EXPEDITION TO THE API MOUNTAIN

By W. H. MURRAY

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on February 10, 1954, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, K.C.B., C.B.E., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr. Murray has kindly come today to describe to us his expedition to the Api mountains in 1953. He is an author as well as a climber and has published a number of books mostly concerned with his great recreation, which he describes as "exploratory mountaineering." He was a member of the 1951 Everest Expedition, and his publications include *The Story of Everest, Scottish Himalayan Expedition, Mountaineering in Scotland,* and others.

Mr. Murray served during the late war with the 5th Indian Division from 1941 to 1942. He was taken prisoner at El Fuka and was in German prisoner-of-war camps for three years.

I now ask him to give his talk on his exploration of the Api area—an area to which no other European party has hitherto been granted access.

THE tale I tell you this afternoon is one of exploratory mountain travel, with only a little mountaineering thrown in, in the extreme north-west corner of Nepal, about 400 miles to the west of Everest. There we find a great range of mountains, the Api range, to which the Government of Nepal had consistently refused entry in the past.

My own attention was first drawn to that range in 1950 when I was climbing in Kumaon. From a camp at 19,000 ft. on Panch Chhuli we looked south and east to a great host of very high and spiky mountains receding in ranges one behind the other into the blue skies of Tibet and Nepal. Not one had been climbed and few had been investigated at close quarters. In all that great array there was one mountain outstanding, which we discovered to be Api, 23,400 ft.

It was distinguished not only by height but also by the fact that it was the only peak that really did look climbable, and running eastwards from it was a great range which looked most enticing. I resolved to go there at the first opportunity, but there was no opportunity then. Access would not be granted from Nepal, and it was not until 1953 that I found to my delight that at last we could get in, and my friend John Tyson was free and able to go with me.

Illustrating his lecture with slides, Mr. MURRAY continued:

Application for a pass was delayed at Kathmandu for a month, and so we lost a month of good pre-monsoon weather. Bentley Beetham, who was over 60, proposed to go with us only for the march in, not for the climb, with the idea of returning whenever he felt unable to go on.

We went to the foothills at Tanakpur and from there travelled by bus for 100 miles to the little town of Pithoragarh, where we arrived at the middle of May. Here we were joined by three Sherpas from Darjeeling. It was difficult to get Sherpas last year, as you can imagine.

We climbed a small hill in order to get a view of Api. Our problem was how to get to it at all. I should explain that our plans were most

uncertain. The range of Api is divided into two parts by the Seti river, and it is the left-hand part on the map which I am calling the Api range.

The obvious way to approach Api is to go up the Kali river by the trade route on the Indian side and then cross into Nepal to reach the north side of Api. Unfortunately, the Indian Government will not now allow foreigners to travel within thirty miles of Tibet by the Kali route, so we had to approach it on the Nepalese side.

No route was known there. We were told there was no possibility of getting a route along the Nepalese side of the gorge. However, assuming we did get there, we would try to climb from the north-west side and then to get a pass over the range to get south. We could not come back by the way we went in. The ravines would be flooded by the monsoon rains.

Longstaff and Gansser and others said they did not think there was a pass. A great deal was thus left to chance. The truth is that a trip like this one must start out with a very great trust in Providence. Without that trust one must stay at home.

On May 23 we set out from Pithoragarh, striking north-east along the hill ridges for two days. On the tracks was an incongruous combination of pine trees and cacti in bloom. We were travelling now not only with the three Sherpas but also with eighteen Dhotials, for we had 1,200 lb. of baggage.

Then we descended 2,000 ft. to the Kali river. The heat was so great in the latter part of May—the altitude was only 2,000 ft.—that the Dhotials actually ran from one patch of shade to another because the soles of their feet were getting burnt on the stones.

At the village of Darchula we had to cross the river into Nepal. It is necessary to cross at dawn, for the Kali is a glacier river which swells immediately after sunrise. The bridge is frequently swept away. The men of Darchula told us we should not find a route up the east side of the Kali and laughed derisively when they heard of our plan. They said that our route was for goats, not men.

At first the tracks in Nepal were as bad as we had been promised. We could average only about six miles a day. Our habit was to rise at four a.m. in order to get the day's march finished by noon, after which we were immobilized by heat. We were very fortunate with our porters. The Dhotials especially were outstandingly good men.

After seven days of travel we came to the village of Dumling, where we saw a man threshing barley. It was the first time I had seen a hillman working while women looked on. The Dhotials were scandalized.

At this village Beetham was not at all well. He had been unable to digest the native food and now had to return. Tyson and I continued alone.

From this point the track ceased and we had very difficult ground ahead of us, across cliffs and ridges dropping 15,000 ft. from the summit of Api into the Kali gorge. Our men would not carry more than 40-lb. loads and so we had to engage more men from the village. We averaged about two miles a day. We found goat tracks and ledges which we followed without once having to spend a day reconnoitring the route ahead. We could

hardly say from one day to the next whether we were going to get through, but never did we have difficult rock climbing. We had short stretches, of 40 or 50 ft., when we had to use our hands as well as our feet, but apart from that all went well.

Every day we had to climb many thousands of feet up and down over the butt-ends of the spurs and ridges falling from Api into the gorge, until, after fourteen days' travel, we at last broke through to the north-west side of Api. We then climbed south-eastwards into the heart of the Api valley in order to reach the foot of our mountain. We camped at 12,000 ft. All around us were alpine flowers—the purple primula, yellow anemones and potentillas. At this point we sent back fifteen of our eighteen Dhotials and kept only three of the best.

I like these Dhotials even better than the Sherpas. (They are better rock climbers but not nearly so good on snow and ice.) The Sherpas, in my opinion, are becoming spoilt by the big expeditions and are anything but the thrifty and honest men they once were. I am speaking of the Darjeeling men, and grant that there are exceptions.

Directly above us rose a great step in the valley, which we climbed in order to get to a long and flat terrace above, where we pitched our base camp. Tyson at this point was not at all well, so I went myself up the glacier, following the moraine for three miles till I came to the upper basin.

The wall of Api rises from here to a greater height and is more heavily iced than the flank of Everest from the West Cwm. Our only possibility was to get up the ice-fall by which the ice-cap discharges into the basin. The ice-fall, which I reckon to be about 4,000 ft., lies at a very high angle.

I approached more closely to the end of the moraine and thought that possibly if there was no route up the ice-fall we could climb the rock ridge to the left of it. I went to the foot of the ice-fall and looked up, but came to the conclusion there was no hope of a route. The angle was far too high for laden porters. While I was considering this point a great chunk of the ice-cap broke off. One half went to the right and the other swept over the rock ridge to the left. That put any idea of an ascent by the rocks to the left out of my mind. I cannot show photographs of that incident: I was running for my life.

We went back to our original base camp. Tyson also went up to the basin and agreed there was no route there. Back in camp Tyson spent a lot of time collecting alpine plants and flowers. We had contracted with the British Museum to collect alpine flowers and insects, including butterflies, because no collecting had been done here before.

We now leave the Api valley and go into the parallel Nampa valley, in hope of making a fresh attempt to climb Api. The Tibetan frontier is just about 7 miles to the north. Our height now is 11,000 ft. On the pastures we met many Tibetan shepherds. The monsoon broke over the main range on June 13. We had a week of very bad weather. (We reckoned that after the first onslaught the monsoon would withdraw behind the Api range, which would act as a gigantic dam, and that proved to be so.) Meantime we climbed very high on to the north side of the valley, and from there could reconnoitre Api to our south.

Our hope was to be able to climb up a glacier and find a way on to

Api's east ridge. As we moved along the hillside we saw how hopeless that was. Between the glacier basin and the ridge stood a sheer ice-wall of 2,000 ft.

Looking directly up the Nampa valley to the eastern range the peaks looked very spiky. What alarmed us was that there was no evidence anywhere of a pass, by which we could return southwards. We could not go to India, nor to Tibet, nor down the Kali, and we were determined not to stay where we were until the end of the monsoon. So we decided to go straight back to the Tinkar valley on the north side of Api and explore the rest of the range with all speed.

The Tinkar valley runs eastwards to the Tibetan frontier. The people of the valley assured us that there was no pass across the range. We must, they said, turn the range by climbing up the Tinkar valley to a pass on the Tibetan frontier, then travel south-east to a pass at 20,000 ft., which would allow us to break south again into Nepal.

The local policeman assured us that, although there were Chinese troops across the frontier, we would be travelling three days in the no man's land along the frontier, and we had his blessing. He advised us to keep very clear of any Chinese troops we might encounter.

We stopped for a couple of days at Tinkar village while we considered the position. We decided that rather than head for the Tibetan frontier we should first of all explore another valley—the Yokanadi—running into the heart of the range. A shepherd told us he thought there might be a pass at the head of that valley. We moved off and travelled two days up the Yokanadi.

Great though the merits of the valley were, they did not include a pass. However, one morning at dawn we looked up a side ravine and saw what looked like a promising pass above it. Straight away we climbed up and pitched a camp at 16,000 ft.

At this point I was confined to my tent with a high temperature, but Tyson went ahead into the upper glacier-basin with one Sherpa and enjoyed some good climbing. The trouble was that the monsoon was now on, the climate warmer, and the snow accordingly very avalanchy. He failed to find a pass, for the promising col was excessively dangerous and steep. To the right of the col is a peak of some 20,000 ft. and this he was able to climb by its north ridge.

Never had we seen such discouraging mountains as we saw round Api. It is important to remember that Mt. Everest is only one great peak among many thousands, few of which have been climbed and many of which are in fact unclimbable.

I was now much better and we withdrew to the Tinkar valley and there we came to terms with the Tinkar men. They agreed to carry our loads along the Tibetan frontier. They knew the route. There was no track, of course. They could give us only five men, so with our six permanent staff we had eleven. But we needed seventeen.

We split the party. We sent the head Sherpa with half the baggage and several Tibetan porters into India. (He was free to go there if no white men accompanied him.) He had orders to travel down the Kali, cross into Nepal south of the main range, and rejoin us in three weeks at a

village named Chaubisho. The rest of us set off for the Tibetan frontier pass.

We arrived on the pass on July 6. The Tinkar men decided that, while we had every right to be where we were, it would be better not to have a meeting with the Chinese, and that we should move by night for two nights, which is what we did. We reckoned we should have to travel for three days along the frontier in order to turn the range. The Tinkar men on this journey lived entirely on tea and barley flour.

When the sun set and the last light flamed across the tops, we packed up and began travelling south-eastwards. We went three miles and bivouacked. All next day we lay up in a hollow at 16,000 ft., then again moved at sunset.

Although we journeyed by night and there was no moon, we had no difficulty in covering the very rough ground. The Milky Way streamed across the sky like a sunlit cumulus cloud, and stars hung with three-dimensional solidity, like lamps, so we had plenty of light.

After a couple of nights we were free to move by day and for three days travelled up a great glacier valley to the Urai Lagna pass at 19,500 ft. Thence we dropped 11,000 ft. into the basin of the Seti river. As soon as we started going south we ran into the monsoon. We had torrential rain throughout our thirty-two-mile journey to the first village, called Dhuli, at 9,000 ft. It was very hard going.

When we arrived in this village, the first outpost of civilization, we were the first white men ever to enter the district. The womenfolk took one startled look, then dropped everything and bolted indoors. The men, however, were more friendly and eventually the women came out, too. These people did not know the use of money. All their trade is by barter. They sold us food, but only to oblige us. They took rupees, but explained they were not of any practical value to them.

We stayed for four days waiting for a clearance in the weather. The rain was incessant. But far away to the south we could see occasional patches of blue sky and we decided to go south at once. We engaged Dhuli men who came reluctantly, fearing the heat of the lower valleys. The tracks were very bad and could not be used even by ponies; only goats could be used as pack-animals. As we descended the tracks greatly improved but also it became excessively warm. We could not get the men to go more than five miles a day, although the tracks were now better.

At last we came to Chainpur, the metropolis of West Nepal. The Dhotials had spoken with awe of this town where everything a white sahib could want would be found and where there were merchants who wore spectacles on their noses and kept accounts on paper. We approached Chainpur through paddy-fields and at last the great town came into sight. It turned out to be a village of quite modest size.

When we got into the heart of it we were surrounded by small boys speaking English. We were introduced to His Highness the Rajah of Bajang, on whose ground we had been moving since crossing the Urai Lagna. He was in his summer residence. He had started up the first school in north-west Nepal with 300 boys and eight masters, and English figured in the curriculum. Within the last year he had also started the

first postal service and the first dispensary with a doctor from Kathmandu, and the first troop of Boy Scouts. In appearance he reminded us of Stalin in one of his "Uncle Joe" moods. After lunch he introduced us to the scouts. The boys were intelligent and we were very much impressed by them all.

We headed westwards and two days later met our head Sherpa with half our baggage. We now continued west to India. None of the rivers had bridges and none of the tracks were mapped, so we had no idea where we were from day to day save that we were going westwards and were bound to hit India sooner or later.

It is interesting to see the means by which one crosses the grass-ropes over the rivers. The penalty for falling off is heavy—you can hardly expect to get away with your life. Big boulders trundle along in the river bed. The Nepalese cross upside down, feet curled over the rope, and pull themselves across hand-over-fist. Tyson and I decided that moral courage should be declared superior to physical courage, so we classified ourselves as baggage and were pulled across on a rope sling.

After ten days we came in sight of India with the Kali gorge in the forefront. As we approached the frontier we found shops selling Lux soap and Seven O'Clock razor blades. Two days later we were back in Pithoragarh.

In conclusion I should like to say that this and my other expeditions leave no shadow of doubt in my mind that the Himalayas give their highest rewards in enjoyment not to the big, heavily organized expeditions, but to small ones, with small funds, carrying the minimum of gear and equipment, and which are not tied down by obligations, financial or otherwise, to any of the great societies, and which are therefore free to roam where they will. The important point is that the party as a whole and the members as individuals should feel themselves to be free.

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