CHAPTER XII

THE AVALANCHE

I lay long in my tent that evening writing, and it was nearly midnight before I blew out the candle, and composed myself to sleep. But sleep would not come. I was quite comfortable, my digestive organs were in good order, and acclimatisation had reduced my pulse-rate to nearly normal. The night was curiously warm, in fact, the warmest night we had had since we arrived at the Base Camp. Now and again came the long-drawn-out thunder of avalanches.

Perhaps it was the atmosphere, or maybe some trick of the imagination, but the sound of the avalanches seemed dull and muffled. It was as though Kangchenjunga was choking with suppressed wrath. My body was ready for sleep, but my mind was not. It was troubled and restless, groping in a catacomb of doubt and fear. I have known fear before on a mountain, but that was fear of a different nature, sharp and sudden in the face of an immediate danger, but I have never known what it was to lie awake before a climb, tortured by the devils of misgiving.

Some people may call this a premonition, but I do not think it can be so defined. Premonition of danger is, after all, an anticipation of danger, where, theoretically, danger ought not to exist. That danger existed in this case cannot be denied. The mind had brooded over it consciously and subconsciously to the detriment of the nerves, and these had become temporarily unstrung. That is a more logical

explanation than the acceptance of the premonition theory, which is more dependent upon a belief in psychical phenomena.

When, at last, I fell asleep, I was troubled with terrible dreams. These dreams were not dreams of personal danger, but of danger to the porters. They were always getting into an impossible position, and would turn to me appealingly for help. But I was unable to help. Afterwards, Wood Johnson told me he used frequently to dream this too. Possibly it was due to an innate sense of responsibility. Others on Himalayan expeditions have probably experienced the same sort of dreams. It was a bad night.

I crawled out of my tent the next morning, dull, heavy, and unrefreshed. I looked at the ice wall, and the weary track leading up through the snow to it, with loathing. Neither mentally nor physically did I feel fit to start.

The morning was ominously warm and a steamy heat beat down through sluggish mists. The sun was obscured, but for the first time on the mountain we were able to sit outside and keep reasonably warm without its rays on us.

It was decided that the scheme arranged the previous day should be adhered to. All except the cook and myself were to leave and try to establish Camp Three on the terrace.

Schneider with his usual boundless energy was the first to leave. He was accompanied by his servant, " Satan " Chettan, who was carrying a considerable load.

There was no porter in the expedition of a finer physique than " Satan," and I remember watching him swing on his load with effortless ease, and start off in the wake of his master, his legs propelling him uphill in shambling

powerful strides, the gait of a born hillman and mountaineer.

Duvanel and three porters carrying cinematograph apparatus came next, as the former wished to obtain "shots" of the last party, which consisted of Hoerlin, Wieland, and eight porters carrying heavy loads. For a while I sat on a packing case, watching them as they slowly plodded up the slopes of soft snow, then I adjourned to my tent in order to write some letters.

Perhaps half an hour later I was startled by a tremendous roar. Two thoughts flashed through my mind. Firstly, that only an exceptionally large ice avalanche falling close at hand could make such a din, and secondly, with a sudden clutch of horror at my heart, that the noise came, not from the usual direction of Kangchenjunga's face, but from the ice wall !

I dashed outside. What I saw is indelibly engraved on my memory.

An enormous portion of the ice wall had collapsed. Huge masses of ice as high as cathedrals, were still toppling to destruction ; billowing clouds of snow spray were rushing upwards and outwards in the van of a huge avalanche. On the slope below was the party, mere black dots, strung out in a straggling line. They were not moving. For an instant, during which I suppose my brain must have been stunned, the scene was stamped on my mind like a still photograph, or perhaps a more apt comparison would be a ciné film that has jammed for a fraction of a second. Then everything jerked on again. I remember feeling no surprise, it was almost like a fantastic solution to something that had been puzzling me.

THE ROUTE UP THE GREAT ICE WALL

Now the dots were moving, moving to the left ; they were running, but how slowly, how uselessly before the reeling clouds of death that had already far outflanked them. The next moment the avalanche had swept down upon them ; they were engulfed and blotted out like insects beneath a tidal wave.

In the tent I had been conscious of noise, but now I was no longer aware of it. The clouds of snow swept nearer. At first they had seemed to move slowly, but now they were shooting forwards with incredible velocity. Vicious tongues of ice licked out under them. Here and there solitary blocks broke free from the pall ; behind them I caught a glimpse of a confused jumble of ice blocks, grinding together like the boulders in a stream bed caught up by the flood waters of a cloudburst.

The thought of personal danger had not occurred to me at first, but now, suddenly, came the realisation that the avalanche might sweep the camp away. I glanced round for the cook—he was standing outside the cooking tent—and yelled to him to run for it.

I had stood and watched the avalanche like one rooted to the spot in a nightmare. Running was nightmarish too. The feet sank deeply into the snow ; at the height (20,000 feet) every step was an effort. We floundered along for perhaps twenty yards, then heart and lungs gave out, and neither of us could continue. We looked round ; the avalanche was stopping two hundred yards away. Though I had not been conscious of any noise after the initial roar, I was paradoxically conscious of it ceasing.

The avalanche stopped, only the clouds of snow, driven by the wind displaced by the falling masses, writhed far

into the air. There was no sign of my companions. I turned to the cook : " They are all killed, but we must do what we can." We retraced our steps to the camp, seized ice-axes, and set out for the scene of the disaster. We tried to move quickly, but it was impossible at the altitude, it was better to go slowly and steadily, and how slow this was.

The clouds of snow began to settle, the veil thinned. It was a terrible moment. I expected to see no sign of the party. Then, to my immense relief, I saw dimly a figure away to the left, and then some more figures. We toiled upwards, skirting the edge of the avalanche ; it was sharply defined, and the ice blocks were piled several feet high. Beyond it the snow was untouched, save where it had been scored by solitary blocks flung forwards from the main mass of ice.

Two hundred yards from the camp the track vanished beneath the débris of the avalanche. We reached a little group of porters. They were standing stupidly, without moving or speaking, on the edge of the débris, all save one, who was probing energetically with an ice-axe between the ice blocks. It was Nemu. I asked him what he was doing, whether there was a man buried there, and he replied, " Load, sahib, I look for load." In order to run and escape from the avalanche he had dropped his load, and this was seriously worrying him. Who were alive and who were dead did not concern him, he had dropped his load, the load entrusted to him by the sahibs.

I counted the party, two were missing. Hoerlin, Wieland, and Duvanel I could see above me. The missing ones were Schneider and Chettan. Two hundred feet higher I saw Wieland approaching something sticking out between the

ice blocks. It was Chettan's hand. By the time I had climbed up he had been dug out. He was dead, having been carried down at least three hundred feet, and crushed in the torrent of ice blocks. His head was severely injured, but as a forlorn hope we administered artificial respiration for over an hour. In the middle of it Schneider reappeared. He had had a marvellous escape. He had actually been under the ice wall when it came down. He said : " I heard a crack ; then down it came, huge masses of ice from hundreds of feet above. I thought I was dead, but I ran to the left, and the avalanche missed me by five metres." Chettan had been too far behind Schneider to save himself.

The remainder of the party had amazing luck. They had been on the track where it ran farthest to the left. Had they been ten minutes earlier or later, nothing could have saved them. Even so, they had had to run for their lives, and the track was swept almost from end to end. Duvanel told me that when he saw it coming, the thought of being able to escape never even occurred to him. But, like the others, he had run to the left, as it seemed better to be killed *doing something* than waiting for apparently certain death. So narrow had been the escape of the main body of the porters that some of them had actually been bruised by blocks of ice on the edge of the avalanche. The escape of the party can only be called a miracle of the mountains.

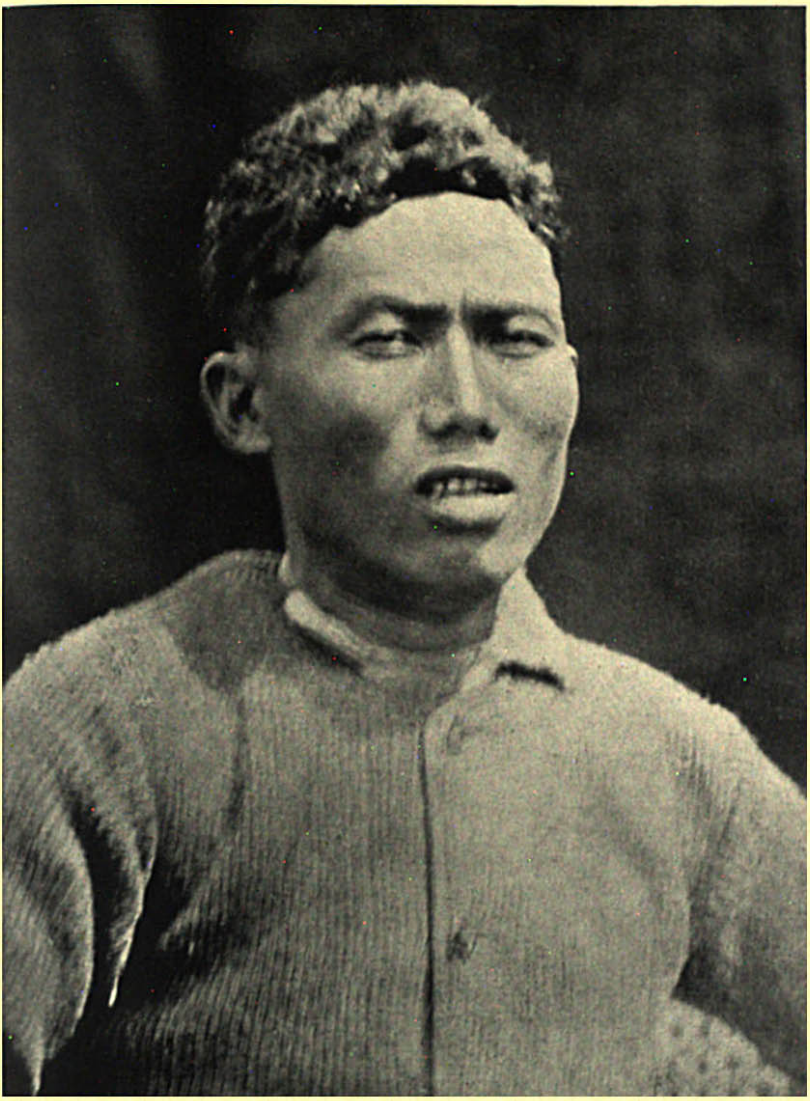
The portion of the wall that had fallen had been that outlined by the crack noted by Hoerlin and Schneider the previous day. In falling it swept the route on the ice wall diagonally, completely obliterating the lower part of the

route that Wieland and I had made, destroying the snow bridge over the crevasse, and the ice hump under which we had sat. In fact, the topography of the route we had made at the expense of so much labour had been altered completely. The area of snow slopes covered by the débris must have been nearly a mile square, and the avalanche can scarcely have weighed less than a million tons.

We returned to camp, two of the porters taking turns at carrying Chettan. According to those who had been highest, another crack had opened up above the ice wall, and there was a strong possibility of another avalanche, possibly greater even than the first, which might conceivably sweep away the camp. It was advisable to retire to Camp One with all speed. But before doing so we buried Chettan.

It was a simple, yet impressive ceremony. A hole was dug in the snow, and the body, dressed as it was in climbing clothes, laid within with folded arms. A handful of rice was roasted by the porters, and this was scattered over the body to the accompaniment of muttered prayers. We stood round with bared heads. Then someone gave an order, and snow was quickly shovelled into the grave. As this was done the mists dispersed, and the sun shone through for a few instants. Almost one could see the brave soul winging its way over the mountains. We drove in an ice-axe to mark the spot, and silently turned away. We had lost not a porter, but a valued friend. We left him buried amid one of the grandest mountain cirques in the world.

So died a genuine lover of the mountains, a real adventurer at heart, and one whom members of several Himalayan expeditions will mourn.



By courtesy of H. Ruttledge

CHETTAN

We descended to Camp One in a wet and soaking snowstorm, that later developed into a blizzard. Word was sent down to the Base Camp of the disaster, requesting that Professor Dyhrenfurth and Kurz should come up and discuss matters.

Wind was howling, and snow lashing the tents, as we ate supper and crept miserably into our sleeping bags.