

Thalay Sagar— Northeast Buttress

MICHAEL KENNEDY

ANOTHER WAVE of spindrift washed over the darkened tent. Raw from the thin cold air, my throat tickled, contracted; swallowing, I tried not to breath too hard, but to no avail. Tentative at first, then with increasing violence, I began to cough. Inspired by my performance, Randy soon joined in, and after a lengthy chorus of hacking, wheezing, groaning and spitting, we slumped back into our respective reveries.

I was in a depressingly familiar position: high on some thankless fang of granite and ice, shivering in a damp, fetid sleeping bag next to a similarly wretched soul, wondering what could possibly have induced me to endure such frustration and misery. The world seemed an unfair place.

I felt haunted by the demons of ambition and disappointment, risk and reward. Climbing had dominated my thoughts for far too long, and perversely enough it still did; but not in this bleak, foreign land of mist and precipice. I dreamed rather of sun-baked crags and gloveless, T-shirted romps up rough warm rock, of lazy afternoons wandering flowered meadows and long nights in the arms of my loved one.

Six days before, I had stopped a few meters short of the summit of Bhri-gupanth, having covered the 700 meters from my bivouac in two hours. It had been a final acclimatization exercise; I had felt strong, powerful, ready to come to grips with the more demanding climbing on Thalay Sagar's northeast buttress. Bhri-gupanth's actual summit had seemed of minor importance as I raced down to avoid the sun-softened snow, and returned to Base Camp for a last rest.

But I felt possessed now by an intense desire for Thalay's summit, still 400 meters of difficult climbing away. I wanted no good effort, no valiant attempt against insurmountable odds; I wanted a summit unfettered by doubt. But I was pessimistic about our chances. This was our second night at 6500 meters, and if the storm continued, we would be forced to retreat empty-handed.

The climbing below had been superb, difficult and varied but seldom approaching desperation. Leaving Base Camp late one afternoon, we had passed Laura and Mugs on their way down, defeated by wind and snow at the start of

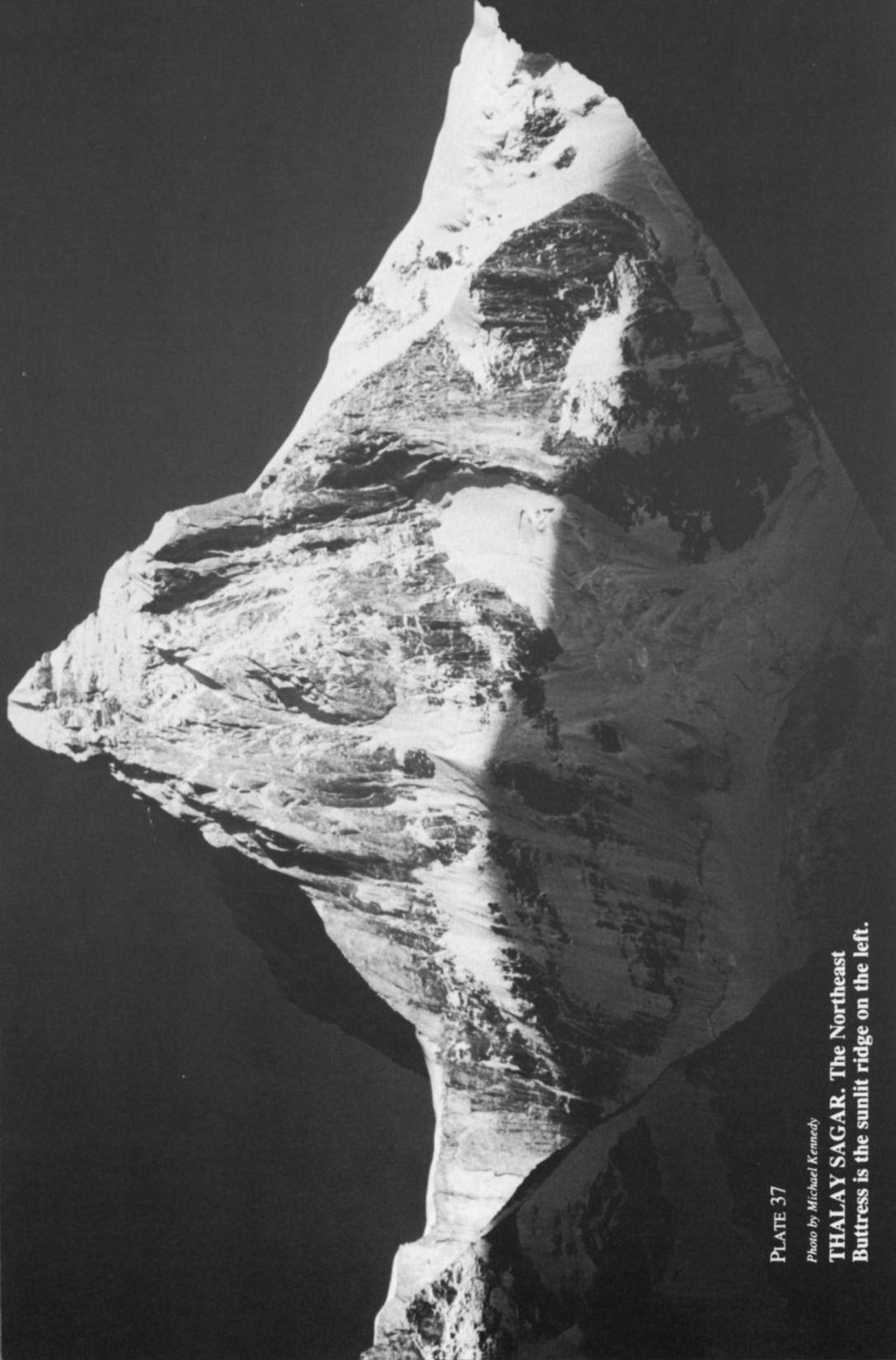


PLATE 37

Photo by Michael Kennedy

**THALAY SAGAR. The Northeast
Buttress is the sunlit ridge on the left.**



PLATE 38

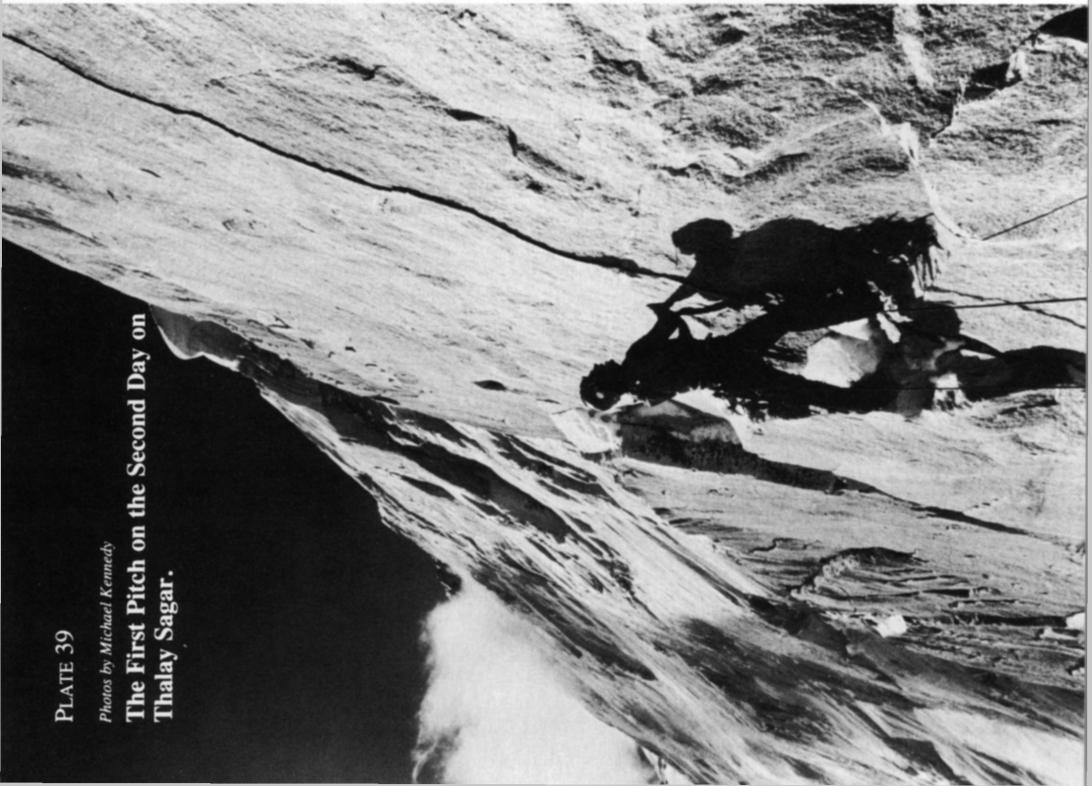
Photo by Michael Kennedy

**Randy Trover on the First Pitch of
THALAY SAGAR.**

PLATE 30
Summit Day: Traversing into the Ice
Chimney.



PLATE 39
Photos by Michael Kennedy
The First Pitch on the Second Day on
Thalay Sagar.



the rock. How different it had been for us! At Advanced Base Camp that night, the skies had cleared; the next day, soloing the firm snow of the couloir had been a joy, plodding across the glacier just a pleasant chore. Ten days confined to Base Camp with a viral infection had taken its toll on Randy's fitness, but he had eventually arrived at our bivouac in the 'schrund. We had slept in peace, a cloudless sky overhead.

A few hours of moderate snow and ice the next morning and we had reached the start of the difficult climbing. Fractured and clean, the rock had loomed above, shimmering in the clear morning light. A day of the finest sort of mixed climbing imaginable had followed: steep ice and steeper granite, sustained chimneys and corners, crampons hooking on tiny edges, the odd move of aid, nearly vertical styrofoam ice after a mantel onto a snowy jug. We had set the tent on a good ledge below a huge overhanging corner as the stars came out, settling in for another clear, windless night.

Basking in the sun at 7:30 the next morning, it had been hard to imagine a finer place to be: high in the mountains, the endless blue of the sky melting into the golds, whites, browns and greens below our feet. But after two blissful pitches, the weather had taken an abrupt turn, clouds boiling up out of nowhere. Soon, we had been anxiously searching for a ledge, any place secure in a suddenly grim vertical world.

More mixed ground and an awkward ice-choked crack had deposited us on a snowy ramp below a blank-looking headwall. There had been no sign of the cracks needed to reach the tattered bit of fixed rope fluttering 30 meters above. A half hour of frustrated probing had brought no solution, but a peek into the gloom around the corner to the right had revealed an end-run around the impasse: down, around and back up to the top of the headwall, all on ice. I had rappelled to recover the packs as Randy searched for a bivouac site, darkness falling as inexorably as the snow.

We had chopped disconsolately at the brittle ice, eventually making a platform on which the tent could be half pitched. An uncomfortable night had been followed by a dismal day: an occasional brew, some talk of past glories and future plans, moments alone dozing, dreaming, all against a backdrop of spin-drift sliding silently by.

The spectre of failure loomed large in my mind, but sleep eventually came, punctuated by coughing spells and mutual shiftings to relieve fatigued limbs. We awoke early to miraculously clear skies, and after a hurried breakfast, set off for the summit.

A pitch each on moderate mixed ground brought us to the base of the steep, black upper rock. The weather turned again, cloud obscuring all but the hostile ground immediately ahead. What followed was the hardest single pitch of the climb, and one of the most frightening leads of my life: an awkward lieback/offwidth, a fist in a snowy crack, desperate mantels on sloping debris, a final pull over the mercifully solid chockstone that capped the chimney. I felt as shattered as the rock all around. A verglassed chimney and a final headwall, climbed on aid, put us on the summit snowfields 150 meters from the top.

PLATE 41

Photo by Michael Kennedy

**Trover on the Descent from
THALAY SAGAR.**



The day had flown by, and it was almost five P.M. as I wearily kicked the final steps onto my first Himalayan summit. A few tears welled up, and I had a brief flush of emotion: a vision of possibilities, memories of climbs past, of almost climbs, a premonition of the coming let-down, all jumbled up in the joy of the moment. And what *had* we done? The second ascent of a difficult route on an obscure peak in northern India, a 6900-meter bump in a range of giants; we were just two specks happily alone in an ocean of cloud. As we sat eating our first food in ten hours, the sun broke through, a blessing of light and feeble warmth. It was also a warning of impending dark, and we started down, leaving a few tracks and little else behind.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Western Garhwal, India.

ASCENT: Bhrigupanth (6772 meters, 22,220 feet), solo to 6750 meters on September 6, 1984 (Kennedy).

Thalay Sagar (6904 meters, 22,650 feet), Second Ascent of Polish-Norwegian Route on the Northeast Buttress, summit reached on September 13, 1984 (Kennedy, Trover); 7½ days round trip from base camp at Kedar Tal (4746 meters).

PERSONNEL: Michael Kennedy, Randy Trover, Mugs Stump, Laura O'Brien, Capt. Anil Goth (L.O.), Sital Singh (cook).

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