

THE
BADMINTON MAGAZINE
OF
SPORTS AND PASTIMES

EDITED BY
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VOLUME XXXIV
JANUARY TO JUNE 1912

LONDON

E. HULTON & CO., LTD., 118, FLEET STREET, E.C.

1912

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ABOVE THE CLOUDS—'MIDST THE EVERLASTING SNOWS

CAN MOUNT EVEREST BE CLIMBED ?

BY GEORGE D. ABRAHAM.

*Author of "The Complete Mountaineer," "Swiss Mountain Climbs,"
"Mountain Adventures at Home and Abroad," etc., etc.*

The Illustrations are from Photographs by Signor Sella and Messrs. Johnson & Hoffmann

WITH both Poles practically annexed, popular attention is likely to be turned, in the near future, to the high places of the earth. Expert mountaineers and explorers will find the ascent of the Roof of the World fraught with grave peril, and abounding in almost insuperable difficulties.

We are nearing the top of Mont Blanc, and stand fifteen thousand feet above the sea 'midst a land of glittering, indescribable whiteness. Overhead stretches the cloudless dome of heaven, purple-black by contrast ; it seems so close that an upstretched hand might touch it. Behind us the world far below is hidden in heat haze, ahead rises the final alabaster cupola, so near but yet so far. The sun smites us mercilessly through the still, transparent air ; every step upwards in the knee-, and oftentimes waist-deep snow is a struggle. Our limbs

feel heavy as lead, and movement means pain. Exertion makes the lungs gasp unavailingly for more and more of the thin air so lacking in oxygen. The heart pants painfully, and at each beat one's head is struck such a resounding sledge-hammer blow that some men might almost curse the surrounding silence which seems to aggravate the internal uproar. The rate of progress is scarcely two steps a minute. If more are attempted sickness and utter collapse may supervene, and at all times there is the temptation to turn back, for that way only lies relief.



A HIGH CAMP IN THE HIMALAYAS (14,000 FEET) BELOW KANGCHENJUNGA

Such is that mysterious malady commonly known as mountain-sickness, the arch enemy of those who essay the conquest of great altitudes. Most men who have the courage to confess have felt its grip on the loftiest of the Alps. The attacks are peculiarly erratic; on one occasion the trouble may be severe, at another time it may scarcely be felt at all. Undoubtedly the diminished pressure is the real cause, but bodily fitness concerns the case and the state of the mountain must also be considered. On a perfectly still, sunny day and with new, soft snow in evidence few climbers escape trouble on the final 500 ft. of Mont Blanc.

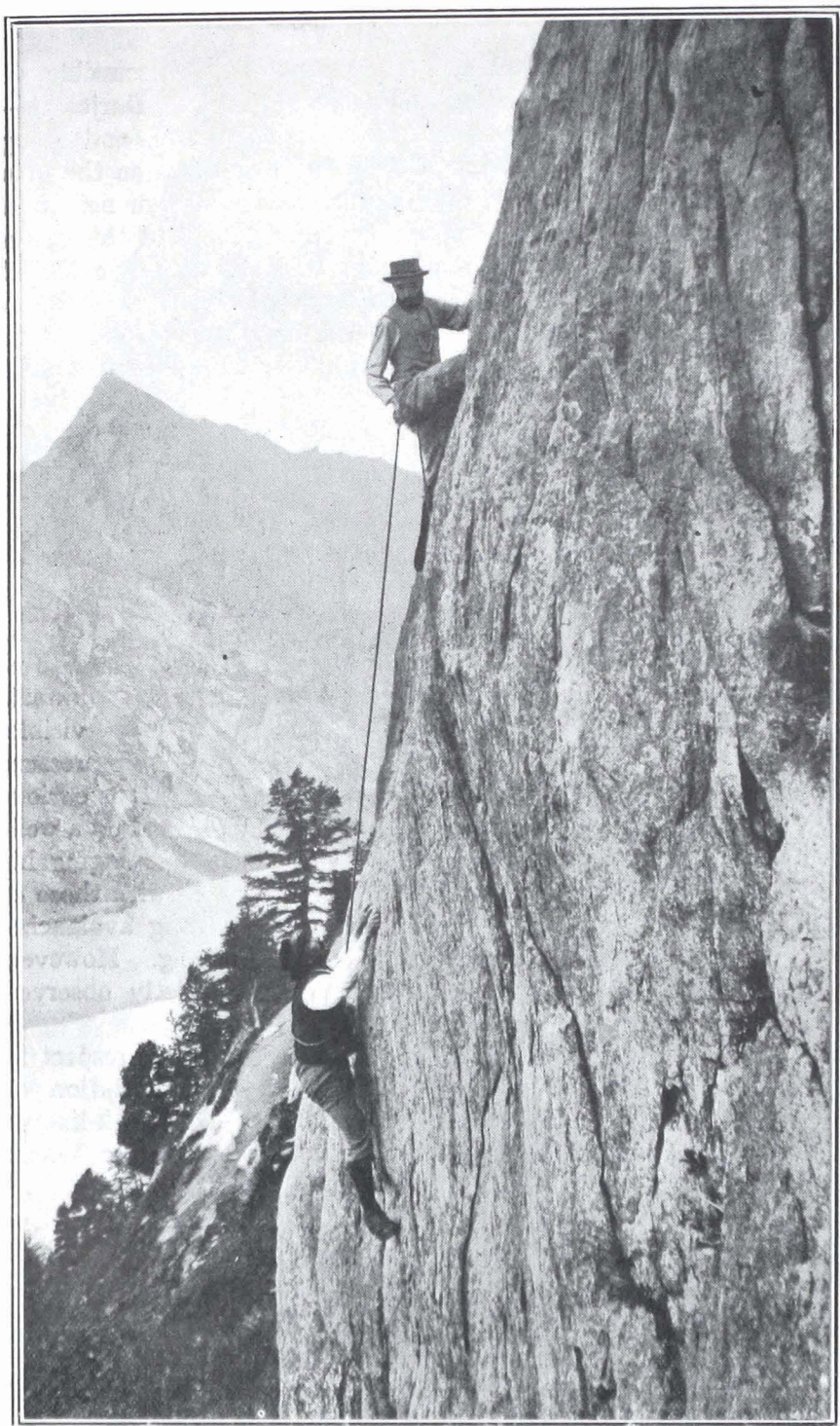
Thus comes the question—"How shall we fare on Mount Everest at double the height?" Some doubt whether human beings could live there.

A famous scientist has experimented with a "pneumatic chamber" and found those inside incapable of standing the diminished pressure which has actually been withstood by climbers in practice. Moreover, Messrs. Crocé-Spinelli and Sivel ascended in a balloon to a height almost equivalent to that of Mount Everest and came down dead. Such matters really prove nothing; the slow and gradual acclimatisation which would result in going on foot to the crest of Mount Everest altogether alters matters. Men who have made actual attempts on the Roof of the World hold strong opinions that ultimate success is possible.

Our neglect of mountain exploration as a nation is really remarkable, the more so as practically all the greatest Himalaya are our own property. Yet we know so little of them that only two years ago an entirely new mountain glacier, the biggest in the world, was discovered by a well-known climber, who saw huge peaks afar, "possibly higher than Mount Everest."

Polar heroes with eyes shekelwards have drawn the populace in more ways than one. The things they have done and more often left undone have stirred the world, but the more uncommercial efforts of mountaineers who have braved the perils of the loftiest eternal snows are comparatively unknown. During last century over four hundred lives, twenty-five million pounds, and two hundred ships had been lost in fruitless efforts to reach the North Pole. However, now that the Poles are practically annexed and the political situation more favourable, we shall in the near future hear much of great deeds on the heights. In the past some remarkable expeditions have been made, and the adventurous experiences encountered go far towards answering the question—"Can Mount Everest be climbed?" This great peak is given as 29,141 ft. in height. Surely the odd feet are a touch of official sarcasm; but few men have seen it, and some authorities disagree as to its exact whereabouts.

It is the vastness of the Himalaya and the inaccessibility of even the bases of the highest peaks that make their conquest verge on the impossible. There are thousands of peaks higher than Mont Blanc, many of them absolutely inaccessible pending the perfection of the flying machine. Mount Everest is 110 miles from Katmandu, the capital of Nepal, and this is the nearest civilised place to its base. The actual summit has been seen by very few white men, and the nearest station from which its height has been measured is nearly a hundred miles distant. The native name is Jomo Kang Kar—"the Lady of the Snows"—and it may be of interest to know that our English naming is from Colonel Everest, its discoverer. Thank the fates he had not a prosaic and particularly unpicturesque name!



"HAZARDOUS ROCK-CLIMBING IS OFTEN NECESSARY BEFORE THE VALLEYS ARE LEFT BEHIND"

The part of the Himalaya at present most accessible for mountaineering is that containing the peaks of Sikkim. Darjeeling—where the tea comes from—is the best starting place, and Kangchenjunga (28,150 ft.) is distant about forty-five miles as the crow flies, or would fly if it existed on Sikkim. The next-door neighbour to the snow-crowned monarch is Kabru (24,015 ft.) and this is one of the few of the greater peaks that have been successfully explored, of which more later. Kangchenjunga, on account of its comparative ease of approach, has been attacked several times but always held the upper hand. In 1905 it discomfited its would-be conquerors severely, for a party was swept down by an avalanche. Three perished, two coolies and a well-known Continental mountaineer.

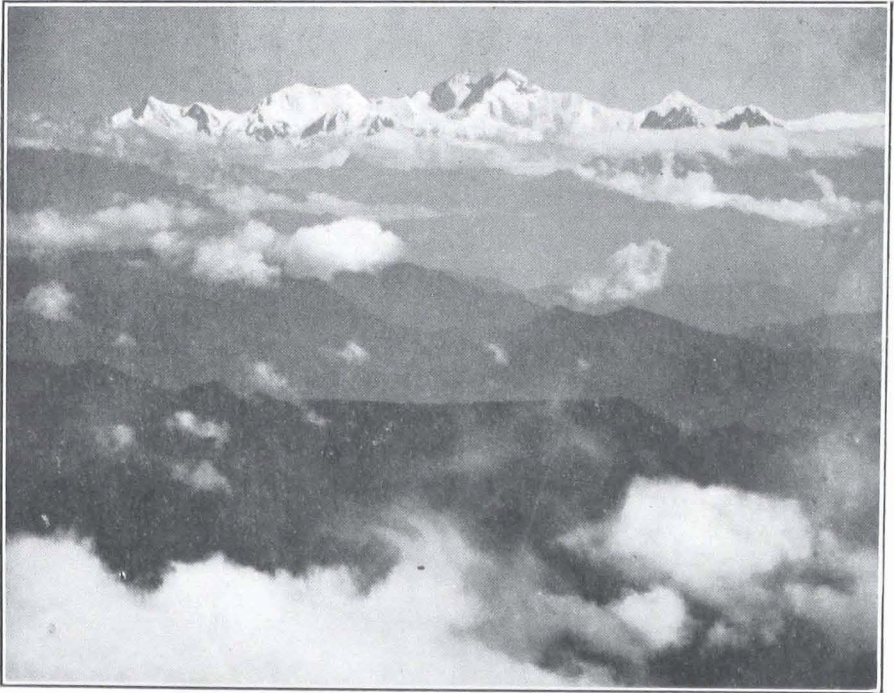
No doubt avalanches constitute the greatest physical difficulty and the gravest danger in climbing the Himalaya; even our greatest British expert, A. F. Mumméry, was thus caught unawares and lost together with two native companions on Narga Parbat in 1895. These huge snow-slides are on a tremendous scale. Sometimes millions of tons of ice and snow become detached from the mountain side and crash down into the higher valleys, killing practically all forms of life for miles around. Travellers have found trees laid low and animals dead long before the remains of the avalanche itself were visible, and this destruction is but the natural result of the great air pressure caused by the terrible inrush of such a mass of matter. It is curious to think of this, and remember the words I once heard used by a well-known London clergyman. In his sermon he was encouraging his flock by contrasting the difficulties of the Christian life with those of the valiant mountaineer who cuts steps in the roaring avalanche. Alas! it is the avalanche that generally does the cutting. However, if certain laws and rules of mountaineering are strictly observed this dread enemy may be avoided.

There has been more than one narrow escape in this respect in the Himalaya, and my friend Dr. T. G. Longstaff's description of his ride on an avalanche is most thrilling. This well-known mountaineer has done more to solve the problem of whether Mount Everest can be climbed than any man. His climbs and exploratory work, mostly in the Gahrwal Himalaya, have a national value. Other men claim to have gained higher levels, but they did not conquer the actual peak attempted; our countryman has climbed the highest summit yet surmounted—that was Trisul (23,406 ft.) in 1907.

With the two Italian guides, Alexis and Henri Brocherel, he reached a greater height on Gurla Mandhata (25,350 ft.) in 1905. The guides claimed that the record for altitude had been broken, but the Englishman jokingly said that this referred to the barometer.

However, their attempt was one of the most wonderful exhibitions of pluck and endurance in the annals of mountaineering. After gaining a height of about 23,000 ft. progress ahead seemed impossible, so a different route was necessitated. Thus it was decided to descend to some rocks in search of sleeping-quarters. Let Dr. Longstaff tell the story!

"We reached the gap about 3 p.m. and started to descend the slope, moving with the usual precautions. At first all went well, and we got down 300 or 400 feet. I had let down Alexis the full length of the rope, while Henri steadied me from above. Just as I turned



KABRU FROM DARJEELING—NEARLY 50 MILES AWAY

to take in the slack of Henri's rope I heard a sharp hissing sound above me; Henri, lying flat and trying hard to stop himself, came down on the top of me and swept me from my hold. As I shot down past Alexis I felt his hand close on the back of my coat and we went down together. The sensation was a curious one. The mind seemed quite clear, but curious as to the end rather than terrified. I found myself taking a dispassionately quiet and detached view of our proceedings. Time seemed annihilated, so slowly did thoughts appear to pass through the mind during the very short time we were falling. The glacier below, with the rocks just above it, seemed to be

rushing up towards us at an incredible pace, just as the engine of an on-coming train grows bigger and bigger each instant as it approaches. I distinctly remember throwing off my snow spectacles for fear that I should damage my eyes when we reached the rocks!

"After what seemed an age I heard Alexis shouting '*A droite, a droite!*' I knew he was somewhere to the right of me and was trying to get us into safety. He had seen a gully filled with snow, down which he hoped we might slide on safely past the first rocks on to a large snow-bed far below. However, I could do nothing but try and keep on the surface of the avalanche. Then somehow I got turned round with my head downwards and saw, a few yards off, a ledge of rocks with a drop on the far side; I seemed to rise on a wave of snow and be dropped over a low cliff, with Henri mixed up in my part of the rope. We were, of course, on moving snow, and we fell on to the moving snow, so our pace was only slightly checked, and we hardly felt the shock of the fall. On we went with the rope round my neck this time, but it was easy to untwist it. Then came a longer drop which I thought must be the last from my point of view. The next thing I remember was that suddenly, to my intense surprise, the rope tightened round my chest, stopping me with a jerk which squeezed all the breath out of my body. The avalanche had spread out, and stopped of its own accord on a somewhat gentler slope of soft snow. Henri was half buried above me, and Alexis was away to the right. I suppose that being much lighter than either of them I had been able to keep more on the surface of the avalanche, and so rolled on further. Both the guides lay quite still. The rope was so painfully tight that I cut it. I called to Alexis, who replied in an injured tone, 'Why have you cut the rope?' It was a silk one, and we had always been very careful with it. Then I started up towards Henri, who had not moved. However, he was merely more breathless than the rest of us.

"By this time the reaction had set in and my knees were fairly knocking together. We crawled to the nearest rocks to take stock of the damage. Alexis was quite unhurt; Henri and I had only a few cuts and grazes. We had all three lost our topis and ice-axes, and the two men had each broken a crampon. We must have fallen about 1,000 ft., and we fully realised what a miraculous escape we had had. I think we were to blame in having ventured to descend any steep Himalayan snow-slope after the sun had been on it all day."

But this taste of the evil temper of the Gurla did not daunt the intrepid climbers. After recovering the lost ice-axes and part of the other details they passed an uncomfortable night disagreeing with Goldsmith's *Traveller*, when he said:

"Though the rocky summits frown

These rocks, by custom, turn to beds of down."



BELOW THE ICE-BOUND CLIFFS OF KANGCHENJUNGA

They were glad to leave the "cold, cold ground" early next morning, and after a considerable detour and descent reached the hollow of the Gurla glacier. In contrast to the previous night the heat was now most oppressive, and after a long tramp up the glacier the guide Alexis collapsed with a sun headache about two o'clock. Progress seemed inadvisable, so a hole was dug in the snow 23,000 ft. above the sea and another night spent; the height of their "bed," and the lowness of the temperature being both unusual. In fact, human beings have never slept at such an elevation before or since. Yet no serious discomfort was felt, and Dr. Longstaff has reasonably argued that if men can thus "camp" at such a height the chances

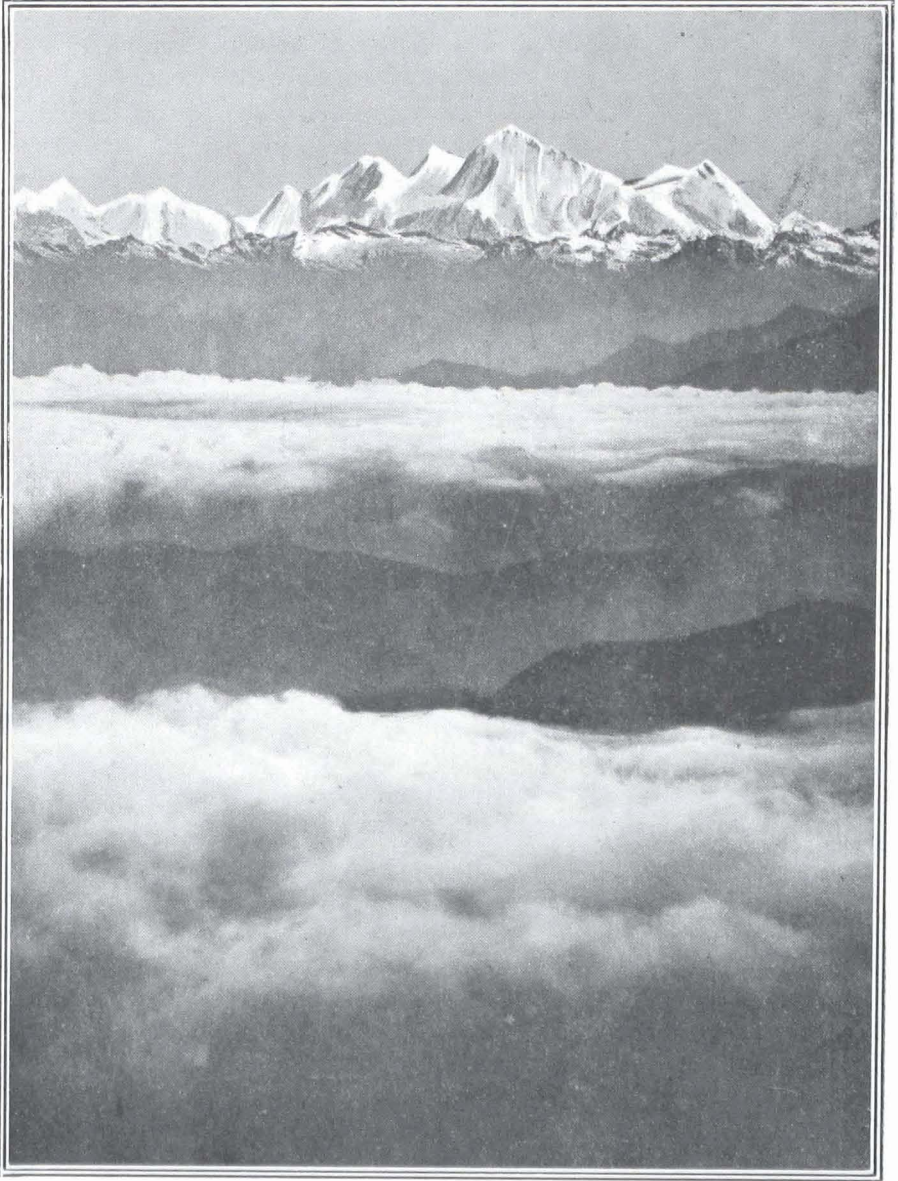


TELEPHOTOGRAPH OF MOUNT EVEREST FROM CHANJERMA, LA

of reaching the top of Mount Everest are favourable. This leaves but 5,000 ft. to surmount, and Dr. Longstaff's party on Trisul managed 6,000 ft. on the successful day's ascent from the upper camp to the summit. Yet the altitude effects on the loftier peaks have to be considered, and two days at least would be required for the final dash to the "top of the world."

However, returning to the attempt on Gurla Mandhata, the rough usage the party had received and the shortness of food now began to tell a tale. Next morning a start was made by lantern-light at 2-30 a.m., and after two hours' climb above the snow-cave a huge crevasse stopped them in the darkness. Attempts to find

a way across were unavailing, and the life-sapping wait for daylight ended in defeat. The cold was too overpowering, and one at least of the party felt incapable of climbing another foot. Gurla Mandhata



TELEPHOTOGRAPHED FROM NEAR THE NEPAULESE BORDER—A HUNDRED MILES AWAY.
MOUNT EVEREST—THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN IN THE WORLD

rises 25,350 ft. above sea-level, and the guides said that the stopping-place was only 300 metres from the summit ; but our countryman

with characteristic modesty disagreed, and claimed no record in the way of altitude. Thus the descent was commenced, and so ended what was undoubtedly the most remarkable *tour de force* yet achieved in the high Himalaya.

Turning to the more accessible Sikkim Himalaya the two climbs up Kabru deserve attention. The former of these was made as long ago as 1883 by Mr. W. W. Graham, accompanied by the guides Emile Boss and Ulrich Kauffmann. This expedition had no scientific aim. It was undertaken privately for the pure love of the sport of mountaineering, and relied more on the energy of its members than on the powers of gold and consequent assistance from local officials and others. Many great peaks were scaled, but Kabru was their *ultima thule*. Passing over the struggle with the lower buttresses it may be noted that they overcame serious difficulties both of rocks and ice-slopes in the final stages. From the lower peak of Kabru, 23,700 ft., they had a remarkable outlook upon the giants of the Himalaya. The more distant prospect seems to have interested Mr. Graham most of all. North-west, less than seventy miles away, lay Mount Everest, and he pointed it out to Emile Boss as the highest mountain in the world.

"That cannot be," Boss replied, "those are higher," and he pointed to two peaks which rose far above the second and more distant range.

These showed beyond the slope of Mount Everest, at a rough guess about ninety miles away in a northerly direction, and the whole party agreed that the unknown peaks were the loftier. Sir Joseph Hooker has also mentioned these unmeasured heights, and, later, we have the recent discoveries of Dr. Longstaff, all of which show that those who scale even Mount Everest may find fresh fields of snow to conquer.

Unfortunately the final 50 ft. of Kabru consisted of a vertical pinnacle of hard blue ice which defeated Mr. Graham's party and robbed them of the "crowning glory." However, they had been actually successful, and their ascent to nearly 24,000 ft. was a remarkable feat. A very noticeable feature of this wonderful performance was the absence of any serious discomfort due to the rarity of the air.

The two Norwegians, Messrs. Monrad Aas and C. W. Rubenson, were not so fortunate in this respect, yet in 1907 they gained a height of about 23,900 ft. on the other side of Kabru. Adverse conditions prevailed, and one of the party lost some toes by frost-bite. A point of interest worth noting is that unlike Dr. Longstaff's party they suffered no cumulative effects of a prolonged stay at great altitudes. Twelve or thirteen days were spent in camps at a

height of 19,600 ft. and over. Mr. Rubenson shares the opinion of Dr. Longstaff that Mount Everest can be climbed.



THE QUEEN OF THE SIKKIM HIMALAYA—SINIOLCHUM—GENERALLY
CONSIDERED INACCESSIBLE.

Much was expected of the Duke of the Abruzzi's expedition to the Karakoram Himalaya in 1909 ; Mount Godwen Austen, or K2

as it is officially called (28,250 feet) the second loftiest known peak, was the height of their ambition. But though the party inspected the mountain at close quarters from practically every direction, no way of ascent could be discovered. By repute this and the other two highest peaks in the world were said to present no serious technical difficulties to the climber; the shattering of this belief, in one case at least, was the most important result of the Italian expedition. One other point is, however, worth noting, and that is, the greatest elevation yet recorded was attained. This was on Bride Peak, and the height gained was nearly 24,500 ft., or about 700 ft. from the summit. Bad weather and danger of avalanches were the causes of defeat. Mountain-sickness was practically never felt, strange to relate.

Considering the untold wealth lavished on the expedition, the official encouragement it received, the experience of its leaders, and the complete organisation of all details, the results are disappointing. However, so far as Mount Everest and Kangchenjunga are concerned, men who have practical knowledge agree that comparatively easy routes can be found to their summits.

Though as yet without actual experience of the greatest heights my own personal opinion is that Mount Everest can be climbed. This opinion has been arrived at by consulting practical authorities and by plans and experiments arranged with a view to visiting the Himalaya with the late Owen Glynne Jones. The cruel peak of the Dent Blanche decreed that our theories should not be put to the test. The man who hopes to climb Mount Everest must be able, when in training, to run at a fair speed up the last 300 ft. on Mont Blanc. My intended companion could do this with ease, and others, guides and amateurs, can be found to do the same. But, though there have been brilliant exceptions, these are not of those who have attacked the frozen fastnesses of the world's highest places. Few can spare the time required, and a still more limited number have command of the necessary wealth. I venture the suggestion that the undertaking is quite worthy of a Government grant; the money would be well spent in acquiring a knowledge of our own territory and its unknown, lofty borderland.

Yet this apart, the lure of the great unknown will always draw men from the strife of the cities up to that more ethereal, purer region of romance. There, 'midst the eternal snows, life and action are purified in the fierce struggle with the furies of storm, and in conflict with the wildest and most relentless forces of nature. Great will be the battle, but greater still the rewards, of the man who first scales Mount Everest!