CHAPTER VI

OFF AT LAST

By the end of March all members of the expedition were assembled in Darjeeling. While in Delhi we had written letters to the Maharajah of Nepal, and to Colonel Dawkes, C.I.E., British Envoy at Khatmandu, requesting permission to attack Kangchenjunga from the Nepalese side. Owing, however, to political friction existing then between Nepal and Thibet, it seemed advisable not to worry the Nepalese authorities until matters had quieted down. The letter was left, therefore, with Mr. Howell, the Foreign Secretary, who had kindly undertaken to forward it at an appropriate date. The previous year, the Munich expedition had also applied for permission to enter Nepal, but though this permission had been eventually given, it had arrived far too late for them to avail themselves of it. Bearing these things in mind, we had no option but to plan an attempt on Kangchenjunga via Sikkim, and the eastern face of the mountain.

Apart from Colonel Tobin, who as previously mentioned, was appointed Transport Officer, Mr. J. S. Hannah, of the Bengal and Nagpur Railway, was invited to join the expedition. Hannah had had considerable experience of Indian travel, and had also climbed in the Alps. Most important of all he spoke Hindustani, and this, combined with the efficient way in which he handled transport and

porters, was to make him an invaluable member of the expedition.

By whichever route we went, we hoped to leave Darjeeling early in April. The time during which an attempt can be made either before or after the monsoon is so short, that it was essential to be at the foot of the mountain, if possible, by the middle of April. This would allow some six weeks. But as General Bruce pointed out, the monsoon *might* come by the middle of May, and that this was possible was borne out by the experience of the tea planters and others living in the Darjeeling district. Assuming that the difficulties would be comparable to those encountered by the Munich expedition, four weeks was definitely too short a time in which to make the attempt. On the other hand, so far as could be seen from Darjeeling, the Kang La, the 16,373 feet pass we must traverse into Nepal was still so deeply snow-covered at the beginning of April that to have started earlier would have been impossible.

Attempting any great Himalayan peak must always mean a gamble with the weather. Had we decided in the beginning to tackle the eastern face of the mountain by the same route as the Munich expedition, we could have established our Base Camp early in April, and commenced to have attacked the mountain without delay. But Professor Dyhrenfurth had other objects in view besides attempting Kangchenjunga. North-east Nepal was practically unknown. No European had passed along the valleys to the west and south-west of Kangchenjunga since 1899, when Mr. Douglas Freshfield passed round Kangchenjunga. The upper branches of the Kangchenjunga Glacier were still unexplored. No one had seen the head of

the Ramthang Glacier which falls from the western face of Kangchenjunga. There were valleys unknown, and peaks untrodden, and the district might confidently be expected to provide topographical and geological data of considerable interest.

Directly on arrival at Bombay we had dispatched the expedition's goods, weighing some 6½ tons, in a special truck by passenger train to Darjeeling. Though this cost £135, and should have taken no longer than four or five days in transit, over two weeks had elapsed, and still there was no sign of the truck. Imploring telegrams were sent to high officials, eliciting non-committal replies. The truck had been seen here, and seen there, but not one of the railways could tell us exactly where it was at the moment. Finally, as we were in despair, the goods arrived, but the expedition had been delayed two or three days, and every day was of vital importance.

A store-room was hired, and the 180 crates containing food and equipment unpacked under the supervision of Frau Dyhrenfurth. She was in her element, as clad in a neat apron, and armed with a pencil and notebook, she superintended operations, amid stacks of various foodstuffs, tins, rucksacks, boots, films, patent hot-water bottles, dangerous-looking magnesium flares, and a multitude of other things all heaped up amid a labyrinth of packing-cases and crates. There was one tragedy, a German firm had presented the expedition with a large quantity of honey. This had been packed in cardboard containers. Travel and heat had done their worst, and it had arrived a glutinous mass. It was not, however, entirely wasted, for it was much appreciated by the porters and countless children who gathered

around the crate and licked the honey as it oozed through the cracks.

General Bruce had been emphatic on one thing in particular. "Don't forget to worm your porters," he had whispered into my ear at Victoria Station. Worms are a curse among the natives in India, and the strongest Himalayan porter may become anæmic and weak from them. Actually, Dr. Richter discovered but few porters who were suffering from this particular ailment. Possibly the Medical Officers of previous Everest expeditions taught them how to cure themselves with santonin and castor-oil. More prevalent among the porters was a species of scurvy, due most likely to under nourishment, that showed itself in the form of skin breakings, and boils. A number of porters were so badly affected by this that it was impossible to take them.

Owing to recent cases of smallpox locally, it was deemed advisable to vaccinate all porters. We anticipated some trouble here, and Frau Dyhrenfurth heroically offered herself as the first victim and example. But her public spirited offer was unnecessary. The porters took to vaccination with alacrity, and they roared with laughter at the lengthening of the faces of those being vaccinated as their arms were scratched.

Not warning Darjeeling of our coming had been a serious error, and meant much additional work for Colonel Tobin in enlisting every available porter. It was an exceedingly busy time for most members of the expedition and especially so for Colonel Tobin, who laboured with all his might to get the manifold preparations completed in time. About 400 porters were necessary if we were to attack Kangchenjunga from Nepal, and 400 good porters are not

obtainable normally in Darjeeling. As had been proved previously on Everest and Kangchenjunga, the best types of Himalayan porters are Sherpas, Bhutias, and Thibetans. There is little to choose between these hardy races for carrying powers and endurance, but the Sherpa is the best mountaineer. Like the Bhutia, they dwell in the remote valleys of Northern Nepal, and have both Nepalese and Thibetan blood in them. They are used to withstanding cold and hardships on some of the most inhospitable portions of the world's surface, and are natural mountaineers. The men who did so well on Everest and Kangchenjunga were known as "Tigers," for their work in carrying loads at immense altitudes was tigerish in its strength and courage.

It may appear extraordinary that these men should so readily leave their homes and rickshaws in Darjeeling, where many of them make a comfortable living during the tourist season. Perhaps it is because of a born instinct for adventure, perhaps because of the prestige that is to be gained by being chosen to accompany an expedition to the greatest peaks of the world, and perhaps because they love the mountains with a primitive unreasoning devotion which finds expression in the belief that they are the abiding places of the gods. Whatever it is, and it would be interesting to get behind their minds in the matter, it is not entirely the prospect of monetary reward that impels these men to risk life and limb on Everest and Kangchenjunga.

There are many good men in Darjeeling, "rickshaw wallahs," most of them, but there are also many good men living in far-away hill villages, who, had they known, would have been only too willing to come too. As it was, during the fortnight we were at Darjeeling, a number of

men came in from the hills anxious to join the expedition, including two from Nepal, who said that they had traversed the Kang La. So long as these men remain unspoilt in a world where commercial gain is becoming the only thing that matters, future expeditions, with mountaineering as their aim, will have no difficulty in finding the right men to help them on their enterprise.

Thus it was, that though the expedition was able to enlist a nucleus of keen, reliable men, it was forced also to enlist others who had no interest in its objects, " bazar wallahs " who were merely out to serve their own ends, and who had no intention of working or serving the expedition faithfully.

Four sirdars were engaged, Naspati, Gyaljen, Narsang and Lobsang. Of these, Lobsang was incomparably the best. Though only an ordinary " rickshaw wallah " of humble origin, and affecting none of the European clothes and manners of the other sirdars, and of little experience, having only recently been promoted from coolie to sirdar, he was a born commander of men. A Bhutia by birth, he was yet liked and respected by the Sherpas and Thibetans. His pock-marked, rugged countenance was the hardest I have ever seen in a native, and indicated a masterful personality. Perhaps it was this very personality that was responsible for adverse criticisms from some quarters, for Lobsang was of that rare native type which prefers being left to itself, to act largely on its own initiative. He was a genuine " tough " in the best sense of that word, and as Wood Johnson remarked, his work was equal to that of a sahib. Unfortunately, he was now too old to climb to the highest camps, but as commander of the general coolie

A TYPICAL SHERPA

organisation at the base, in the lower camps and on the march he would be invaluable.

Of the other sirdars, Naspati and Gyaljen were excellent men, especially in keeping pay-rolls, management of stores, and " office jobs," but for sheer drive and personality they were not to be compared to Lobsang.

Minor worries are to be avoided at all costs on a Himalayan expedition, and a good personal servant can do much to alleviate the trials and discomforts of life. General Bruce had given me a letter to his own personal servant, Lhakpa Chede, who accompanied him on the Everest Expedition. In this letter General Bruce flatteringly if inaccurately referred to me as his grandson. It is needless here to enlarge upon the admiration, affection and respect with which the Leader of two Mount Everest expeditions is regarded in Darjeeling. On many occasions natives stopped me in the streets of Darjeeling to ask whether the General Burra-sahib was leading the expedition. This charming fiction was of inestimable advantage to me personally, and I was soon known among our porters as the Nati-sahib (Grandson).

Lhakpa Chede had taken a post as a waiter, and was unable to come. Mr. Kydd, of St. Paul's School, suggested his own " rickshaw wallah," Nemu. It was a happy suggestion. Nemu had been " Sandy " Irvine's servant on Everest, and had ascended as high as Camp Five, a height of 25,000 feet. But that was six years ago, and Nemu was now thirty-six. For Europeans this should be the prime of life, but it must be remembered that these men are frequently old at thirty, whilst the majority of them die in the neighbourhood of fifty. Was Nemu therefore too old, was

his strength, and power of resistance to cold, still equal to the task, did he really want to leave a comfortable and easy job in favour of the hardships and rigours of high mountaineering ? Nemu's keenness to come was in itself an answer to these questions.

I took an instant liking to the man. Clad as he was in a ragged and patched old coat, a dirty pair of aged corduroy breeches, frayed puttees, probably relics of the last Everest expedition, and a pair of apparently cast off boots, he looked at first glance a thorough old vagabond, but his face was broad and good-humoured, and his eyes were those of a hillman, possessing that subtle, far-away look of those accustomed to gaze great distances. Hazel brown, and set far apart, they were eyes indicative of honesty and trustworthiness. So I engaged Nemu, and had no cause ever to regret it.

There were many other seasoned veterans of Everest and Kangchenjunga who were anxious to come. " Satan " Chettan was secured by Schneider as his servant. Of all Himalayan porters he was the most experienced in mountaineering, for he had accompanied all three Everest expeditions, climbed with Dr. T. G. Longstaff and Mr. H. Ruttledge in Garhwal, and as the servant of Dr. Paul Bauer, the leader of the Bavarian expedition, performed miracles of endurance on Kangchenjunga the previous year. There was also Lewa, who put up a magnificent performance on the Bavarian expedition. Perhaps most important of all were the cooks, for on their efficiency much depended. The Bavarians had sung the praises of Ten cheddar, so we engaged him. He spoke a little English, and among his favourite expressions which we soon learnt

by heart was "sometime coming." To him everything was always "sometime coming"—even death itself. There is a whole philosophy in "sometime coming."

Many of these porters produced tattered and dirty letters of recommendation from General Bruce and other members of the Everest expeditions, testifying to their courage and loyalty. One of the first questions was often whether the General Burra-sahib was coming. Happy indeed the man who can win the respect and affection of such men.

As nothing had been heard from Nepal, it was necessary to plan a provisional scheme to attempt Kangchenjunga via Sikkim and the Zemu Glacier. It was arranged that Wood Johnson and myself should leave Darjeeling about April 1, and proceed via Gangtok, the capital town of Sikkim, and Lachen, and blaze a trail up to the Zemu Glacier. It is possible to take ponies as far as Lachen, but above that, dense jungle would probably necessitate arduous trail making. It would also be the task of this advance party to find three camping sites between Lachen and the Base Camp, which we proposed to establish on Green Lake Plain on the north bank of the Zemu Glacier. With the way thus prepared, the main body of 150 porters and about 60 pack ponies would start from Darjeeling under the charge of Hannah, where they would be joined at Gangtok by the climbing party, who would travel in motor-cars from Darjeeling.

From Gangtok the main body would proceed on foot or ponies to Lachen, where a provision dump under the supervision of Colonel Tobin would be made.

The three temporary camps between Lachen and the Base Camp would be a day's march between, and would

be used as stages in the relaying of loads from Lachen to the Base Camp. By this means we estimated to reach the Base Camp with 67 porters. Of these 25 would be sent back, leaving 42 porters to do the work of establishing the Base Camp, and the first two high camps on Kangchenjunga. By this method it would be the work of only eight or ten days to bring all the expedition's food and equipment from Lachen to the Base Camp.

Professor Dyhrenfurth was naturally loth to attack Kangchenjunga by the same route as that of the Bavarians the previous year so long as there was a possibility of climbing the mountain by any other route, but it was obvious that the ice ridge leading to the North Ridge was the only line that offered any possibility on the Sikkim side of the mountain.

It was at this stage, when all preparations had been completed, that the following charming letter was received from the Maharajah of Nepal :—

" Khatmandu,
" Nepal.
" 29*th March*, 1930.

" To Professor Dr. G. O. Dyhrenfurth,
" Darjeeling.

" Dear Sir,—I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 16th March, 1930, giving information of the formation of an International Expedition to attempt an ascent of and make scientific observations on Kangchenjunga, and requesting permission for the expedition to enter Nepalese territory and approach the said mountain via Kang La, Chumbab La, Tseram, Mirgin La,

Khunza and Kangbachen, using the same route on return with the possibility of one party going over to Sikkim by way of Jonsong La.

" His Highness appreciates your remarks about the international character of the expedition which has for its object the cementation of international friendship and good-will among the countries concerned, coupled with the augmentation of human æsthetical and scientific knowledge, and desires me to inform you that he gladly accedes to your request. The Nepalese local authorities concerned are being ordered to permit the party the use of the routes mentioned in Nepalese territory.

" His Highness hopes that the expedition will be a great success in every way, and sends to you as the worthy leader of the expeditionary party the best wishes for that.

" I remain,

" Your obedient servant,

"(Signed) MARICHI MAN SINGH,

" Bada Kaji,

" Private Secretary to his Highness the Maharajah, Nepal."

Although a complete change of plans was necessary, no time was lost in rearranging matters. Had, however, we realised the difficulties confronting us, I do not think we should so willingly have abandoned the original scheme. The route to the Zemu Glacier is a relatively easy one compared to that to the Kangchenjunga Glacier and good paths along low valleys lead four-fifths of the way from Darjeeling. The road to the Kangchenjunga Glacier via the Kang La and Mirgin La passes is much more difficult.

Most important point of all—the winter was a late one, and snow lay low on the Kang La.

Mules could be employed only as far as Yoksam, five marches from Darjeeling. Thenceforward, we must rely entirely on porters, and as previously stated, 400 of these were necessary. We estimated that it would take us three weeks to reach the foot of the mountain, and once the base camp was established, communications had to be maintained, and fresh supplies for the porters obtained. Obviously, we must rely to a large extent on local help in Nepal. A telegram was sent to the Maharajah asking whether we could buy porters' food at Tseram or Khunza, two Nepalese villages we must pass through. We received a very courteous answer, informing us that everything possible would be done to help us, and that we could employ local porters and obtain local supplies. Thus was solved the greatest difficulty of all, for without local help, this route would have been absolutely impossible.

In order to avoid overcrowding at the camping sites, Colonel Tobin considered it necessary to split the expedition up into three parties. Wood Johnson and Hannah were to be transport officers of the first and second parties respectively, whilst Colonel Tobin was to bring up the rear with eighty mule-loads of provisions and equipment, which he would transport to Yoksam, where he would be met by 150 porters sent back from the first and second parties to carry his loads over the Kang La.[1] This arrangement was made assuming that local help in the shape of porters and

[1] This arrangement was known only to Professor Dyhrenfurth and Colonel Tobin and the fact that neither the transport officers, Wood Johnson and Hannah, of the first and second parties respectively, knew anything about it was largely responsible for subsequent transport difficulties.

food was to be obtained by the first and second parties on the Nepalese side of the Kang La.

It was an excellent scheme, but it was perhaps not sufficiently elastic in its allowance for failures. How were we to be certain that porters and supplies would be immediately forthcoming in Nepal. The Maharajah's commands would take some time to infiltrate from Khatmandu into a remote corner of North-east Nepal. Little time would be available for the Subadar appointed by him to look after our needs, and to collect porters' food and porters from the sparsely populated valleys. The weather was another important factor. Anything might happen on a pass as high as the Kang La. Even now, the beginning of April, almost daily storms were depositing snow at levels far below the summit of the pass, and boots were available for but a few of our porters, principally the " Tigers " intended for the work of establishing the high camps on Kangchenjunga. Was it wise to split up the party into three separate groups over such a difficult route ? The discomforts of overcrowding in camping sites would have been well worth cohesion and unity. If I have dealt at length with this problem of transport, it is because it is a very real problem, and one on the solving of which the success of any Himalayan expedition depends.

The three Everest expeditions had a far easier task, for in spite of the length of their route from Darjeeling to Everest, they were able to take ponies and mules the whole distance. This meant employment of less than 100 porters, and these were all picked men. We had 400 porters, some very good, others very bad. In addition to attempting Kangchenjunga from the Kangchenjunga Glacier, it was

proposed first of all to explore the southern face of the mountain above the Yalung Glacier, the face attempted by the ill-fated Crowley party, but like Mark Twain, our exploration got no farther than an examination through the powerful telescope at the Planters' Club at Darjeeling.

To appreciate the beauty and dignity of Kangchenjunga, the apparently smooth, sickle-like sweep of its ridges, the pale red of its granite precipices gleaming like a sun-caressed Devonian sea cliff through a blue Atlantic haze, it should be viewed with the naked eye. Seeing it thus it is impossible to grasp the scale of the mountain, and the mountaineer's analytical mind is peacefully submerged in a quiet ocean of meditation.

But seen through a telescope Kangchenjunga ceases to be an object of restful meditation. It is revealed in all its cruelty. The pale red precipices are resolved into fearful slices of unrelenting granite ; the apparently smooth ridges resemble the blade of a knife seen through a microscope ; broken and jagged, torn and hewn by wind and weather into edges, gaps and towers of fantastic and terrible beauty ; what appear to the naked eye as straggling thin white threads are terrific ice-armoured couloirs, down which crash stones, and ice avalanches from disintegrating cliffs of rock and ice. Even looking through a telescope it was impossible not to gain some idea of Nature's forces that are ever at work slowly destroying the greatest peaks of the world.

But a minute's examination was needed to assure us that it was futile to seek a way from the Yalung Glacier. Though only the upper part of the route was visible, the long sloping icy shelf the mountaineer would have to ascend is exposed

to avalanches of snow, ice and stones, while the ice-fall up which the party would have to go to reach the shelf, looked unassailable. The telescope effectively dispelled any nebulous schemes we may have cherished of attempting this side of the mountain.

At last the preparations were completed. On the night of April 5, the last load was packed and weighed by Frau Dyhrenfurth, assisted by many willing helpers. We had planned to reach the dak-bungalow at Chakung in one day by motoring to Singla Bazar, and from there riding to Chakung 4,000 feet higher. This was, however, a long march for the porters, so it was decided to send them off a day beforehand.

It is interesting to remember that there are days during every month when it is considered by the natives extremely unlucky to start on a journey. However, should a native find it absolutely essential to leave on one of these unlucky days, it is usual for him to send on his hat on a lucky day beforehand by a servant or friend. In this way the gods are deluded into thinking that he has actually started on a lucky day, and he may escape the consequences of his rash act.

It was important to have someone in Darjeeling who would look after our mails, and arrange for the sending of dispatches to Mr. Alfred Watson, Editor of the *Statesman*, of Calcutta, whence they would be forwarded to *The Times* in London. We were extremely fortunate in obtaining the services of Mr. W. J. Kydd, of St. Paul's School, Darjeeling. Mr. Kydd had been in the Secret Service during the War, and we felt we could not leave the work in more competent hands.

It was arranged that Herr Eberl, the German Vice-Consul at Calcutta, should accompany the expedition part of the way. Before leaving Calcutta he was able to arrange to have weather reports broadcasted for us by the courtesy of the Meteorological and Broadcasting Departments, and he brought with him a suitable receiving set complete with masts. He also loaned us some useful porters' tents, and presented to the expedition a number of gramophone records.

April 6 was a day of bustle and activity at Darjeeling. Each porter and his load was checked by Colonel Tobin. This was facilitated by the issue to each porter of a metal disc stamped with a number. The native population of Darjeeling was agog with excitement. Crowds lined the roads ; porters' wives were there to see their husbands off, some to give them a final cup of tea, others to wag an admonitory finger. The porters themselves swelled with conscious pride.

Kangchenjunga sympathised but little with these preparations for its discomfiture. It sulked behind sullen clouds, dispatching now and again sudden rainstorms, destined apparently for the express purpose of drenching and damping the ardour of the expedition.

That night before turning in Wood Johnson and I took a final stroll along the terrace of the Mount Everest Hotel. The weather boded ill. Lightning glared every few seconds through a rain-charged murk. Ghostlike swathes of mist eddied evilly from the valleys. From the direction of the Himalayas came long low growls of thunder.