.

“More women having their throats cut,” said a voice.

Payan and Languépin followed the stages which Duplat had fixed on the map.

“I shall sleep at Camp II and leap from there to Camp IV.”

“Listen, Roger, it’s fine weather. Don’t hurry! Climb slowly and sleep at Camp I this evening. I could film you tomorrow morning.”

The voice which uttered these words was hesitant. There was a strange silence. Duplat raised his green eyes.

“He’s right,” said Payan. “Don’t hurry! It will be better at this altitude. That’s the only thing we really know about it. You must go slowly.”
“I want to make the most of the time. Don’t worry, we’re not kids. That’s our business. From Camp IV perhaps without a Camp V to the summit. The descent again. Recall on the red rope. Then the ridge. If we’re too heavy I shall sling away the tent. We’ll wade in and it’ll be all right.”

Roger broke off suddenly. His thin nervous fingers clutched his pipe. He threw a final glance at the map and then at the stone table where Vignes had recently emptied his haversack.

“Are you ready, Gilbert?”

“Yes, I’ve just given my pack to Tensing and yours to Sarki.”

“Roger,” repeated Payan, “don’t force the issue. Don’t climb too fast. Drink a little and try to sleep. You’ve got some sleeping pills.”

“I know. If I swallowed the lot all at once there’s enough to kill me.”

“If your breathing is bad you’ve got the necessary: coramine. You can take as much of that as you like. As for the rest, well, you know what they say.”

“You never do anything like anyone else,” added Languepin. “Try at least to sleep at Camp I. I’ll shoot you tomorrow morning. I shan’t be leaving for another hour yet. I’m not ready.”

We could already hear the sound of stones which Tensing and Sarki, heavily laden, kicked up on the interminable scree that stretched almost to the ridge of yellow rocks. It was about eleven o’clock in the morning. Gendre had come out of his coma and watched Roger and Gilbert as they began to climb above the camp.

“Good luck!”

“So you’ll wait for me at Camp I, is that agreed?”

“Perhaps,” said Duplat, “perhaps.”

“Hi, Gilbert!” called Dubost.

“What?”

“Merde!”

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"Same to you, mon vieux!"

Those who remained behind seemed frozen to the spot. Gendre looked at Dubost and then at the sky. It was almost black, but the sun was now very high and covering the world with a harsh whiteness. He remained in his tent and the torrid heat beat down on him. He lay down on his mattress and thought that he should have shaken their hands. Shortly afterwards Payan and Dubost thought the same thing, but it was too late. The two men had just passed a barrier of rocks above which they could no longer be seen.

Hardly an hour elapsed before they crossed the breach of the yellow rock ridge. On the far side they noticed that the air was colder and on making to the left discovered that the wall would shelter them for some time from the sun. They walked very fast, and as they had no packs they did not feel their weariness. They tried to find the rhythm they normally used in the Alps when they climbed a moraine. They succeeded to the point that Tensing and Sarki, following behind, gave up the struggle they had been trying to wage since the two Sahibs had forged on ahead. The effort was too great. Duplat noticed that his heartbeats had accelerated alarmingly and felt that he was suffocating. Vignes clenched his teeth and each of his gasps sounded like a bellows.

They raised their heads and saw that not far away Da Namgyal was outside the tents of Camp I waving to them. Soon they were sitting in front of a mug of tea which the Sherpa had prepared for the Burra Sahib. They nibbled one of the white tablets which the doctor had recommended and soon had a feeling of relief approaching euphoria.

"This Camp I should have been put higher up," said Roger.

"You know it's a bit difficult carrying a full load," replied Gilbert in surprise.

At that moment Tensing and Sarki arrived. The sweat beaded on their foreheads. The sirdar smiled, whereas his
companion compressed his lips in his great monkey face. Duplat had decided that Tensing should return to the Base Camp, for he had to accompany Dubost to the Longstaff col, but when they had emptied their mugs of tea Tensing stared at the ledges of the ridge with such passion that Duplat suggested climbing with him to Camp II. The hot tea had revived them and as soon as Da Namgyal had taken over Sarki’s load they set out again. They were about 300 feet above Camp I when they heard a cry. They looked back and below the tents saw the outline of Languepin slowly climbing. “He can film us tomorrow,” thought Duplat, with a sigh of relief at having escaped this unwelcome ordeal.

A whitish mist filled the air and clouds began to form in all parts of the sky. To their right the nearest glacier seemed alive; the ice pinnacles crumbled, the overheated snow trickled in heavy streams, and occasionally boulders became detached from the great pillars of schist on the crest and gouged out deep trenches in the surface. The men advanced, weighing up each of their movements, and despite their burning temples and the pain they felt in their head at each sudden movement they enjoyed passages of short, easy climbs which separated the scree from the crumbling rocks. They reached the top of the ridge and, following its bends without trouble, were impressed by the huge south-eastern slope of Nanda Devi, which plunged at 50° from them towards the Rishi Ganga, and which, from being ironed out by the falls of stone and by thousands of tons of avalanches, had become smooth, regular and inhuman. The clouds ate up the empty sky and steaming mists rose from the valley where the daily storms brewed.

“Everything is rotten,” said Duplat, “the rocks, the snow, and even the weather. It all smells of the monsoon.”

They had caught sight of some orange patches: the tents of Camp II. The last part of the trip, a ridge of very wet snow, caused them great trouble. The imprints of their feet
melted and Tensing had to secure Da Namgyal several times on the rope.

The camp was empty. Roger found two jackets in the first tent, and in this way he knew that Gevril and Barbezat intended to return and sleep at Camp II. Vignes popped his head into the second tent but withdrew it.

"It looks like a railway dump."

The water which fell from the rock had stuck the velum\(^1\) to the tent and puddles had formed on the ground. They had flooded a variety of tinned foods, some biscuits, and even a packet of cigarettes from which a brownish juice oozed. Da Namgyal started to put things in order and make some tea.

"A good day, Tensing," said Duplat. "We could have pushed as far as Camp III. Not too tired, eh?"

"It's good here, good here," replied Tensing.

"And what about the weather?"

"It's not the monsoon yet, Sahib."

"Tomorrow we shall be right up there," said Duplat, stressing his point by indicating the peak.

The water which trickled from the rock overflowed the mess tins and there was no need to melt the snow. Before the tea was ready Vignes drank a pint of lemonade, which failed to soothe his chapped lips and swollen mouth. Duplat looked at the time by his wrist-watch. It was only four o'clock so he decided to send Tensing and Da Namgyal back as soon as they had eaten and the tent was in order.

Vignes had opened a box of ham and was devouring the pink slices one after the other.

"Things are all right," thought Duplat.

He produced a pencil and in a writing which was more careful than usual he wrote out a message for the Base Camp.

"About sixteen hours arrived at Camp II with slight headache. Enough food here to last a battalion for a month."

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\(^{1}\) An inner tent to give greater protection from the cold.
We're pushing on. Tomorrow we shall leave to install a camp as near as possible below the summit. Waiting for Alain and Gevril who are installing Camp III which we shall try and reach tomorrow. It's a piece of cake.

"Roger."

Tensing could not make up his mind to leave. He finally admitted to Duplat that he would have liked to have accompanied him on the trip.

"Not possible, not possible," replied Duplat, who did not know how to explain to the attentive sirdar that a man could not pay another man to embark upon such an adventure. Most of the reasons which attracted him up there were so personal and so intimate that he felt incapable of translating them into balanced arguments, into solid reasons which would absolve him from risking a life for his own pleasure. Tensing's candid eyes grew serious. He stood up, saluted Duplat and Vignes in the Indian manner. They both shook his hand.

"Good luck, Sahib!"

His face lit up with a rather forced smile. Da Namgyal was already on his way down. In turn he waved back farewell to the white men.

Vignes had disappeared into the tent which Da Namgyal had done his best to arrange. Naturally it was still damp and was filled with an indefinable odour of tobacco, damp wool and paraffin. Cursing the water and the world as a whole, Vignes managed to blow up his pneumatic mattress. At that height it was an exhausting exercise which made him feel giddy. His lungs were on fire from this air which he had inhaled too quickly. Duplat was sitting in the entrance of the other tent, his back to the sun. He could not take his eyes off the crest and the eastern peak of Nanda Devi which, from his present position, looked far easier than he had originally thought. The debonair peak he had noticed during his walk on the glacier now towered above him, and he could see a very real mountain in all its details. He was
disappointed to see that a stretch of snow he had intended to follow beneath the summit was cut by an important rocky spur. He dismissed this casually with the other obstacles he foresaw.

“Hi, Gilbert!”

Vignes did not reply. He was inside the tent and had fallen asleep.

When Gevril and Barbezat arrived on their way down from Camp III they found Duplat fiddling desperately with a radio set, the aerial of which shone in the setting sun. It was seven o’clock, and in the Base Camp, as in Camp I, ears were glued to all the earphones. For a moment Duplat heard a few strains of jazz music which had come through by some fantasy of the ether, but not a sound from the lower camps.

“Try and tell them that we need spirit,” repeated Gevril. “Spirit.”

Duplat was pleased to see Gevril again. He had not seen him since the village of Lata, but he soon discovered that he had not very much to say to him. Gevril and Barbezat laughed and were surprised that Duplat and Vignes had climbed up from the Base Camp in a single day. Duplat did his best to show that he considered such a stage quite natural, and to maintain that on the following day he hoped to push on beyond Camp III.

“It’s tough going higher up, as you’ll find out,” said Barbezat, who was exhausted after his day’s efforts.

“Rotten schist which crumbles away and is much harder going than here,” added Gevril. “And where will you get the Sherpas?”

“Don’t bother about that, Angdawa and Da Norbu will come up to Camp I tomorrow morning very early.”

Vignes had got the kitchen going and they all ate slowly, half asleep and almost in a coma after their long day.

Barbezat was pale. He ate little and was the first to fall asleep. Gevril found it harder. Since he had left the Base Camp he had seen his companions affected by the altitude—
even the giant Sarki—and he felt disturbed at Duplat’s incredible speed. He himself was sure that he would have been incapable of carrying out the climb under such conditions. He was tempted to open his heart to Duplat, but he had known him long enough to realise that it would have been useless. Earlier on, while they were all eating in the same tent, the idea had crossed his mind, but when he raised his eyes to Duplat’s hollow, implacable mask, he realised that the task was too much for him and his lips would not utter the words. He thought that the next day they would be together at Camp III and that by then Duplat would have better summed-up the mountain’s dimensions and have a better inkling of the weapons it used to break men. He even thought that it would not be a bad thing if a good storm arrived and blocked the camp for two days, but he was immediately ashamed of this thought. In the past he had often had similar thoughts but each time success had proved him wrong. Why did he always have to go and make his own judgments?

Everything was calm, and not a breath of wind shook the tents. Had it not been for the growling of stones falling on the glacier, nothing would have indicated that outside their canvas walls lay the Himalaya, drowned in darkness. Gevril listened to the soft powerful breathing in his chest and was almost proud of its regularity. In the neighbouring tent he heard Gilbert grumbling obstinately at the damp and tossing to and fro trying to find a more comfortable position. Gradually sleep overcame him, and at last he was at one with the night after noticing its reassuring stars.

28th June. Camp II. The sun rose veiled with mist. All of them were struck by the same thought: the weather was going to change. Gevril tried to wake Barbezat, but the scientist—his entomology gave him this title—was so disagreeable that he respected his need for rest. Duplat had put his nose out to have a look at the sky and had gone back to sleep. Now he was moving about and without
emerging from his sleeping-bag put a match to the stove which Vignes had just put in order. A tiny gourd of brandy was lying in the tent. He took a gulp which he held for a long time between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. It made him feel warm and completely awake.

"Do you want some, Gil?"

"No thanks. I'm too thirsty."

So many thoughts whirled in their heads that they could not seize any of them. But this inner merry-go-round was a pleasant and euphoric companion. They began to fill their packs watched by Gevril, who had just come up. At his insistence they put in a tin of spirit and an extra stove.

"Here come the Sherpas," cried Gevril.

"Ah, now we're all set. Wake up, Gilbert!"

"So you're not going to sleep at Camp III—you want to get up higher," Gevril went on, "higher."

"Higher!"

"And on the following day you'll do the peak and return along the ridge."

"That's it. You'll see," replied Duplat. "Are you ready, Gil?"

Gilbert had put on his blue nylon balaclava and tightened the laces round his calves. Duplat pulled the zip fastener of his brown canvas jacket. Everyone came out into the sun and Gevril filmed them with the small camera the Sherpas had just given to him with a note from the cameraman who had stuck at Camp I. In the viewfinder he caught Duplat explaining with great gestures to the Sherpas that they could leave their personal belongings, for they would be coming down the same evening. He continued to film other simple scenes: Duplat drinking a mug of tea; Vignes buckling the straps of his pack; Duplat taking a photo. Gevril was absorbed by this new job and spoke little. Moreover the presence of the camera gave a certain gravity to the scene, which he would have preferred to have been quite different.
They all drank a last mug of warm tea, and since the Sherpas had just shouldered their packs they set out. When Duplat reached the top of the little snow ridge that separated Camp II from the south-west face he turned round and waved goodbye to Gevril and Barbezat and to some orange patches which he could see below—the tents of the Base Camp.

"We're off! Don't worry, things will start to buzz!"

Vignes hurried his Sherpa and followed at Duplat's heels. The leader turned round again and waved once more but said nothing.

What he had just left no longer existed for him and he was completely absorbed by the stones and the snow over which he had to choose a path. He came to the spot where the face which dominated the Base Camp came to an end in the uniform slopes of the south-west face. The schist was more rotten than elsewhere and soon the blocks only held because of the frost. Layers of stones pointed to the sky and each break of the rock was a handhold or an easy foothold. He reflected that on the descent from the Nanda Devi summit the contrary effect would be produced. The strata would be directed downwards, and however slight the slope things would be far more complicated. He sought out the easiest passages for the heavily laden Sherpas by making off a little to the right of the face. With his hand he tested each outjutting rock; often he found that the stone was loose and had to look for another hold. Vignes went on ahead and he admired his almost feline suppleness; by force of habit climbing had become second nature to him. The Sherpas were panting heavily. "Come, Gil. Ease down a bit. They can't keep up."

They arrived at a chute of snow. They climbed for a while on its right bank, disliking having to abandon the stone which was far more reassuring to the touch. The sun began to melt the grey snow and made it treacherous. To cross they had to rope the Sherpas and the manoeuvre seemed interminable. Duplat was preoccupied
with choosing the best handhold and deciding the easiest passage. A more vertical obstacle reminded him of the altitude—he had to make an abrupt effort which left him panting and slack, forcing him to sit on a stony traverse. He fumbled in his pockets, brought out the doctor's white pills and offered some to the Sherpas. Angdawa, who was suspicious, refused, but Da Norbu tried this new white man's gadget. He had seen so much during the past few weeks!

Far away to the south, above the plains, they could see a pile of black clouds. Ahead of the climbers the trampolin of the south-west face was lost in a sea of light cotton-wool clouds—a sport of nature rather than a danger. Their attention was once more focussed on the treacherous rocks and on a fissured boulder which a kick sufficed to hurl into the void; moreover, a damp sweating—the sun was now hot—warned them to try their luck further on. A lighter-coloured boulder let its deep roots be guessed—it should hold. A foot was placed on it and gradually the rock bore the entire weight of the man and his equipment. The Sherpas fixed their eyes on the Sahib's handholds; sometimes the stones moved in their sockets and the men cursed them, for they had long since grown accustomed to speaking to the mountain.

"You, my little one, support my left foot."

"You, O twisted one, get ready to receive me."

"You, my pretty, pay attention. I'm going to cling to you . . . ."

The shoulder muscles came into play, a hard cable knotted beneath the skin, and the effort was rewarded by an advance of half a yard. A few stones lent a deaf ear; thus a fine-looking example which Duplat had flattered like the others flew into the air as if borne away by its own weight. He crouched, leapt backwards, and was surprised to find himself standing with the twenty points of his climbing-irons firmly planted in the soft rock.

"The bitch!" he said out aloud.
He had been afraid. It was not a great mental shock but a physical fear, a stab in the belly which made him turn white as he stood there on his rock, and which in actual fact gave him great pleasure. He began to think of the fall he might have had and envied the mountaineers of the old days who imagined that the speed which the body acquired in space was enough to kill him. He wanted to set out again, but the Sherpas sat down for a rest. They had now started on the south-west slope and they had to make to the right to reach the snow. There they found the traces of the previous evening and followed them. The Sherpas forged on more slowly but still regularly. The slope grew more gentle and they came across a huge pile of harmless snow piled against the last ledge of the ridge which they had been following since the Base Camp. Above them the higher slopes could be imagined, similar to the south-west face but more stark, less covered with snow and infinitely more hostile.

They had only been going two hours when they reached the tent at Camp III. The Sherpas dumped their loads.

“What do we do now?” asked Vignes. “I've got a splitting headache. It's making me thirsty.”

“We'll stay a quarter of an hour here and then make for Camp IV up there,” replied Duplat, pointing to the summit of the schist slopes which stood out jagged against the sky.

They set out. The snow was soft and their feet plunged in up to the ankle before meeting an icy layer which held firm. The pace was slow. Each man was absorbed by the effort of forging ahead. The gain in height simplified the disorder of the nearby mountains which began to take on their rightful places in the landscape—almost corresponding to their positions on the map. At each halt—they now became more frequent—a strip of horizon rose in bluish lines to the west, peaks to the east and mysterious mists to the south. The wall of the Longstaff col which filled the eye when one was on the glacier of the Base Camp had

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become a barrier outlined against dark valleys and abysses which sheltered life.

The final ridge, which so far they had taken from the side, was hidden when the four men reached the foot of the rocks. They were drier and less tricky than those of the morning. Once more they had to rope the Sherpas. The latter were bowed beneath the weight of their loads; with one hand they held the taut rope, while with the other they pulled heavily on their ice axes. Angdawa, with a coloured scarf round his head, had tense features half hidden by blue glasses. Da Norbu kept on giving vent to angry outbursts as though he were reproaching himself for not going any faster. At this height the white men felt as though a cord had been tightly bound round their foreheads. The only thought in their heads was to go forward. The world was reduced to the rock on which they would place their foot and the next handhold. The past had vanished; there was no longer a future; they had to exist merely by putting one foot in front of the other and stretching the rope.

The rope tightened. Duplat turned round. Da Norbu had sat down on a jutting rock, and his eyes implored a halt. Duplat motioned to him to put his glasses on again and paid out the rope to him, looking away in another direction. The man went on. The schist wall came to an end to be replaced by a Dantesque slope, a chaos of snow and rocks which refused to reveal its secret at first sight. The Sherpas were lying down in the snow. Vignes panted heavily without saying a word. Duplat could make out a couloir, an expansion of the face they had just climbed. A northerly wind chased away the whitish clouds. "They'll drift over the final ridge," thought Duplat, chewing some nougat mixed with snow which froze his mouth. Vignes ate and rubbed his temples with a handful of snow. Since it seemed to bring him relief the Sherpas copied him.

They rose, staggering for a moment, before regaining the balance which one loses so easily in the absence of vertical or horizontal lines. They set out again, and the effort was
terrible for the Sherpas, weighed down by their load. They became animals, although animals implore no one to give them strength for the next step. Now they counted their steps. Da Norbu groaned, completely annihilated beneath the sack whose weight seemed only to increase. In this type of exhausting struggle also Duplat found pleasure, and this miracle of a man continuing to advance seemed to him more than a physical effort—a victory of the mind which put his heart at rest. Once more there was a tug on the rope. Da Norbu had slumped down, leaning on his load, suffocating, his chest shaken with hiccoughs. A mist enveloped them and it began to drizzle gently. As though with regret, for each stop was a renunciation for him, Duplat signalled to Angdawa to pitch the tent. Da Norbu remained for several minutes with his mouth wide open greedily gulping down the rarefied air. They all felt their heads buzzing with a pain which each heartbeat turned into an agony. Even the sight of a Sherpa bereft of his strength encouraged Duplat, who still felt master of his own. He was completely satisfied at having reached the goal he had set himself and joked lustily with Vignes. Everything was going well.

But the present state of the Sherpas in addition to the mist, which was now thick, prevented them from being sent back to Camp III. The four men had to huddle in a narrow tent where there was hardly room enough for two sleepers. “So much the better,” thought Duplat, “we shall be all the warmer.” He gave the signal to begin work on building a platform for the tent. He tore up a stone and pitched it into the void. When the platform was finished and the tent pitched Angdawa hurried to light the stove. Vignes detached the silk velum, and in this way the tent was larger but colder. The whole evening was spent in melting the snow and drinking sips to soothe their mouths which had been burnt by the biting air. That night was unforgettable. As soon as night fell the cold set in. They had to share their warm clothes. The Sherpas had left their sleeping-bags at Camp II. Duplat and Vignes gave them their
added jackets, and these, added to the ones they already possessed, protected them somewhat from the cold. The steam from the stove had frosted the roof and the crystals fell on the tangled sleepers. Where their bodies were in contact with the ground an icy torpor penetrated them which was soon transformed into stabbing pains. When these became intolerable they had to move to get rid of the numbness. Their muscles hurt and their limbs were shaken with cramp which racked their whole bodies. Each movement set in motion this human mass which was trying in vain to sleep.

One Sherpa's teeth were rattling. Duplat bent over him, but the unfortunate man only had a bad attack of shivers. At last, when the sky was grey once more, a little warmth came to bathe these bodies huddled against each other and these faces which had lost all expression. They were at rest.

Duplat was the first to wake. The frost was melting in dirty tears on the canvas of the tent. His eyes followed them for a moment and then he looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. He opened the door and saw a clear sky washed clean of all the stains of the previous evening. Not a cloud to be seen. Ahead of him rose the colossal ramparts of the final ridge. It cost an effort to raise his head high enough to make out the peak. From this Camp IV its rounded curves seemed utterly devoid of mystery. But irresistibly his gaze was attracted by the long ridge which the sun had transformed into a path of light. Following the thread of ice chiselled by the wind he remembered the first day when, as a young child, his footsteps had led him towards the mountain. Once more he discovered the secret emotion of his first attempts at his grand passion. There was even a trace of contempt for those erstwhile fears, for the caresses and the respect he had lavished on these peaks which obsessed him. That day the apotheosis of his passion made him almost delirious with joy and everything seemed permissible. He had the greatest conviction that he would
subject these ultimate outposts of the planet at which he now stared without realising the vacancy of his stare.

He shook Vignes and the Sherpas. He realised that he had a bad headache and looked automatically at the snow melting on the stove. As he started to prepare his pack he suddenly realised that he ought to give a message to the Sherpas who were now going to descend. He took a pencil and had to think for a while before realising the date. He had forgotten it. At last he wrote:

"29th June?

Intention—
Peak midday.
Camp on or under the eastern summit.
Tomorrow eastern summit midday.
Sleep at Longstaff."

Angdawa interrupted him to say with his hands and in the few words of English he knew that he would like to go with the Sahibs to the top. His grave gentle smile made one forget that his face showed every sign of fatigue. "No, no, Angdawa," replied Duplat, picking up the pencil which had just slipped from his numbed fingers.

"From our camp on top of the slab face above Camp III I am sending you back Angdawa and Da Norbu. They are both sick. Look after them.

"From tomorrow have the camps evacuated by the Sherpas to Camp I and by coolies between Camp I and Base."

Vignes now interrupted him to ask for some aspirin. He rummaged in his pack, and then went on with his message, the writing of which was now strangely irregular.

"Take back everything (take back for me Tilman's rope). Gil and I have bad headaches, but apart from that all is well.

"The camp is about 24,300 ft.?"

"Roger."
He folded the piece of grey paper in four and handed it to Angdawa, ordering him to dismantle Camp III on his way down.

A mess tin was still on the stove, and Gilbert added some more to the water from which the steam rose and danced in a sunbeam.

The sleeping-bags were folded and now there was only the tent to strike. Duplat had put on his boots and went out. Lost, lost in a wilderness of 3 yards by 4, he walked up and down like a bear in an empty stone cage.

Would the tea never boil? Why was this camp still here?

"Make it snappy, Gilbert!"

Earlier than usual the clouds drifted in the valleys, clutching all the nooks and crannies with their grey fingers. Very high up a lacework of silvery cirrus outlined its clear pattern against the sky. A light wind sprang up and in a short time the whole of space was in motion. A boulder came away from the upper part of the couloir which separated the camp from the final ridge. It made a draught. Other rocks toppled into the void leaving a train of little pebbles and throwing up the usual cloud of dust which the wind immediately dispelled. Calm had hardly been restored before a gigantic block of stone began its flight which was to end 300 yards lower down in a furious explosion. The sight of this useless disaster disturbed Duplat. There was nothing that the mountain could not destroy. What could a single man do against a hundred tons of granite hurtling from the sky? That was the risk in all its futility. Here it was no longer a question of Alpine sport. In this world success was often bitter, half a defeat was always fatal. Woe to the conquered! But he banished this thought and found nothing which could deter him from his intentions. Moreover, he had told himself a thousand times that he was not a man whom defeat could sully. Nothing now could curb the frenzy within him.

The packs were buckled. Vignes had already shouldered
his with the climbing-irons hanging from it. Unable to make up their minds to leave, the Sherpas stood there motionless watching them.

They set out. After going 30 yards Duplat remembered that he had not photographed Angdawa and Da Norbu. He called them and took out his camera.

"Good luck, Sahib! Good luck!"

They set out thinking only of their frozen muscles and their numbness of the preceding night. The packs were heavy but the slope, devoid of treachery, looked like a mixed terrain reminding them of that part of the ridge which, 6,000 feet below, stretched between Camps I and II. The air was disturbed by contrary currents. White clouds sped above the final ridge. They came from the north.

"It's a good wind," they thought.

Very far beneath their feet a tide of restless clouds with yellow gleams rose from the plains, which were more inaccessible than the blue sky. Now they threw their balance from one leg to another and took out their ice axes. They breathed deeply but without difficulty, and all their movements were in harmony. They felt masters of their tough magnificent animal bodies—the bodies of men who look for a fight rather than avoid it. Step by step they advanced. Both men felt consumed by the fires of a boundless ardour. The realisation of their desire, the union of their inspiration and their knowledge of the mountain was a source of the deepest emotion. The most violent effort had a tang of pleasure.

Pride seemed to roar in Roger Duplat. He could see nothing of the earth except an unreal path which led in a blaze of glory to the final ridge. The wind could become a tempest; he would not notice it. In a deep spell, he was no longer a vulnerable human being. At no moment of his existence had the game been so fraught with menaces, but at no moment had he received so many marvellous messages to illuminate the secret recesses of his heart. This climb was the proof of his freedom. In this monotonous but
exalting climb he existed. He felt himself vibrate as others vibrate only in the dance or in war.

At last he was alive.

He was himself. A man with a rich past and a man of rich tomorrow; a man who had stood aside from the easy world; a man of exacting faith and eager for purity—the man who unburdened himself in his red notebook.

“I have a keen desire for solitude. I wait in feverish impatience for my ship to be at sea far from the port of men. I long for the immensity of oceans and the immensity of infinite spaces.”

Roger Duplat raised himself and smiled at his companion without interrupting his effort.

The final ridge lay ahead of him and a livid mist veiled the brilliance of the whole sky.
29th June. (Based on the account of Louis Gevril.) At eleven o’clock in the morning Barbezat and Gevril reached Camp III. From some way off they could see two Sherpas striking a tent. They hastened, and the Sherpas explained that the Burra Sahib had given them the orders. They had brought back the message written in Duplat’s own hand. Gevril was overwhelmed, and when in turn Barbezat read the message with its quavering letters he looked for some moving spot on the slopes above. He could see nothing.

Their camp could not have been at 24,500 feet.

“Did they have an altimeter?” asked Barbezat.

“No. In any case their forecasts are very optimistic. We shan’t stir from here before we see them on the eastern summit.”

The Sherpas pitched the tent once more and made their way down to Camp III. Their faces were a pitiful sight and had taken on the colour of parched earth.

Since Gevril and Barbezat were thirsty and they had a little spirit, they melted some snow and ate a snack.

The sky was whitish and blinded Gevril as he scanned the horizon. The Sherpas took off their dark glasses and through half-closed eyelids scanned the horizon with their sharp eyes. Gevril was about to give up when he saw two dots, standing out against the rocks, which he thought he had seen move. He decided to say nothing, for he knew that when you look too keenly shadows, rocks, and even patches of ice are inclined to take on the appearance of the objects one desires to see. Wearily he had abandoned that corner
of the sky when a Sherpa pointed it out again to him. The black points were the leaders; they had taken the shape of men and were going forward. They crossed a patch of snow and were swallowed up in the shadow. Then they were outlined against the pale sky. They were walking slowly. A rift of mist blurred the far-off contours of the mountain and very rapidly a dense cloud obscured the vision which had made the hearts of the men in Camp III beat a little faster.

Gevril looked at his watch. It was one o'clock in the afternoon and it was obvious that the two men were still far from the top of the main Nanda Devi peak. Gevril wrote a message for the lower camps, asking for provisions and confirming his intention of remaining at Camp III. The Sherpas made up a rope party and left, dragging their feet as though some spring had been broken within them.

The summit disappeared completely in the clouds which, after drowning the ridge, reached the top of the slab barrier. It struck Gevril that it was not cold, and at that moment a hesitant snowflake landed on the back of his hand. He watched it melt from the heat of his skin, and when the crystal had been destroyed another complicated piece of fretwork architecture landed next to the first one.

"It's snowing," said Gevril.
"Yes, it's snowing," repeated Barbezat.

The two men took shelter and devoted themselves to the methodical gestures of life in a tent at altitude. A kind of apprehension took hold of them and they refrained from speaking about the contest which was being waged above their heads. Gevril was now in charge of the team. He tried to form a clear picture of the position in which he now unwittingly found himself. Dubost and Tensing must be keeping watch on the Longstaff col. The doctor and Gendre were in charge of the Base Camp. Languépin had stopped at Camp II waiting for his Sherpa, who had been sent to the Base Camp to fetch paraffin and provisions.

Above Camp III nothing now existed, since Camp IV had only been pitched for a single night. When Duplat
had left Camp II. Gevril had hoped that the mountain would remain equipped and that other rope parties would be sent to the peak. Since the first day he had given himself whole-heartedly to the transport of the loads and he had been rewarded by a swift adaptation to the altitude. Now he was ready for new ordeals. The presence of the great slope with its scales of schist obsessed him, and he liked to imagine the moment when, leaving his marks on the snowy gently sloping dome which crowned Nanda Devi, he would discover the prodigious mountain blossom which, towards the north, slept in a blue silence eternally protected from the human gaze.

But so many obstacles loomed up on this path that his hopes were cruelly shattered. At best, if on the following day he saw Duplat near the eastern peak he could try and obtain his permission on his return to the Base Camp. For although in common with his companion, who was half asleep, he felt not only anxious but even alarmed at the kind of fury which obsessed the assault pair, who at this very moment were making their way to the summit, he was convinced of a happy outcome, of a success which would reward a struggle on the scale of this extraordinary world.

Outside, the snowflakes had ceased to whirl, but a heavy drizzle crackled on the canvas. Gevril could not help going out and trying to pierce the white clouds which filled the sky. Irrationally he waited for the miraculous clearing-up, a flash of blue in which he would distinguish two silhouettes, or perhaps the bright orange of a tent, which would have filled him with joy.

When the nearby snow and the snow in the distance melted into a uniform grey he realised he would have to give up for that day.

Barbezat had placed a stove at the back of the tent and was trying to cook something. Neither of them were hungry, but how was it possible not to eat the food which had needed so much patience to be carried up there and to be prepared. Gevril looked at his watch.
"It's seven o'clock," he said. "The hour for radio liaison. If those bloody sets were something more than toys we should learn something."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Barbezat vaguely, staring at the weak flame of the stove. The wind had sprung up and was now making the tent rattle.

"It can't be very pleasant up there," said Barbezat.

After carefully closing the press studs inside the tent they both slipped into their sleeping-bags, retaining their padded jackets, for they knew that when the drizzle ceased it would get even colder. The wind did not abate and the tent cracked in an infernal rhythm. Moments of peace were succeeded by moments of a fury which was almost painful on the ears. A precious silk tent and an outer one of thin but stout canvas protected them from the violence outside. They waited a long time for real sleep to come. Late in the night an unusual sensation woke them up, one after the other: the wind had fallen and the calm surprised them. It had been a short-lived tempest.

They slept. When the sun of 30th June rose in a red ominous sky Gevril was outside, huddled in all his clothes, but his tired eyes could not see what they were looking for.

A light breeze was blowing and harvesting vague clouds. Far away to the east towards the southern plains, beyond the icy cliff of Panwhali Doar a wave of fog had raised its dark wall.

Gevril's eyes explored every cranny on the slopes of the summit, the ridge, and in the direction of eastern Nanda Devi. He had absorbed the minutest details of a landscape which he continued to see even when he was no longer looking at it, but nothing in that vast expanse struck his eye, nothing which could indicate the passage of a man. The void . . . The void. As on the previous night space was entirely filled with mists. About three o'clock that afternoon the bad weather returned and a soft drizzle fell. The two occupants of Camp III took stock of their resources:
a few tins of food and a few packets of biscuits, to which
must be added the remains of a sausage, a bar of chocolate,
and a tube of sticky condensed milk. This would not
suffice to supply the camp if the monsoon set in, and they
had to resist the first shock, blocked in their tent. Gevril,
anxious to continue his watch, asked his companion to go
down to Camp II. The inaction had weighed heavily on
Barbezat and he slowly began his preparations. About four
o'clock he was sitting in front of the tent, tightening his
climbing-irons, when a stifled cry reached his ears. Gevril
leapt out of the tent with a momentary hope, but Barbezat
was already pointing to two far-distant shapes outlined
against the abyss below them.

"No luck," said Barbezat, who had entertained the same
idea. "They're coming up from Camp II. There are three
of them, and they must have had enough."

The Sherpa, Da Namgyal, and the liaison officer, Jayal,
were on the rope with Languepin as leader, who was com-
pletely exhausted. He sank down on the snow but soon
managed to summon up a wry smile.

"We've had a fine time down there. I could do nothing
better than cling into the face and huddle in the slippery
couloirs. With glacier experts like my fellows, it was a
sight that should not be missed. All our tracks have been
effaced. With this drizzle you can't see 30 yards ahead of
you, and when I saw the outlines of your tents I was beside
myself with joy and so were the others."

The loads they had brought made it unnecessary for
Barbezat to descend. Jayal had carried a tent and began
to erect it, helped by his Sherpa.

The drizzle soon stopped and the cloud screen was torn
as the sun began to set. Armed now with a pair of binoculars,
Gevril resumed his watch. There was no change on the
familiar horizon. Patches of new snow lit up the russet
rampart defending it against the night. The stars, which
could already be seen in the blue of the evening, took
possession of the sky. The Milky Way was a white river,
and while the darkness turned to ice, a festival of light reigned supreme. But nothing, neither planet nor star pierced the darkness. No flame, no glimmer of life, no signal came to betray its secret.

Da Namgyal called out. His raucous shouts were swallowed up in the black void. Our whistles rent the air. No reply. Our ears could hear nothing except the sounds of this world of ice and rocks contracting under the grip of the cold.

The men in their tents at Camp III forced themselves to banish their budding fears. When it got the better of them they would have liked to plunge into some activity to occupy their minds. But what could they do? Strengthen the bond between the camps with a single Sherpa? To leave—but in what direction? Attempt the peak when Duplat had ordered them to return to base?

Gevril could not remain idle. Tomorrow he would climb above the camp in the hope of getting a better view of the final ridge. Da Namgyal would go with him.

**Sunday, 1st July. Camp III.** At five o’clock in the morning Gevril, still a prey to the languor of the night, made an effort to leave the moist dampness of his sleeping-bag. Outside, a blue sky, tents covered with thick frost, and an icy north wind which pierced like a blade and burned the throat. It was too cold, and Gevril returned to his shelter waiting for the sun to warm the world. Towards eight o’clock Da Namgyal was fastening his hood while Gevril looped the rings of the red nylon rope. Barbezat came out with an inquisitive look on his face. The film camera purred. The two men made off towards the slanting slabs beneath the final slopes. Although the altitude slowed down the rhythm of their steps and made their breathing difficult it did not suffice to still their thoughts. Each yard of the crest, each block of rocks which came into view as they advanced, was scrutinised.

The two men strode forward. How long had they been
'THE DAYS OF WAITING

walking? Perhaps three hours? For a long time they followed a stony valley with no horizon, paying attention only to their muscles and to the sounds of the mountain. Their feet stumbled in broken schists, and with constricted hearts they discovered a new stretch of ridge, hundreds of yards of snow with no traces. Had they tried to go too fast since they used the rope? Now they lay on a traverse of rock with dry scales and Gevril, leaning on his elbows, scoured the landscape with his binoculars. He was dazzled by the light and he could no longer fix a detail of this world which had recently intrigued him so much. A strange patch on the flanks of the eastern peak. He had to banish the dark visions of catastrophe and destruction which had taken root in his mind. What was that patch? A shadow. The shadow of a shadow, like all other shadows. A disturbing fantasy on the part of the Himalaya. And even if it revealed its secret, what could he do? Was he in possession of any mysterious weapons? What were he and his companions on this mountain, threatened by the monsoon, the grey vapours of which he could already see drifting through the valleys. Suddenly all his strength seemed to have abandoned him, and he turned his eyes towards Camp III which was hidden behind a spine of stone. But he could not yet assess the collapse which had taken place in him, and tirelessly his eyes returned towards the slopes of the summit, towards the final ridge, the sugar loaf of eastern Nanda Devi, the long winding path which descended to Longstaff col on which he could distinguish two tents. Then his glance fell on a rock, lingered on a crevass, returned to the rock only to switch to a dark patch, towards some tremor of this cruel world. He only gave up when the hostile mists veiled the landscape completely as they had done on the previous day.

When Gevril returned to the camp those who had remained behind realised that he had seen nothing. There was no need to speak. Provisions were drawing to an end. Their solitary Sherpa was sick. The men were tired. They must return to the Base Camp.
Each of them went through alternate spells of hope and anxiety. The bad weather every afternoon, the mad speed of the assaulting rope party, and the absence of tracks and signals justified the darkest presentiments, which the inaction of Camp III made unbearable. But the memory of a thousand occasions on which fortune had smiled on the rash made them nurture a flame of hope. Lying side by side, struggling against the numbness of the night and with fugitive sleep, each of the men in Camp III built a scaffolding of fragile reasoning.

To begin with, it was possible that the route they were following up there was out of sight. The final ridge must be so vast that the fear of monstrous pinnacles could force the rope party to keep on the hidden side. At worst, if an accident had happened to one of them the other would have tried to make some signals. On the slopes of the summit, safe from falling stones and avalanches, their advance must have been easy. Perhaps the men on Longstaff col had spotted a camp. The assault pair had left Camp IV forty-eight hours ago and could not have turned back. They had been visible on the ascent and it was unthinkable that they should remain invisible on the way down. Therefore they had certainly passed the peak and had made their way down on a rope along the slanting slabs of the ridge which were undoubtedly treacherous and icy. They could therefore no longer retrace their steps and perhaps, delayed by the bad weather which was worse at altitude, they were making their way towards Longstaff col.

The last message of crazy optimism estimated the crossing at forty-eight hours. Anyhow they had three days’ provisions. Perhaps they would not reach Longstaff col until tomorrow.

That night the stars remained hidden and the wind raised mad whirlpools of snow which danced for a moment before vanishing. The men hardly slept and their tents, lashed by the wind, cracked long after a pale dawn broke over Longstaff col.
2nd July. Camp III. The world had lost its colours, and the insidious approach of bad weather led one to suppose that the monsoon had entered its kingdom. Ice covered everything. The tents were one with the frozen snow. To tear them from its clutches demanded great patience. The metal stuck to the bare fingers for a short moment. The men of Camp III could only make slow and clumsy movements to strike their tents. These human machines were thrown out of gear, and the most insignificant tasks demanded an incessant appeal to the treasures of will-power. The cold gave place to a warm wind and clouds were born in all parts of the sky. Gusts of damp air, pregnant with vegetable odours, trailed along the slopes. The frozen canvas broke like cardboard. To disengage a rope caught in the ice took a hundred blows with the ice axe. Faces had lost their eagerness, and the monotonous task caused vacant stares. It took four hours to pack the bags. At last they were ready.

A rope party of staggering men began the descent. The snow covered the climbing-irons. Gevril saw the party down, watching the rope which joined him to Jayal and Da Namgyal. Their tracks had been obliterated by the wind and covered with snow. In the lead Barbezat made a detour towards the rocks of the south-west face. There, on the climb, the schist traverses had afforded a passage. Today melting snow covered the slope and the boulders which the ice no longer held in place escaped from its clutches and hurtled towards the void. They ricocheted noiselessly on the walls and were swallowed up in the clouds. The party stared in silence and continued the descent. No voice was raised. Then suddenly came useless words and disputes as to the path to follow. Da Namgyal was for cutting steps. A rope party of terrified beginners straggled over the slopes of Nanda Devi. To go quickly one would have had to feel full of joy, with the body ready for sudden reflexes, but those days spent at altitude had emptied men of their strength. It was a fitting décor. For a moment the men rested.
standing up, leaning against a rock. They closed their eyes. Gevril gave a start. They must take some drug and get out of this stony jungle. He made his way to the head of the party. The rope grew taut and the exhausted men came to life in a dull rage. Each one thought that his neighbour was the worst descender of mountains in the world. A couloir scoured by snowfalls entailed rope manoeuvres of infinite slowness. Twelve feet of snow, an hour's work. The tents of the camp were in sight. The slightly denser air revived the party. Now it was easy, and each of them felt a kind of intoxication, encouraging him to enjoy this descent. A mist, in which a spur of snow plunged, rose towards the party. The sun broke through, illuminating a sea of cotton-wool clouds to the west. It cast enormous shadows of the men on strips of mist. At the foot of the spur the ropes were untied. Drops of mist cooled burning faces. As the south-west slopes receded and Camp I drew nearer the descent took place over ledges of soaking-wet schist. The men leapt from traverse to traverse faster than the stones they loosened. The climbing-irons bit into the rock, boulders slipped, and the rocks melted. When a strip of snow appeared, a rash slide effaced it. Night fell and the climbing-irons banging against the strata of quartz threw up reddish sparks. A man stumbled, fell 45 feet, remained lying for a moment on the ground, and then picked himself up.

When the men from Camp III arrived at the tents of Camp I they found it a miracle of comfort. Their most urgent desire was to sleep.

The following day, 3rd July, the sky was hesitant, and although clouds covered the ridge and the peaks, the sun bathed the giant beam of yellow schist. A damp mist rose from the overheated rocks. We dragged our stiff limbs and aching muscles among the bastions of rock. The restless sleep that night had been only half a rest, and the efforts of the last few days weighed on our shoulders. There were
many halts. Leaning against the rock we watched the north wind sweeping the sky.

At last we reached the Base Camp. Gendre was there, and the news he tore from us stifled the joy we felt at seeing him again. We guessed that he was ashamed of his enforced retirement, anxious to be of service, and consumed with scruples, as though he had to make excuses for his youth. He, too, hid his anxiety. He knew no more than we did. The previous evening Sarki and Gyalzen returned from Longstaff col with a message. Dubost had pushed forward a stage to meet the assault pair, and having been for most of the time enveloped in clouds he did not know whether the crossing had been started or not. Gendre summed us up as though he had not seen us for an eternity.

“You all look as though you ought to be in hospital. It’s terrible. Do you want a wash?”

“Why, do we smell?”

In actual fact he heaped attentions on us which should have made us feel nervous. During our absence he had built a table of rock on which he served us a meal of at least four courses. We ate in absolute silence with the formidable appetite of people who had not eaten for three days.

Fresh and pink-cheeked, Gendre reminded one of an English gentleman who had decided to invite four tramps whom he had picked up on his lands to dinner. He attempted a few questions, but his guests were too absorbed to reply. Gevril gulped down a plate of bharal, and the Sherpas could not help admiring his prowess as a trencherman. Angdawa and Da Norbu had been ill for two days but they had gradually rediscovered their nonchalance. A furtive laugh followed by others which echoed strangely . . . They awoke something in me. I seemed to have returned to life, to have come out of a dreadful nightmare and to have arrived from a far-off land. We were as we had been before, but it could not continue . . . and at that very moment I had the feeling that a great shadow had passed.
Our eyes were raised to the immaculate sky. The monsoon had not yet arrived.

"It's pre-monsoon weather," said Jayal, who yesterday had thought the opposite.

What was going on up there? Gevril and Barbezat did not dare to utter their thoughts, but they could be read on their faces. Gendre and I had not lost our confidence. The mountain had made us so accustomed to miracles that we merely imagined the rope party had been delayed by the bad weather and that it was now struggling energetically to reach Longstaff col. And we knew what efforts a man who wants to live can summon up from his body. We repeated our childish calculations. Instead of the two days foreseen the crossing needed three. Add a day of bad weather, 1st July, spent in a tent at the mercy of a blizzard, that made four days, so they would only be at the first camp above Longstaff tomorrow and we should know nothing for two days... 6th July. Moreover, for the next two days we should be stuck at the Base Camp, prisoners of our weariness, captives of our bodies, which ached in every pore.

*Wednesday, 4th, Thursday 5th, and Friday 6th July. Base Camp.* The day before yesterday and yesterday sleep took hold of the Base Camp. The sky was a brilliant blue, pierced by an incandescent sun. At twilight woolly clouds formed above 20,000 feet, and the hours dragged painfully.

Today the ignorance in which we have been left makes rest impossible. The air we breathe is unbearable. Anxiety has turned to agony. Even if we retain well-founded reasons for hope, the days of waiting are over and the days of illusions have begun.

A sort of modesty makes us avoid Vignes' tent in which the same disorder reigns as on the day of his departure. A silence falls when one of us has to open the office chest marked "Duplat". Then suddenly our youth takes the upper hand.

"Why don't you become a geologist?" Gendre said to
Barbezat when he complained that the butterflies flew too fast.

"Ah, that doctor—he would have to go up to Longstaff col. What about my bicarbonate?"

Gevril opened all the medicine chests and laid bare a whole chemist’s shop—a chemist’s shop without bicarbonate, but with plenty of anti-sunburn cream.

About one o’clock in the afternoon, Angdawa, who was on the glacier, ran in, out of breath, and assured us that he had seen two men coming down from the eastern peak. Life speeded up. All our grim forebodings vanished. I pummelled Gendre in the ribs. Perhaps it was Roger and Gilbert. Now at least we should know. Gevril gave permission for me to climb up to Longstaff col. Officially if all went well I should be able to have a shot at Nanda Khat, the 20,728-foot peak which rises above Longstaff col. Gendre asked if he could come with me and I was only too pleased. We put on our packs and left. Two coolies would carry our loads to the foot of the wall, and Da Norbu and his brother would accompany us. Since our first ascent the snow had melted and the slopes of the col shone like a mirror. That promised great pleasure. We were at the foot of the col. Nothing could be seen on the ridge or on the summit. The alarm clock went off at half-past three. The Sherpas got busy. Outside in the moonlight an avalanche of small ice and then a fall of rocks... The walls of Nanda Khat are of granite, and the falls of stone pierced the darkness with a trail of sparks. Frozen snow, too sensitive to the sun... Heavy patches alternating with greyish regions where the crust yielded and let the leg plunge in up to the knee. One by one the peaks emerged from the darkness. What a difference from our first climb! We forged ahead at great speed, without a halt, as far as the foot of the final couloir, 600 feet below the col. We waited for the Sherpas, to attach them to the rope. The cold air was a relief after our efforts. Well, here as elsewhere the mountain was the same. When it seemed to welcome and help you, you had
to beware. As the slope grew stiffer the thin layer of snow no longer held on the glassy ice. At each rope length we hollowed a safe platform with our ice axes. Da Norbu hated ice and a suppliant look came into his eyes.

"Okay, Danou?"

"Okay, Sahib," came a far-off voice. Before he started to move he always waited for the cord to be taut. The couloir of ice with the black gleams had to be crossed. Gendre cut the steps and the splinters whistled over our heads. What pretty work! The ice suddenly scaled and whole patches became detached. At last we reached the bare schist and then a spur of blue ice which soon rebuffed us. We slipped aside towards a slope of schist to which the morning frost had given a temporary solidity. Da Norbu lost a climbing-iron; it disappeared. Impossible to go and fetch it. In an hour the sun would heat the soil and the rocks would be impracticable. The rope continued to be paid out.

"Okay, Danou?"

"Okay."

My hands and shoulders hurt each time the Sherpa pulled on the rope. He had just fallen. I had to hold him without really understanding how his fall had not carried both of us away. His brother, Pa Norbu, followed Gendre, who prepared the crossing of an icefield. Despite the cold great drops of sweat stood out on Danou's forehead. I looked at him. He closed his eye and with a plaintive cry untied the rope. All was well.

Gendre reached the ridge of the col and threw us a rope. I did not feel I had the strength to climb the last 30 feet of snow and I pulled with all my might on the nylon cord.

With the aid of Da Norbu I heaved up poor Danou who was green, more from fear than fatigue. I breathed with relief when I saw him smile and my desire to bring him up safely had been fulfilled. I felt happy and also terribly weary after those hours of physical and mental strain. Gendre went on ahead and waited for us by the empty
tents. We erected ours and, lying on our sleeping-bags, began to discuss matters, swallowing mouthfuls of boiling tea. Where were Roger and Gilbert? The fact that the camp was empty was a hopeful sign. Dubost had received strict orders not to try the eastern peak. If he had gone it was because he had seen some indication or perhaps because the assault pair was in an upper camp. We had counted three camps.

The clouds came from the east in thick waves and enveloped us in their mist. About three o’clock we were slumbering in the tent when Pa Norbu called out. He thought he had seen some men above the Red Pinnacle. We stood in the snow, serious, and doing our best to be patient.

Up there the stones fell with a dull thud in the dirty snow, and the curt orders of a tired rope party and the scraping of climbing irons came to us through the cotton-wool silence. The seconds were long. A rift in the fog gave us a glimpse of figures which were immediately swallowed up again.

“Yes, yes—Burra Sahib!” cried Da Norbu, his face joyful as if he had just found his brother. But we had seen nothing, and this emptiness was heartrending. The wind blew the mist away and Da Norbu groaned: “Aie! No, no Burra Sahib! No . . .” and he burst into tears.

The snow melted softly and the voices grew nearer. Dubost and Sarki suddenly appeared on the top of a spur. No one dared to speak. The rope detached stones which hissed into the void. Dubost had reached a schist traverse which led to the camp. Gendre questioned him. Dubost was amazed. He had seen nothing. They were alone. The previous morning they had been on the eastern peak. No traces, and the whole of the journey 60-foot cornices. They were thirsty. Payan arrived in turn, leaning on his ice axe, his face showing pain at each step. He was suffering from frost bite. Gendre wept. The world which had surrounded us suddenly vanished. The terrible reality became fact and
broke us. All four of us huddled in one of the tents. Payan took off his boots and put a padded jacket round his feet. He was quite calm. Tensing joined us, on the verge of tears. The steam from the stove rose in the tent. We were soaked through. Gradually everything grew clear and became self-explanatory. But we were people who refused to admit the evidence. We believed too firmly that our comrades were men who never gave up. Flabbergasted for a moment, we were already looking for some way of building up a scaffolding of reasons to give ourselves hope, blinded by the heavy grief which weighed on our shoulders, the weight of which we did not yet feel. Perhaps they had had to descend towards the north basin of the mountain or towards the Milam Basin. But the only words which no one dared to utter were the ones that hammered inside us: it's too late. No man in the world could survive so many days at over 23,000 feet in a blizzard. Fate had struck. The sorceress goddess would keep her prey. That evening this dream obsessed us. Tomorrow we should have to make our way down the icy slopes of Longstaff col to return to the world of men and to face reality. Outside, the sky gleamed with so many stars that it seemed to be fairyland. That evening four men, huddled up within their canvas walls, knew the best and the worst of comradeship. Dubost spoke in an undertone...
Chapter Eleven

ON THE EASTERN SUMMIT

(As told to me by Louis Dubost.) To establish a camp above the col had already been quite a business. I had spotted a couloir of ice from which boulders emerged, and I thought it looked a bit of a menace. Don’t talk to me about the next day in the sun! The falls of stones were a real pleasure. We had to slip through the rocks . . . rigid, loose, and rotten. Beneath the ice we could see pitons or rope-ends belonging to the Poles.¹ No question of using them. They were no good except for a souvenir. They must have had a dry season. Ice everywhere. We had to skirt two towers, and though trying to go quickly we had taken eight hours. In this type of country it’s always the same: you think you’ve finished and then you have to erect the tents and build platforms, which takes another two hours. The sky was overcast and there was a storm in the air. We spent the following day looking through our binoculars without seeing anything. I sent Sarki and Gyalzen down to the Base Camp to fetch spirit and provisions. The following day we got ready quickly and left with Tensing above Camp I. The ridge became snowy with enormous, incredible cornices of snow. They jutted out 20 yards over the void. Impossible to tell if they were solid. The Nanda Devi-side slope was stiff. We followed it for a time and then followed the top of the cornice. We were not very pleased with ourselves but we went fast. We arrived at a rocky ledge with a slab offering a good climb.

¹ Dr. Karpinski’s Polar Expedition which succeeded in scaling the eastern peak of Nanda Devi in 1939.
Higher up, a second ledge or, rather, a continuation of the same one. We did not go any higher. We had seen nothing in our binoculars, neither on the summit nor on the slanting slabs, nor on the ridge. We could see Camps I, II and III on the southern ridge; there were a lot of people there and we could not understand what was happening. I wondered whether Duplat had remained at Camp III. Was there some reason why he should not have left for the crossing?

On descending to our camp where Payan had remained we did not quite know what to do, but you can imagine that I wanted to get up to the summit. If Roger was on the ridge, all the more reason to go and meet him, and if he had not attempted the crossing, we might as well take advantage of what was there. Payan agreed, but when we checked things, one tent was missing. I was fed up and got undressed, but Tensing did not want to leave until the following morning. I don't know what came over me, but I got dressed and set out with Payan. We came across the traces of our previous climb, and in an hour we were at the col. No good going on farther, and it was dark when we returned to Camp I. The first day we had taken eight hours . . . The following day it was impossible to leave, for the Sherpas had not returned from the Base Camp. They arrived in a dense fog at five o'clock in the evening with enormous sacks, surprised that they were absolutely flat out. They told us that the Longstaff col was iced and they knew from you, Paul, that the assault pair had begun the crossing. We thought that something must have happened. There was no question of delay. We left on 4th July at half-past seven in the morning, and since we had tracks to guide us, we made good time. The quack was with Gyalzen and Tensing and I was with Sarki. Cornices such as I had never imagined; in places they looked really rotten, and so odd that we returned to the very stiff slope again on the Nanda Devi side. The slope was all right but the ice was quite a native variety. We cut steps and clung on to it,
I don't quite know how. In the end it was not too bad but there was a mist. We went on, however, length by length. It was slow going, but while you are reassuring yourself you get a rest. In the clouds we came across ice pinnacles where the ridge begins to climb. Payan went on ahead and cut out the tracks. Sarki and I followed. We pitched two tents on a snow ledge. It was an ideal spot.

Try as we might, we could not get to sleep that evening. The quack had forgotten the sleeping pills and began to tell me stories of his surgery. At last we managed to get some sleep. On the following day Sarki and Gyalzen took possession of the camp and Payan, Tensing, and myself pushed on. The altitude? We had no altimeter when we left Longstaff col. By the panorama we should have been at 21,500 feet. We attacked some iced slabs and as we could no longer see the peak we had to look for a way. We kept on our climbing-irons but the wind sprang up . . . a devil of a wind which blew from the north and swept over the ridge. It went right through us, and the quack, who had on his valley shoes, could no longer feel his feet. When we reached the open part of the ridge the wind nearly cut us in two. I cut steps; the bits of ice flew in the air. From the direction of Milam (the valley on the other side of Longstaff col) clouds were rising and the wind was chasing them. It was this wind which preserved the good weather, one might say. It was a real battle. We were so cold that we thought we should freeze on the spot, and we pitched our tent on a platform cut in the ice. Our third camp . . . You can imagine the sweat . . .

That was a night, my friends, which I shall never forget! The platform was on a slope and we began to slide. The wind did not let up. We thought the tent was going to burst and we had such a thirst. "Pani, pani," said the quack, but the water did not melt quickly enough, and the spring was far away. At one moment I thought the tent was going to fly away. I left the tent, and with the rope fixed up a gadget with an ice axe planted in the ice. The
quack was next to the door and he could not get warm. We massaged each other. Two days like that. We nearly went mad.

In the early morning the sun warmed us a little. From this camp, which was at about 22,750 feet, we had a very good view of the ridge, but still we saw nothing. When we left that morning we could hardly stand up in the wind, which had grown stronger than ever. We massaged ourselves before leaving, but the quack could no longer feel his feet. After a spell on the rope he had one hand frozen and decided to return to the tent and wait for us there for the rest of the day. Good old quack! I call that guts. Then we progressed without a stop. Tensing went on ahead. We were on traverses and icy rocks. My conversation with Tensing was remarkable. I spoke and he did not understand. We exchanged glances, understood each other immediately, and pressed on. Two small scrambles... Tensing was in splendid form. Another bit of ridge with a cornice. The wind blew the snow into our faces. I had to tighten a climbing-iron, but my hand was a block of ice and I could not feel my feet. Tensing rubbed my hands and pointed to his feet.

"No good, Sahib."

Mine weren't any good either.

We halted for a moment and then set out again. I swear to you that it took some will-power. Nothing stirred on the ridge on the western peak: snow, rocks and wind... gusts of wind strong enough to blow you over the cornice... powdered snow which got in your eyes.

A last ledge of rocks. Tensing is a fantastic fellow. He was less tired than I; in much the better fettle of the two of us. Before midday we were both on the summit, utterly exhausted, a little intoxicated by the wind and too numbed to understand that we had really done it. It was a unique experience such as one will never experience again. No traces anywhere! Above the clouds, far away in the direction of Nepal, the gigantic mountain masses of Annapurna or

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Daulaghiri. We came down quickly. Thirty feet lower down, sheltered from the wind, Tensing and I shook hands. I never knew that fellows like him existed. In the direction of the crossing it was not as bad as one would have thought. It should be possible. If there were no wind I should try, but it must be absolute hell in the wind.

They must have seen it. On the way down we went at great speed with the wind almost in our backs. Our hands improved. We found the quack and he had made something to drink. Above us the clouds sped low overhead. In the rocks we looked a pretty sight with our rather stiff feet.

We caught sight of our tents, and for a moment I thought we should never make it. The wind continued to blow like a fiend. And those cornices—my ice axe went in sideways, and yet we had to get a foothold somewhere. At last we came upon Sarki. It was high time . . .
"A contempt for death leaves me cold unless it is rooted in an accepted responsibility. Otherwise it is a sign merely of poverty of spirit or of extreme youth."

SAINT-EXUPÉRY.

On 8th July, nine days after the departure of the assault party, we foregathered at the Base Camp and the void which had been created among us forced us to face the truth: there was now no hope.

We had just sent a laconic cable to our respective families in France, each word of which wounded us: faint hopes still entertained. It was an illusion. We should have liked to devote all our energies towards some goal, but where could we find a trace or a signal in this oppressive immensity? Towards what unknown goal could we have rushed? In the warm relaxed atmosphere of the camp, surrounded by attentive Sherpas, we took stock of our terrible impotence. The camps had been struck, the men were worn out—some of them out of action—and the monsoon clouds were driving overhead. What a few days previously would have been rash would today amount to madness. Gevril tried to penetrate the north basin, on the other side of the Nanda Devi. Possibly he would tear some secret from other cliffs of ice and other fortresses of stone. Those which surrounded us had lost their magic charm and this Base Camp which we had longed for so eagerly was now no more than a melancholy desert of stone.

We lived like sleep walkers for another few hours, filled with the presence of those who had disappeared. Before
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leaving this spot we carried out a few simple gestures. Already the flag which Duplat always flew above our tents was at half mast, and the Sherpas knew how to stand at attention and remain silent. On a firm rock Gendre carved the two names we no longer dared to utter. We built a monument which would remain there, a stone carved with messages among lifeless stones.

We assembled in front of it for the last time, and in a silence hardly troubled by the distant wind, each of us addressed a fervent prayer to his God. Our eyes were closed, but an image formed within us—an image of two men whom we were proud to have known, of two men who had alternately been our brothers and our guides, who were part of ourselves, men with whom we had struggled and whom we had loved.

The words hardly blinded us. It was one of those moments when victories on the peaks have little value; other images, vain and useless, possessed us. In actual fact we shall never know what tragedy was played out in that barren world of ice. Did a cornice collapse? Did a fall of stones wipe out the rope party? Did they fall asleep for ever, completely overcome by the altitude? There is no answer. What we do know and feel is that there are in the world men who bear within them a passion for the peaks. They love to play with the stone and the granite.

There and there alone do they find their supreme joy and their path towards grandeur. They satisfy their love for purity; they enjoy the satisfactions of the individual and a wild liberty, and in a world comprised only of obstacles they attain simultaneously the peak of the material and of the spiritual. When they are restrained in the valleys the best of them feel the call of the blue sky; life has no meaning for them except if they can respond. Doubtless their strength merely masks some weakness and they are not unaware of it. Nor are they ignorant of the fact that other causes are as noble as theirs, and that others are of greater service to mankind. Even if they experience any doubts,
they retain the conviction that their place is in this world, that their mad desire is a miraculous ferment which will bear fruit in their lives or in the lives of others. Transcending the world in which they were born they despise neither mankind nor the life of man. Each new adventure opens to them limitless wealth and extends the horizons of their loneliness. Their passion is a form of knowledge.

They value their life enough to risk it on paths of which they know the dangers. One can only love that which one is in risk of losing. If danger did not exist they would invent it. Not a fashionable modern risk bound up with blood and machinery, but a risk they shoulder on their own, if necessary in the darkness. And when their end comes they will not complain of fate. They are proud in their struggle and humble in their submission.

Thus everything is in order, and it is only at the cost of this end that certain of them reach the sublime, in the shining merit of this world of the high peaks which is the ante-chamber to the beyond.

Those whom we mourned were men of this type and now they sleep in the grandiose halo of the summit of Nanda Devi. To our dazzled eyes they remain those who have been privileged to plough a deep furrow in the world of men.

Up there a wind can rise to obliterate our tracks and the monsoon may put the mountain out of bounds and walls may tower there which separate us from those we love. With them we saw the world in a blaze of light. We shall never be the same again. They have engendered a new spirit within us.

We have learned a little about life, we have known a taste for truth . . .

We have known friendship, the sun and hope, the tempest and sadness. Shall we ever find them again?

In our eyes we retained the cruel reflection of cruel mountains, and we had to learn once more to lower our eyes towards the plains.
FAREWELL

On the 11th July we left the Base Camp. On the glacier moraine our muscles rediscovered their familiar rhythm and with our Sherpas we embarked upon a breathless race which was no more than a rout.

The following day we met Gevril.

"I nearly never saw you again. Here are my rescuers," he said, pointing to Angdawa and Da Norbu.

He had set out to cross the Rishi Ganga direct in order to reach the North Coomb basin. The whirlpools of icy water had caught hold of him, but the Sherpas pulled him to the shore unconscious, his hands still clutching the rope. Exhausted he returned slowly to life.

Stages followed one after the other. Cliffs, rocky slopes, mountain streams fled by beneath our indifferent gaze. Payan still found it difficult to walk and we went on ahead slowly, speaking of things which lay closest to our hearts. The hours we had known were now so much above our heads that only weariness remained. Our fine enthusiasm before the assault had vanished. We craved for other horizons, other faces and other thoughts. There were hours of discouragement and anxiety. This is usual in a team which has no fixed goal in view. But so many secret bonds united us that we were convinced that tomorrow a mere gesture would suffice. We made our way along ravines too bright with flowers for our present sadness, and the night came at last when everything was at an end, when we should return stage by stage to the warm life of the valleys. A friendly path, then fields of corn swaying in a gentle breeze and busy men asking questions and exchanging glances. The sick woman whom Payan had tended had recovered her sight. She was laughing. Her village staged a feast for us. We left again followed by the village children.

"Will you return?"

"Adieu! Adieu!"

A child wept.

"Goodbye, child of Lata. Here, take my knife. Don’t cry, it’s for you."

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And we crossed villages, hamlets and towns. We resumed friendships which assuaged our melancholy. Would they have wanted us to be sad?

Let us try rather to remain faithful... let our joy be faithful.

We were dazzled once more by India, teeming with human beings, among the monuments of man's genius. On the gate of what has been described as the Eighth Wonder of the World the hand of wisdom has written a verse from the Koran: *The pure in heart will enter the Garden of Allah.*

We found other faces... The sea and the heat... The great port, friendly hands and the glances of those who had based their hopes on us... The cog wheels of the world. Obligations...

The quack who became a doctor once more. Barbezat, who left rapidly to climb new mountains. Gevril and Dubost, who travelled together to the shores of Lake Aiguebelette.

The story of the eagle which turned out to be a crow...

And life went on.

The crowds that listened... The reflection of space illuminating them and making their eyes gleam.

Tomorrow there would be faces asking us their trivial questions. "Were you terribly cold? What did you eat? Weren't you terribly cold?" "Have a drink." "And what happened to them? Tell me..."

Was it for this that we had taken this journey beyond the realms of man? If so, why?

How heavy-hearted is my reply.

*Chamonix-Paris.*
POEM BY ROGER DUPLAT

If one day I die in the mountains,
It is you, my old rope comrade,
To whom I write this testament.

Go see my mother
And tell her that I died happy,
That my only sorrow was not to be with her;
Tell my father that I was a man.
Tell my brother that I now hand him the baton.

Tell my wife I wish her to live without me,
As I lived without her;
Tell my sons that they will find the traces of my nails
In the granite of Etançons.
And you, my comrade:

Take my ice-axe,
I do not wish it to die of shame.
Take it to some grand face
And stick it on a little cairn which you have made
For it alone.

Far from the noisy crowd
Erect it, that it may see
The triumphant dawn on the glacier
And the bloody sunset behind the crest.

And for you, here is my gift:
Take your hammer and may your blows in the gneiss
Shake my corpse with shivers of joy.
Make a loud din in the wall and on the crest.
For I shall be with you . . .

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