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**North to Everest**

**I. EASTERN NEPAL, 1950**

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**I**T was a lucky thing for all of us that the request Oscar Houston made in 1949 for permission to visit Katmandu and the main valley of Nepal had not been granted. In the interval between that year and the next, the interesting possibility of a trip into eastern Nepal came to his attention. For the first time in history it appeared likely that official Nepalese approval might be forthcoming for a small expedition to the virtually unknown area south of Mount Everest. Native trails could be followed northward from the Indian border right up to the peak itself. As Mr. Houston well knew, the possibilities of a climb from this side had never been measured. That clear and settled weather could be expected throughout the fall was another very attractive feature.

Since this sounded like the chance of a lifetime, Mr. Houston again applied for leave to enter Nepal, now including the eastern area in his request. And when His Highness the Maharajah Mohan Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana graciously gave his approval in the spring of 1950, permission to visit the region south of Mount Everest was granted also. Mr. and Mrs. Houston arranged to go to Katmandu in early October, and plans began to take shape for an expedition into eastern Nepal immediately thereafter. I was very lucky to be included.

No one associated with the Houstons in these ventures will be found complaining about fate for years and years to come, if ever. For everybody concerned, the lucky chain of events continued. That Charles Houston was able to leave a busy medical practice in Exeter

and add his strength and experience to his father's undertaking was one tremendous break. Another was our running into H. W. Tilman in Katmandu and being able to persuade him to join us. Tilman, who probably knows more about the Himalayas than any man living, was just out from five months in the mountains of western Nepal. Obviously, he and Charley, friends from the Nanda Devi days, would be the ones to make the Everest reconnaissance toward which the whole trip was pointing. The fifth member of the party was Anderson Bakewell, who lives near Darjeeling. We were fortunate in having Andy on the spot, as he was able to do a great deal of advance work for the undertaking, gathering much essential information and personally selecting a fine group of Sherpa porters. I suppose it cannot exactly be called luck that the expedition was so splendidly equipped and supplied. All the endless details of planning were in Oscar Houston's hands, and they could not have been better cared for. But fate was kind in a lot of other ways: we were blessed in weather, in health, in congeniality and in the extraordinary kindness we were to meet everywhere. Everything combined ideally to give us an unforgettable experience.

On October 27th, Oscar, Charley (just off the plane from America) and I took the train at Delhi with some 1000 pounds of supplies and equipment. Our rendezvous with the others was to take place at Jogbani, the last railway stop in India south of the border of eastern Nepal. The little narrow-gauge train averaged, we figured, about ten miles an hour for the two and a half days we were on it—quite a slowdown in pace for Charley, who had not taken nearly that long coming from the U.S.A. Andy and Bill met us at Jogbani. Andy had brought the Sherpas with him from Darjeeling, including—to everyone's amazement—a lady Sherpa! She hailed from Namche Bazar, the last town before Everest, and was going home to see the folks. As we later found ourselves with lady coolies from time to time, this was really quite a coeducational enterprise! Gyaljen, the head Sherpa, was a veteran of two Everest expeditions and various others besides. Sarki, too, was an old hand and had gone up to Camp V on the French ascent of Annapurna during the summer. There were also Da Namgyal and Pa Nurbu, both experienced men, and another Gyaljen (no relation) who was scarcely more than a boy but very bright and promising. We met and liked them all, the Sherpette included.

Everyone spent the night of the 29th at a guest house of the big Jogbani jute mill, run by a man we had been lucky enough to meet in Katmandu two weeks before. His command car and lorry transported us and all our belongings across the 50-mile band of low country that lies between the border of Nepal and the hills where our trek was to begin. It took the whole of the morning to do this piece; a more punishing road could scarcely be imagined. Great confusion followed in Dharan, the last town before the hills, where Sahibs, Sherpas and baggage were all dumped about noon. It seemed impossible to distinguish between the people who were supposed to belong to us and the mob just hanging around to watch the fun. When the cumbersome caravan finally started, it was long after midday and steaming hot. What followed was a real chore. Nobody was used to anything: not the 16 coolies to their loads, nor the Sherpas to their new bosses, nor we to the trail, the heat or the public attention. This last was terrific! Being on one of the main north-south trade routes, we passed literally hundreds of heavily-laden coolies, their tapered straw baskets filled with salt, potatoes, cotton cloth, oranges and the like. If we paused for so much as a split second, the crowd would pile up around us six deep, and all traffic would come to a standstill. Nobody was unruly, nobody was impolite; they were just intensely curious and, one felt, considerably amused. Although the path was rough and steep, walking seemed easier on the whole than trusting oneself to one of the little Tibetan ponies that were—very temporarily, as it turned out—at our disposal. When, four days later, the ponies had to turn back for good at a place above the Arun, where the track became mere footholds on a cliff face, no one was sorry. The horse is out of place in Nepal. He has no job really. The universal load-carriers are the Nepalese himself, his wife and his children. Everybody carries in this country and seems to like it. One wonders what would happen to someone with fallen arches or a sacroiliac.

Our first camping place was a thrill. We had crossed, with much effort, the Siwalik Ridge and dropped halfway down the other side. The beautiful Tamur Valley lay below with its hills clustered around like stiff folds of blue-green taffeta. In the sky all along the north rose the icy summits of the Himalayas. Makalu was there and Chamlang and, far over to the east, Kangchenjunga—the only view that we were to have of it. We saw it at sunset, by moonlight, and

bathed in the early morning colors as the sun rose. This was worth coming a long distance for! Here, I remember, we came across our first Nepalese swing, an ingenious ferris-wheel contraption. These swings are very airy, always placed with an eye to the view and characteristic of a land whose people have a real gift for enjoying life.

Next morning we dropped to the Tamur River, crossed it by a fancy steel suspension bridge and ascended about 3000 feet to Dhankuta, the dream town of all our lives. Imagine to yourself a clean, happy, prosperous village, built with taste and style, beautifully situated on a ridge where poinsettia and bohinnia trees are in bloom. Its streets are swept twice daily, and its houses replastered twice yearly. We visited the public library, the school (where English is taught) and the parade ground where, when the garrison is not drilling, the children play soccer, volleyball and badminton—amazing sports to find in a town in faraway Nepal! None of us will forget Dhankuta and its bright cheerful people, or the words we saw written in English on one of the school buildings: "Gather courage; don't be a chicken-hearted fellow." Not a bad motto for a school, we thought—or for an expedition.

The Governor of Dhankuta was extremely kind. He arranged for coolie replacements and food for the caravan, gave us directions about the next stages of the route and supplied us with a Jemadar (lieutenant) and three soldiers for an escort. Their job was to take us to the next province and turn us over to the next governor's men; but, owing to a misunderstanding about the rendezvous, everyone missed connections. Not daring to leave us unattended, the four Dhankutans stayed with us for the whole trip.

It was a steep climb above Dhankuta to the crest of the second big ridge where, near Pairibas, we had another superb view of the mountains. No sign of Everest yet, although we wondered if the cloud streamer midway along the ridge of Chamlang might belong to it. This would have been possible, as Everest lies directly behind. Camp III was part way down the vast terraced hillside, with the Arun Valley lying just below. Next morning (November 2nd) we dropped down to the river, went on up for a bit and pitched an early camp that afternoon right beside it.

By this time we were beginning to settle down into expedition routine. After swims all around, everyone involved himself in characteristic pursuits. Bill Tilman, champion bread-maker, was mixing

dough, in up to his elbows. Charley went off with a fishing rod in search of mahseer, the fighting fish we had all heard so much about. Andy got out his instruments and calculated temperatures and the like, while Oscar smoked his pipe and studied the map that already we were beginning to find full of inaccuracies. I was busy looking over the supplies and planning supper with Gyaljen Senior, who had turned out to be a marvellous cook. The Sherpas were wonderful. Accustomed to the American do-it-all-yourself system, I never could get over the speed and skill with which they would get the tents up, blow up the mattresses, lay out sleeping bags and all the gear, bring to each Sahib a change of shoes plus hot water to wash in, and then announce tea. A soft life!

Two more days were spent working up the Arun, and on November 4th we crossed it at Kattegeat in a 20-foot dugout canoe. Three accomplished oarsmen maneuvered us neatly through the swift green current. Next came two days on the Irkua Khola, a tributary of the Arun, which we followed to Phedi. This was a small settlement at the foot of the long hill leading to the 12,000-foot Salpa Pass. Here we began to have troubles. Many of the lowland coolies were turning back now that high country was ahead; and all efforts to get replacements, as well as food for the entourage and supplementary meat and vegetables for ourselves, seemed unavailing. The next days were anxious ones. At several points a complete halt threatened. Everyone was packing a load now, even the Jemadar and his men, and the *bandobust* (Urdu for caravan) was beginning to wear a lean and hungry look. Added to these anxieties was the realization that the journey was proving considerably longer and harder than we had expected. We had just 36 days for the round trip; if we took too long either going or coming, the time left for the mountain might be too short for us to accomplish anything.

These were also our hardest marches to date. We crossed the Salpa La on November 8th and made a long descent to Gudel through great forests of holly and rhododendron. The short winter day was hampering. It was not light much before six, and dusk began to fall about 5.30. It took a good bit of doing to get in the eight to ten miles that seemed to be our daily limit and still have time in the afternoon for the relaxation that is so important for an expedition's well-being. From Gudel it was rather dispiriting to see the Hongu River apparently still miles below, and, on the other

side, the long ascent to the next pass. But what wonders just putting one foot in front of the other can accomplish! Two days later we found ourselves safely over pass two and able to face pass three (for there was another) with growing fortitude. We just plugged along. The river crossings were a thrill because of the variety of bridges, usually made of bamboo and very wobbly; and the ascents to the passes were enlivened by arguments among the experts as to altitude and distance. Nobody seemed able to decide whether it was better to expect the climb to be longer and higher than it actually was or to regard everything with undaunted optimism. (I inclined to the latter view.) On November 10th we crossed the Innukhu River and in one long Spartan day surmounted the last ridge remaining between us and the Kosi Valley.

Things were beginning to look up. Being in Sherpa country now, we could obtain food far more easily, and we had been lucky enough to find some strong hill men to help carry for us. The high mountains were very near. Up every side valley we saw new groups of magnificent snow peaks. Below us was the Dudh Kosi, the river that drains the south side of Everest; but of the monarch himself there was still no sign, although we thought and talked of little else and never came around a bend without hoping. Namche Bazar was three days' march up the valley. The Sherpas showed us where: on a high plateau at the foot of a handsome rock peak called Kumbila. We were really getting places.

On November 14th we reached Namche. The day, clear enough at the start, was rapidly darkening, and a curtain of clouds was drawn across the high country ahead. It was a wonderful solid winter town, row upon row of stone houses, with dark roofs, doors and shuttered windows. A reception committee had met us a mile or so down the trail with a flock of small, bell-hung Tibetan ponies. Everybody bowed and smiled and salaamed, and we mounted the horses and entered the town like Alexander the Great. Then followed a period of goldfish-bowl life beyond description. Our tents were pitched on a small terrace (in the Nepali sense) around which the entire population gathered. It was like finding oneself on the stage for a 24-hour show, for which every seat had been sold for weeks. Despite the charms of Namche and its people—and we did like them all—it was something of a relief to be going on up to Thangboche the next day.

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THE YOUNG HEAD LAMA OF THANGBOCHE

*Photo, Elizabeth S. Cowles*

But when we woke up on the morning of the 15th, it was snowing. We were 12,000 feet up now; and, although the temperature did not go below 18°, this represented, according to Andy, a 100-degree drop since the midday sun of the Arun Valley. We walked along shivering in a winter wind; but we found it impossible to complain, warmly dressed as we were, while our coolies in their flimsy cotton garments and bare feet were trotting along faithfully in front of us. Everest lay right ahead, we knew, but all we had was a hint now and then of distant crags and slopes through the mist, and of the Dudh Kosi in its wild gorge far below. At noon we reached Thangboche. Here there was a lamasery where Oscar, Andy and I were to stay while the advance party continued on toward the mountain. It was still snowing. A lama greeted us and very kindly put a small house at our disposal for the five days of our stay. After a farewell lunch together in our new domain, Bill and Charley left, taking Sarki, Da Namgyal and two Sherpa coolies, with supplies for six days. If they were not back on the 19th, they said, we were to return to Namche, and they would catch up with us. I must confess that the stay-behinds felt rather low after they had gone. The thought of the storm worried us all. Good visibility was an absolute necessity for the reconnaissance. Could it be that our luck had changed, and that a real break in the weather was in store for us?

What a lifting of the hearts the next day! We awoke to blue sky, bright sunshine and an outlook that must surely be one of the most magnificent in the whole world. Everest was just ahead. Its vast bulk and that of Lhotse beside it filled massively the whole great V of the valley. People have said that Everest is not beautiful—and they are quite right. But there is something profoundly moving about having the biggest hill on earth right in front of you, yours to see day after day, in all the lights and in all the moods. The south wall was rugged as a fortress and amazingly free of snow. Nuptse's long dark ridge cut right across it like a rampart and then mounted steeply to join Lhotse on one side. Everest flew no cloud banner that day, but we were to see its ice plume later on and marvel at the force of those high, cold winds. Of course, the mountain does not begin to look as high as it is, but that evening the setting sun was blazing away on the huge incredible face long after the rest of the world was in darkness. That told us a lot.

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"GOOD FEELING AMONG US ALL . . ."

*Photos, Elizabeth S. Cowles*

But Everest was not everything. On every hand there were peaks like nothing I had ever seen or dreamed of, and their tapered summits and fluted white faces shone in the sun against the deep blue sky of that marvellous day. Yesterday's snow lay everywhere around. A flock of yaks made dark accents against it. And the lamas made bright accents against it as, young and old, they went about their business dressed in their bulky, red homespun gowns. There were 25 lamas in all here at Thangboche, ranging in age from about eight to well over 60. This was a very cheerful, happy place. The little lamas were bright and responsive, and giggled and cut up like any other small fry. The older lamas had sweet, peaceful faces and treated the younger ones with warmth and affection. All were exceedingly kind and attentive to us and showed enormous interest in everything we did, said, ate or wore. English lessons were very popular. In no time the whole lamasery could count up to 30 and knew the words for nose, eyes, teeth, hair and the like. They went about shaking hands and saying, "Good Morning," in exact imitation of our inflection and tone of voice. In return, they taught us their names for the mountains and wrote them down for us in beautiful, careful Tibetan script. *Chomolungma* meant Everest and its satellites, Nuptse, Lhotse and the rest. *Andumlungma* was the spectacular wedge-shaped peak on the right side of the valley, with *Kantega* next to it and then my favorite, which was called *Tamusurmu*. It was like a cathedral, with a cluster of lofty spires connected by delicate, graceful and shining snow ridges. We were picture-taking like mad. Oscar and I worked around the Gompa mostly, but Andy went farther afield. He took telephotos of Everest from high up on the neighboring slopes and one day went over to Taweche with Pa Nurbu for valuable shots from the west.

From time to time we were invited to services at the lamasery. These were very interesting and impressive. The 16-year-old Head Lama, believed to be a reincarnation of his predecessor, and through him of the great Buddha, sat behind a sort of pulpit on one side of the ceremonial room. Books lined two sides of the room; the other walls were brightly painted and decorated. Sacred banners hung everywhere. In rows of squat brass bowls, candles were burning. After we were seated, the lamas marched in, each kneeling and touching his forehead to the floor before an altar in the center. Then everyone sat down, the older ones around the sides of the

room and the youngsters in two rows down the middle. Next a kind of intoning began, led by a patriarch with a deep, rich bass. At intervals everybody would pick up an instrument, and a weird, strident music would burst forth. This was rhythmic rather than melodic; it was given range and color by the contrast of tones joining in. There were two immense horns, like Alpine horns, and conch shells with a deep, throaty note. There were smaller soprano horns, and pipes, cymbals and bells. There were three vast drums. We had heard these drums often: at 4:30 every morning they announced the beginning of the lamasery day.

Sometimes Tibetan tea (very strong and buttery) was served as part of the ceremony. We were each given a cup that was filled over and over from a great silver pot that went the rounds. Or a few grains of rice would be handed around that everyone tossed into the air as prayers were chanted. We presented the Head Lama with gifts, using the white silk scarves of Tibetan tradition as channels of communication between us. He gave us presents, too—amulets to wear, a packet of little colored pellets to ward off misfortune, and more of the long white scarves. One afternoon, word was sent down for us to go up to the Gompa to watch one of their dances. This was just what we had been hoping for. The dance was held in the open center courtyard of the lamasery with the warm sun pouring in. The four performers had costumes that were all brilliant reds, blues and yellows; and they wore wonderful high, gilded headdresses. The musicians were placed in one of the open upper galleries and provided the strange strident background to the slow, graceful, stylized motions of the dancers below. Another day we asked the lamas if we might take their pictures—and how they loved it! Lots of decorating and primping and all the lamas in their best outfits, the lamasery treasures set around so they would show, and the young Head Lama very fine in a large, bright red hat.

When day succeeded day and the weather still held fine, we began to feel wonderfully hopeful and encouraged about the reconnaissance. Excitement mounted as the 19th approached. That afternoon all eyes were riveted on the path. At about three o'clock we saw them coming slowly up the trail, a very weary-looking party. Sarki, helpless with an attack of malaria, was being carried by one of the Sherpas at the rear. But despite the grim look that this gave

things, the news was splendid. Charley and Bill gave us a complete report of their successful undertaking around the tea table in our little lamasery room.\* It was a happy reunion. The lamas dropped in to hear about everything, and Gyaljen served a meal worthy of the greatness of the occasion. As for Sarki, he was dosed with appropriate medicines and was his old self in a few days.

The morning of the 20th was clear and fine as we wound up our Thangboche affairs. Everyone gave everyone else presents, and we all waved and smiled and said goodbye as the caravan started down the steep trail on the return journey to Namche. The low-country coolies, who had been vacationing below, presented a transformed appearance, with warm blankets around them, knitted caps on their heads and an air of having been completely Sherpafied. The bandobust was a real unit now. There was loyalty and good feeling among us all. You never passed anyone on the trail without getting a quick, friendly smile; and cheerful sounds of laughter and conversation abounded. Back at Namche, we enjoyed about the same measure of privacy as before; but the warmth of our welcome pleased us all, and the goodbyes next morning were touching. Charley gave the head man (with the wonderful name of Nga Wong Tchetem) his American hat as a parting present. The effect on that gentleman of switching from a Tibetan bonnet of fur and brocade to the Knox number was *something!* Then we started down the descending path with last looks back at the sturdy little town and at Everest, still grandly in view up the valley.

The trip out went very fast. We were in the best trim of our lives and could walk tirelessly for hours. Seeing everything in reverse was wonderful, fixing the lay of that marvellous land firmly in our minds. First, goodbye to the Kosi Valley and back over the passes—then goodbye to Sherpaland, to mani walls and chortens, and the little Buddhist prayer flags fluttering in the wind. To Phedi again, and down the Irkua Khola, and then the Arun once more, on November 29th, just a week away from Namche. Down here it seemed very warm, relaxing and civilized. People along the path brought us oranges, bananas, honey, flowers. What a delightful land! We thought and talked a lot about its endearing qualities as we passed for the last time the familiar terraced hills, the trim

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\*See C. S. Houston, "South Face of Mount Everest," pp. 12-21 below.—*Ed.*

little thatched houses and the many shady resting places on the trail, well-remembered from the journey in.

We left our old route near Pairibas to go out via Chatra and the site of the proposed Kosi dam. On December 2nd we reached a point near the confluence of the three great rivers, the Arun, Tamur and Sun Kosi. It was just above here that we heard for the first time of the revolution in Nepal. We had been met by two men in uniform sent very kindly by our friend the Governor of Dhankuta to see that we got across the ferries and down the roads closed to travel by the emergency. But all went quite peacefully for us. We crossed the river by a little open car on an overhead cable (very sensational!) and swung down the broad smooth track toward Chatra, passing the Kosi dam site on the way. This was very interesting. If it is built, it will be the highest dam in the world and will back up the rivers as far as 80 miles, radically changing the character of much of the country we had just gone through. At Barakshetra, where the headquarters of this project of the Indian government are, we were pleasantly entertained by the members of the staff. From them we heard of the abysmal turn that world events had taken. It sobered us considerably. The contrast between outside reality and the free, simple, vigorous life we had been leading struck us all with great force, as it must all those who return from the wilds.

Endings are always sad. December 5th brought the wind-up of the expedition at Chatra, and the members began the long process of getting themselves back to where they came from: to Dharan, Dhankuta, Namche Bazar and Darjeeling, back to England and to the United States. Coolies, soldiers, Sherpas, Sahibs—what a variety of people to have shared for a time the responsibilities of a common enterprise! I should like to think—and do—that, as it was possible for this oddly assorted group to live and work happily together, on a tiny scale, one can reasonably hope for our world that big groups, varied though they may be, will one day be able to work peacefully together on a big scale.

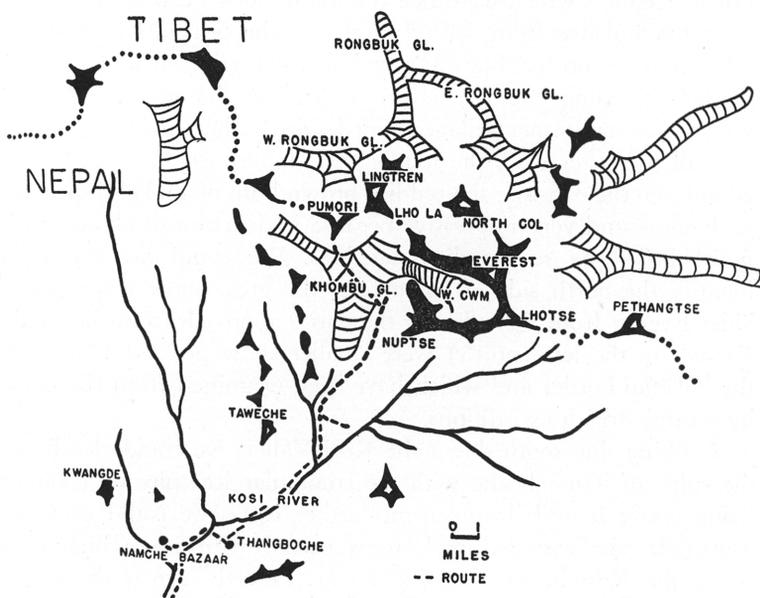
**II. SOUTH FACE OF MOUNT EVEREST**

CHARLES S. HOUSTON

When Tilman and I set out from the lamasery of Thangboche on the afternoon of 16 November 1950, we had six days in hand—six days in which to examine the unexplored south side of Everest. Obviously in this brief time we could do little more than form an over-all impression of the climbing possibilities and bring back all the photographs we could take. It was disappointing to have reached this heretofore unexplored area without time for a proper reconnaissance, but we had known from the start that we should be unable to do anything like the splendid job which the first party to the northern side of Everest accomplished in 1921. Our party had been perforce hastily assembled; it was small, lacking in personnel and equipment; and we were squeezed by the lack of time, for all of us had unbreakable commitments early in December. It was up to us to make the best use of what little time we had.

The great rock wall which is known as the Nuptse-Lhotse Ridge fills the upper end of the Kosi Valley and dominates the view from the lamasery of Thangboche. As may be seen from the photograph and rough map, the actual summit of Everest lies to the north, well behind this formidable rampart from which it is separated by a confused maze of ridges and icefalls. Our first thought—that Everest might be reached by climbing the southern face of Nuptse—was obviously ridiculous: the climb would be extremely difficult and would only land one on a high ridge (26-27,000 ft.) some two miles from the summit cone of Everest. Nor would the ascent of the southeast ridge of Lhotse, a more attractive climbing route, be much more helpful. The 1921 and 1922 parties had looked at the Lhotse-Everest saddle (the so-called South Col, 25,850 ft.) from the Kama Valley below Pethangtse (see photograph). Although the route from there to the summit seemed climbable, they saw no way to reach the South Col short of climbing over the top of Lhotse (27,890 ft.), and then descending 2000 feet before attacking Everest itself. These considerations, together with inspection of the massif from Thangboche, persuaded us to devote our attention to the western side. We hoped to pass around and behind the western end of Nuptse, enter the West Cwm (part of which had been seen from the north) and examine the true south face of Everest.

The magnitude of this task was much in our minds as we trudged up the valley that afternoon, through lightly falling snow and in fog. It was discouraging to have our first bad weather on the first really important day, and our camp that evening in a shepherd's hut was rather cheerless. The wind rose during the night, however, and we woke to a crystalline morning, bitterly cold but cloudless. As we walked up the cattle trail, the Nuptse-Lhotse ridge towered above us. It was obvious how easily the natives could



SKETCH MAP OF EVEREST AND ENVIRONS SHOWING ROUTE OF APPROACH

mistake this subsidiary ridge for the complete mountain, calling the massif by the name "Chomolungma" (Goddess Mother of the Snows).

Beneath the foothills leading to this ridge, the Kosi River divides, part coming down from the glaciers below Pethangtse and Lhotse, while the large part drains the western valleys. We turned up the western branch and soon came out on a large flat plain, perhaps one mile by two, obviously the dry bed of a now defunct lake. On each side rose moraines, three levels in all, the uppermost 500 feet above

the valley floor. We camped about noon in a summer grazing alp called Phalong, and after lunch Tilman and I left our three porters and climbed up the grass slopes to the north of the valley, hoping to reach a rock ridge from which we could see the south face of Lhotse in profile.

The afternoon was perfectly beautiful—cool and clear and cloudless. About us were magnificent peaks, unnamed and unclimbed. To the east the immediate spectacle was a 22,000-foot peak of exceptional steepness which we called the Matterhorn Peak because of its close resemblance from several angles to the peak above Zermatt. We could see no feasible route up this mountain. At its foot lay a glacier (receding rapidly, as we judged by its moraines), near which was a summer village named Dingboche, where there was a small monastery. To the left of the Matterhorn Peak and some 20 miles to the east rose the reddish-brown bulk of Makalu, speckled with snow and very impressive because it rises almost alone and is not belittled by surrounding satellites. We could not positively identify the north side of Chamlang, the great snow ridge which hides Everest from view during the entire approach from the south. Farther to the left (north) were smaller snow peaks which mark the Tibetan border and which have been examined from the north by several British expeditions.

Looking due south down the Kosi Valley, we could clearly see the ridge of Thangboche with the triangular ice spire of Kantega rising above it and Tamusurmu farther east. We could even see Kwangde, the rounded rock mass coated with ice, which rises across the Kosi below Namche Bazar. Directly across the valley from us, and only a few miles away, was a most inspiring peak—Taweche (21,390 ft.), which seemed almost as unclimbable from this side as it had from the south. Continuing to the west in a series of giant steps were several smaller but no less precipitous peaks, until one's eyes fell to the Solah Glacier, which comes in from the west.

Despite the magnificent scenery and weather, we made slow going of our climb. For nearly three hours we plodded up grass slopes too steep for easy climbing but steep enough to be very wearying. Always the next "ridge" seemed to promise our view; inevitably there was another dip and a farther ridge beyond. Toward the end of the afternoon we dragged ourselves up a sharp rocky

ridge of granite slabs only to find a deep "gunsight" notch separating us from the main ridge, which was still several hours distant. This finished us: there was nothing to be seen of our objective from the point we had reached, and no chance of going farther that day. We wearily returned to camp, though not before the indefatigable Tilman had shamed me on the way down by climbing an extra thousand feet to a small saddle—the view from which was again frustrating.

Our porters greeted us with steaming mugs of tea as we staggered into camp at dusk. We were both very tired, and I for one had a splitting headache, though our camp was at only about 14,000 feet and we had certainly climbed no higher than 17,000 feet. That night, around a roaring fire (of wood brought up by the porters, for only scraggly gorse and juniper grew here), we reminisced about Nanda Devi and the Karakorum; and Tilman brought out odd tales of Sinkiang, Hunza, Sikkim and other exciting areas where he had climbed. By bedtime our talk had made us considerably stronger.

In the morning we started early, planning to establish camp four miles or so up the Khombu Valley. For a mile we followed the northern side of the valley, then turned north, climbing steadily over old moraine to reach the lower end of the Khombu Glacier. This, like all the others we saw, seems to be dying rapidly. Very little ice is visible beneath the rubble that covers it. Consequently, the lateral moraines are unpleasant to march over, and we were glad to camp on a sand bank near a frozen lake about four miles above Phalong. The temperature, even in the warm sun, was below freezing; and, since there was a light but chilling breeze, we did not linger over our luncheon but set off early to continue up the valley.

We hoped to reach and look around the "corner" of a great rock rib which seemed to separate us from the West Cwm, and which we estimated was three miles from camp. If we could see into the West Cwm, from the Khombu Glacier, we could form some idea of the character of its headwall and get a profile view of the south face of Everest itself.

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MASSIF OF CHOMOLUNGMA FROM LAMASERY OF THANGBOCHE

Nuptse is on the left, and Lhotse on the right, with the summit of Everest showing over the middle of the Nuptse-Lhotse ridge *Photo, Elizabeth S. Cowles*

SOUTH COL FROM SLOPES OF PETHANGTSE

Lhotse is the highest summit in the center. To the right are the South Col and the summit of Everest. The photograph was taken looking almost due west

*Photo, 1921 Everest Reconnaissance, by permission of the Himalayan Committee*

Members of the 1921 expedition to the northern side had looked from the col below Pumori directly across the upper Khombu Glacier into the West Cwm. Mallory (1921) described the glacier as being "terribly steep and broken," and he did not think it possible to reach the South Col from the floor of the West Cwm.<sup>1</sup> They did not have an unobstructed view of the south face of Everest; nor could they see the southern face of the Lho La, the 20,000-foot saddle below the western buttress. The reconnaissance of 1921 reached the Lho La from the upper West Rongbuk Glacier and considered the southern side of this 19,000-foot pass very difficult, though they did not try it. Both the 1922 and 1938 parties had reached the North Col by climbing up the western slope from the West Rongbuk Glacier, a route less dangerous from avalanches but more laborious than the eastern slope.

Three questions were before us: (1) Was there a new direct route to the summit of Everest from the floor of the West Cwm? (2) Could we see a feasible route over the Lho La, from which we knew a route was possible to the North Col and thence onto the usual climbing route? (3) Was there a possible route up the western shoulder of Everest, originating near the mouth of the West Cwm, and eliminating the need of crossing the Lho La? We hoped to answer these questions in the two days that remained to us.

Again we were travelling slowly. The footing was poor, and there was much up and down over the nasty sliding gravel and boulders that make up moraines the world over. It was clear by three o'clock that we could not hope to round the corner that day. Tilman, who was well ahead of me, turned west to cross the Khombu Glacier; and I did so at a lower level.

Here, some three miles above camp and five miles below the Lho La, the glacier shows more ice; and hundreds of pure white pinnacles, many over 200 feet high, rise from the flat moraine-covered glacier like the "ice ships" of the Baltoro and Rongbuk Glaciers. We stopped on separate ridges about half a mile out on the glacier and realized for the first time that our "corner" was in reality a broad rounded face which gave into the West Cwm only gradually and which we could therefore not look around without a great deal more travel than we had reckoned. Sadly we turned

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<sup>1</sup>*Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance, 1921*, p. 214.

back to camp, frustrated in our effort to get a decisive view. Again we were both worn out when we reached camp after dark and huddled around a pathetic fire of gorse which the porters had spent the afternoon gathering. As usual, a cold evening wind blew briskly up the valley. We retired to our sleeping bags about seven, and spent a cold and restless night.

Our final day, November 19th, was cloudy—a disappointment, for we had hoped for blue sky behind our peaks. After directing the Sherpas to break camp and return to Phalong, Tilman and I started up the route of the previous day, again finding the moraine unpleasant going, and crossed the Khombu Glacier about two miles above camp. This took some time: there was still a dusting of powder snow over the ice, and our rubber-cleated boots were dreadfully slippery. Both of us were tired and slow, and it was not until nine that we reached the western side of the valley and started up the lower slopes of Pumori (“Daughter Peak,” named by Mallory in 1921). Fortunately, the weather was clearing somewhat. We knew we would have our views, though without the blue-black sky which makes color photographs of high mountains so spectacular.

Again we trudged painfully up the steep grass and rock slopes for several hours and finally, about noon, came out on a rocky ridge just below the snow line, at an altitude above 19,000 feet. Here we stopped for lunch. We could now look northeast to the Lho La (20,000 ft.), about two miles away (see photograph). Directly above and behind it was Changtse (North Peak, 24,730 ft.). The North Col was out of sight behind the western buttress of Everest, which rose steeply and bluntly to the West Peak, much foreshortened in our photographs. Behind the West Peak, we knew, lay a long ridge leading gradually to the final pyramid. The southern side of the Lho La, as can be seen in the photograph, is a steep and broken rock face, swept by icefalls from above; and up it we could see no route which would not be dangerously exposed to falls from above. Once on the Lho La, should it prove climbable (a dubious possibility), a party might conceivably work out a route up the western buttress, or it could cross the West Rongbuk Glacier and climb to the North Col, as mentioned earlier. To us, seated on the ridge of Pumori, neither of these routes seemed feasible.

We could see across the north face of the final pyramid to the First and Second Steps, which were conspicuous on the skyline; and we could easily identify the great snow couloir above the yellow band, which marks the high point reached on the northeast ridge. To our great surprise, there was very little snow on the north face, though the monsoon had probably ended only six weeks previously. This observation gives some support to those advocates of post-monsoon attempts on the mountain. We had, however, noticed high winds blowing across the mountain, usually from due west, during most of our approach. These steady blasts had probably swept the rocks as clear as they ever are. The south face of the summit pyramid was also surprisingly free of snow, but it seemed to us considerably steeper than the north. There we could again see the yellow band continued through the mountain, but higher on the southern face, where the strata slope inward instead of shingle-wise as on the north.

Unfortunately, we could not see far into the West Cwm. Only the lower quarter was visible from where we sat. What we could see confirmed the estimate made by Mallory in 1921: passage up the West Cwm would be very difficult or impossible. Though neither he nor we could see the headwall which leads to the Lhotse-Everest saddle (South Col), this does not seem a reasonable route by which to climb Everest.

The south face of Everest and its western shoulder shown in the photograph do not seem much more promising. Though a route might be found for seasoned climbers, we could see nothing which seemed practicable for the establishment of a chain of camps. In estimating the climbing possibilities of any mountain over 25,000 feet high, one must always remember not only that a climber can perform less well, but also that a porter train is forced upon him, and that campsites as safe as possible in fair weather and foul must be found. No route which satisfied these requirements was visible to us on the southern wall of Everest.

In studying these possible routes, I was continually brought up

FROM 19,000 FEET ON THE SOUTHEAST SLOPES OF PUMORI

Top: Khombu Glacier (foreground) leads up to the low saddle of the Lho La with Changtse (North Peak) directly behind it. The mouth of the West Cwm is seen below and to the right of the Lho La. On the right is the western buttress leading up to the summit cone of Everest

Bottom: This is continuous with the plate above. The western buttress leads to the black summit pyramid of Everest on the left of center, with one of the spires of the Nuptse ridge on the right. The West Cwm is directly below the summit pyramid of Everest

*Photos, H. W. Tilman*

short by Tilman's reminder that a satisfactory route has been worked out on the northeast ridge, and that any route chosen elsewhere should promise to be at least as feasible. If some of the world's finest climbers have failed on a route which is not exceptionally difficult, who is likely to succeed on one which is more difficult and uncertain?

Early that afternoon we started down for our camp at Phalong, following the western side of the Khombu Glacier, which proved to be considerably easier though slightly longer than our ascent on the eastern moraines. On the following day we returned in one march to Thangboche, carrying one of our Sherpas, who had developed a recurrence of old malaria. There we were warmly greeted by our comrades, who had had an exciting and heart-warming stay with the lamas. Bakewell had made two fine expeditions, one up the eastern and one up the western wall of the Kosi Valley, climbing to about 17,000 feet and taking a number of exceptional photographs.

After a tour of the lamasery and an audience with the head lama, we all returned to Namche Bazar, gathered up our coolie train and marched back to India. The return trip, a happy picnic, took 14 days. We arrived in Biratnagar, the frontier of Nepal, on December 4th, just 36 days after the start of our trip.

Norman Collie has expressed very well the emotions which are stirred by such a trip as ours: "The chance of wandering into the wild places of the earth is given to few. But those who have once visited the Himalaya will never forget either the magnificence or the beauty of that immense mountain land, whether it be the valley country that lies between the great snow-covered ranges and the plains, where wonderful forests, flowers, clear streams and lesser peaks form a fitting guard to the mighty snow-peaks that lie beyond, or the great peaks themselves, that can be seen far away to the North, as one approaches through the foot-hills that lead up to them. . . . One may be contented and busy with the multitudinous little events of ordinary civilised life, but a chance phrase or some allusion wakes the memory of the wild mountain lands, and one feels sick with desire for the open spaces and the old trails."<sup>2</sup>

So far as the ascent of Everest is concerned, we have little

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<sup>2</sup> *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance, 1921*, pp. 304-5.

encouragement for climbers. The northern approach through Communist-dominated Tibet appears to be closed to us indefinitely, and only the southern route through Nepal offers even a remote promise of being opened. This approach would have several advantages over the northern route: it is short (two weeks); it lies through fertile, populated country; and it entails no prolonged exposure to the wind and dust of the Tibetan plateau, with attendant respiratory ailments. But the southern route is passable only before or shortly after the monsoon because of the flooded rivers during the rainy season. A comfortable base camp could be established at Phalong, supported with ease from Namche Bazar or by an air drop on the old lake bed. The advanced base could be placed on the western bank of the Khumbu Glacier, which has pleasanter surroundings than the eastern bank. All these plans depend, of course, upon the discovery of a practicable climbing route on the south side of Everest, a discovery which we have certainly *not* made.

Our entire trip was made after the monsoon was well over, and we saw the north and the south sides of Everest in late November. During the entire five weeks of our trip we had two bad days, and on only one of the days when we could see the high mountains were they clouded. As we were leaving Nepal, the mountain weather appeared to be deteriorating; perhaps the "Christmas snows" were beginning. There was very little snow on Everest in late November, but we saw winds of very high velocity sweeping across the mountain, and even at 17,000 feet the temperature was well below freezing. It is possible that the high mountain temperature is not much lower than that in the valleys; this was our experience on K2 in 1938. But wind is a terrible enemy, and the Everest climber must be prepared to face killing winds and blown snow and intense cold, regardless of route or season. From our experience I believe the post-monsoon season would be no worse, and might be much better, than the uncertain period between winter and the beginning of the monsoon.

We had been for five weeks in an area never previously visited by Europeans or Americans. We had marched some 175 miles along rough valley trails, over three 10,000-foot passes, across rude bridges to reach the foot of the highest mountain on earth. There we had found a small community, centered in religion, self-sufficient, self-respecting, happy and healthy. Surrounded by scenery

beyond description, this small lamasery and attendant village seemed to us a beautiful oasis in a troubled world. In all our travels we met nothing but friendliness and courtesy, and some of the people we met were extraordinarily kind to us. Our eyes were opened to a different way of life, a different religion. It was hard to return from this happy primitive land to a world in which our first news was of the U.N. reverses in Korea and of political unrest along many borders. It seemed at least debatable that we were returning to civilization. As we came back to the worries, the pleasures and the responsibilities placed upon us by our own way of life, we could not forget the motto over the public school in our favorite town of Dhankuta: "Gather courage; don't be a chicken-hearted fellow."