

Nanga Parbat in Retrospect

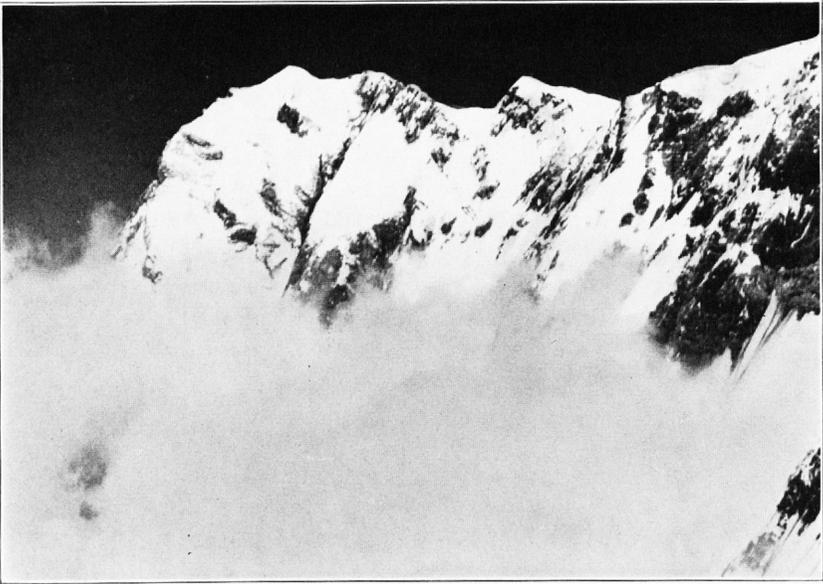
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THE partial failure of the Nanga Parbat Expedition, which had started with such high hopes, raises the question as to what were the causes that prevented the party from reaching the summit, and what are the possibilities for the success of a second attempt.

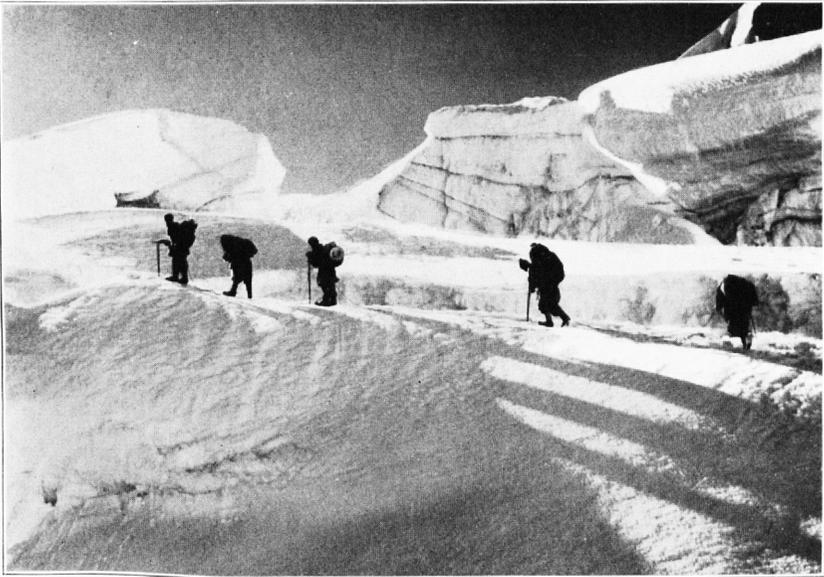
It has been asserted that the attack on the mountain was started too late in the season, but this was not the case, because we did not lose any time in reconnaissance. It was known to us that it was not feasible to attack the mountain from the south, and that consequently we would have to go along the whole Nanga Parbat massif on its north side. We had allowed two weeks for this trip in our plans and consequently lost no time on this account.

Nanga Parbat is situated outside of the area of the monsoon and farther north than the high summits of the Eastern Himalayas. Like the nearby Karakoram it shares the climate of the great central Asiatic desert belt. The last remnant of the moist monsoon is turned back by the south side of Nanga Parbat, where the highest and most savage mountain walls of the earth fall 15,000 feet from icy summits to subtropical valleys. Winter reigns long on the northern slopes. Only in June when the sun burns strongly in the desert canyon of the Indus, does the snow-line creep higher and higher in the foothills. The tremendous masses of winter snow settle slowly, and only then does it become possible to make progress up the mountain.

By the 23rd of June we were gradually working our way up the green Tatto Valley toward Rakiot glacier with a caravan of about ninety coolies. We started with more than two hundred from Astor, but over a hundred dropped out because they were afraid to go farther toward the mountain. As our caravan comprised over two hundred loads, we had to make two or three trips between each camp, and the members of the expedition had to organize in several groups to guard these transports. On one of those trips seven bags containing twenty-five mountain kits for use by coolies at high altitudes were stolen, probably by natives during the night. This theft endangered the success of the expedition before starting the climb, as we could only equip nine porters



SUMMIT OF NANGA PARBAT FROM RAKIOT RIDGE



UPPER RAKIOT BASIN NEAR CAMP IV



ICE FALL NEAR CAMP II



HIGHEST CHONGRA PEAK FROM CAMP III
Route traverses broken ice in center

for high-altitude work, instead of the thirty we had originally planned to use in the attack. On account of this small number of coolies, the establishment of the higher camps was much retarded, the climbers had to carry heavier loads, and energy, strength and time were thereby wasted.

The mountain giants of the Himalayas cannot be conquered in one or two days like the mountains of the Alps. As in the case of Arctic expeditions, the camps must be carefully established to serve both as supply depots and as shelters in case of a sudden storm. The decreasing amount of oxygen in the air makes long days' journeys impossible, and heavy packs can no longer be carried. The loads of the coolies have to be reduced as the altitude increases. Above 20,000 feet, forty pounds make a good load. A climb of 3,000 feet a day with a light load is possible between 20,000 and 23,000 feet, but farther up, half as much is considered good. High camps can be pushed ahead but slowly, since food, tents, blankets, sleeping bags and other equipment must be carried up from the base camp, and certain reserves have to be kept in every camp. Only when this work is completed—the highest camp established, and the climbers able to view the further ascent or judge its possibilities—only then, can the final attack be made, the climbers carrying merely the essentials for the last bivouacs.

We had hoped to obtain high-altitude porters from the Darjeeling district where previous Himalayan expeditions had obtained very satisfactory coolies. But, as it happened, the best of these men had already been employed by Hugh Ruttledge, the leader of the 1933 Mt. Everest Expedition, for his Nanda Devi project, and by the Swiss, Marcel Kurz, who was engaged in topographical work in the Himalayas. So we were forced to fall back on native Kashmir coolies. The only local tribe that was recommended to us as likely material for high mountaineering were the Hunzas. They were strong, tall men of the Aryan race, who had lived in high valleys between the Karakorum and Pamirs for thousands of years, while the other branches of the race were sweeping southward to India and westward to Europe. Their chieftain, the Mir of Hunza, at the request of the Political Agent of Gilgit, Major Gillan, had sent us thirty coolies and a headman. At first we were satisfied with the performance of these coolies, but as we went higher they became mountain sick and lost their nerve. Above 21,000 feet they were of no use whatever.

In spite of these circumstances, and in spite of a misunderstanding through which nine days of finest weather had been lost in a reconnoitering trip, we were able to establish Camp VII at a height of 23,200 feet on the 29th of July. The first ascent of Rakiot Peak was made during this reconnaissance but it really proved unnecessary. I myself feel that it may have cost us Nanga Parbat.

No sooner had we established Camp VII than we encountered another setback. The support party was unable to keep contact with the advance party because of mountain sickness among the coolies. The bad weather which set in, and the fact of the advance party finding itself with insufficient food and equipment to withstand a long period of stormy weather, forced our retreat. On our way down we met the support party at Camp V, but by then it was out of the question to renew the attack. The fresh snow and danger of avalanches in the most difficult part of our climb, the part between Camp V (20,800 ft.) and Camp VI (22,000 ft.), made the return trip to Camp VI an unjustifiable risk. Camp V, located on a steep slope, had been excavated in the snow under a bergschrund to protect it from small avalanches. It was not suitable for a long stay. Consequently the combined party went down to Camp IV, our well-equipped main base, situated on the upper plateau of Rakiot glacier, where we could wait in security until the bad weather had passed.

On August 20th we were finally obliged to go down to the base camp after a stay of five weeks at an altitude between 20,000 and 23,000 feet, surrounded by nothing but ice and snow. We found it a great relief and an immediate benefit to our physical condition, to sleep again on a green meadow, to eat fresh food and breathe air with sufficient oxygen. When the weather had improved and the sun had melted some of the new snow on the glaciers, we started on the 28th of August for the last attack. New equipment had arrived from Srinagar in the meantime so we were able to take twelve coolies. It was a hard battle plowing through the new snow even between Camps II and III. On the steep slopes beneath Camp IV the new snow had not melted at all, although the sun had been shining for days. We forced our way upward, often up to our necks in powdery snow. Although we were in prime condition and climbed as fast as possible, twice the time was required to reach these camps as compared with our earlier effort. The snow stayed powdery, the rays of the

sun had lost their strength, the steep slopes in higher altitudes had become bottomless with soft snow, and avalanches were forming everywhere. When Camp IV was reached, fresh snow fell again—winter had set in.

Real technical difficulties on our route were few. There was only one short stretch which would be called quite difficult in the Alps, and this was between Camps V and VI. Here we had to traverse very steep and icy slopes at the lower end of the northwest ridge of Rakiot Peak in order to enter a large steep basin which leads to the main ridge between Rakiot Peak and Nanga Parbat. We had to overcome a difference in altitude of about 2,000 feet with very bad snow conditions from the point where we entered this basin to its end on the main ridge. We established Camp VI in about the middle of this basin under a bergschrund to protect the tent from the soft powdery snow that came from above. The basin had its steepest part 500 feet above Camp VI, and we were nearly stopped there by bottomless snow, but after excessive exertion we finally worked through and reached the ridge. Our track had the character of a deep ditch which was easy to follow later when the snow had become hard.

The real difficulty on our climb was to plan the route up the glacier so that we would be safe from avalanches and falling seracs. Although all of us were experienced climbers and had made difficult first ascents in the Alps, only two judged correctly from the beginning as to where the route should be placed in order to reach the main ridge. On our route up the glacier to its upper basin, we encountered many difficult ice-falls which required all of our experience and resourcefulness in icecraft.

We were defeated but not discouraged. We have not given up. We hope to be back on Nanga Parbat. We are certain that it can be climbed—with just a little more luck and the experience we have gained. The main problem—to find a through route, possible for coolies, to the main ridge between Rakiot Peak and Nanga Parbat—was solved more easily and more directly than we had expected. From this point on the ridge, we could view clearly the whole ascent to the summit—a snow ridge, not steep, leading to the highest peak. Objective dangers and technical difficulties are left behind once this point is reached. From here to the summit is merely a question of ability to climb at high altitude. Two more camps may be necessary for this final stretch.