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Written by **Ralph Barker**

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THE LAST BLUE MOUNTAIN

THE GREAT KARAKORAM CLIMBING TRAGEDY

RALPH BARKER

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THE LAST BLUE MOUNTAIN

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RALPH BARKER

Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.v-publishing.co.uk

'We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
Always a little further: it may be
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow … '

James Elroy Flecker

THE LAST BLUE MOUNTAIN

RALPH BARKER

First published in 1959 by Chatto and Windus.

This edition first published in 2020 by Vertebrate Publishing.

Vertebrate Publishing
Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.
www.v-publishing.co.uk

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Introduction © Ed Douglas 2020.
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This book is a work of non-fiction based on the life, diaries and recollections of Rae Culbert, John Emery, Scott Hamilton, Bernard Jillott and Tony Streather.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-912560-42-4 (Paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-912560-43-1 (Ebook)
ISBN: 978-1-912560-44-8 (Audiobook)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Cover design by Jane Beagley, typesetting by Cameron Bonser, Vertebrate Publishing.

Vertebrate Publishing is committed to printing on paper from sustainable sources.

Printed and bound in the UK by T.J. International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE 2020 EDITION

Several years ago, I sat in a London crown court listening to a barrister explain to a judge what it was like to be trapped high on a big mountain in the Himalaya in worsening weather, making decisions that would impact not just on one person's safety but that of a whole team in circumstances of extreme physical hardship and danger. Even after a good night's rest at sea level, he argued, the brain could be a fickle mechanism. Was it possible to pass judgement on one fatigued by days of effort with minimal rest?

Gradually the court was hushed as the barrister filled out the picture of his client's situation: the strengthening wind, the snow stinging his face, the fight for breath, the numbing of feet and hands, the psychological pressure of a remote situation, far from the help of others. We were no longer in London but high in the Himalaya, in desperate trouble. I was startled to feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickle with fear and almost laughed: up until then, I thought that was simply a figure of speech.

After the day's proceedings, I asked a friendly solicitor if the barrister was a climber. He seemed to understand viscerally the situation he was describing; he must have been in similar situations himself. The solicitor laughed. 'Him? I'm not sure he ever leaves the city, let alone climbs mountains.' What I'd heard was simply a supreme act of the imagination, the ability to think through the consequences of such a hostile environment on a weary, desperate and vulnerable human being, and communicate that experience with a simple intensity that was almost unbearable.

Ralph Barker did something similar in *The Last Blue Mountain*, his memorable account of an attempt in 1957 by a group mostly of students from Oxford University on the Karakoram peak of Haramosh, an adventure that ended in a protracted and ultimately fatal misadventure whose twists and turns heaped agonies on top of each other. That anyone survived it at all is testament to the courage, resilience and good luck of the two who escaped: the medical student John Emery, and the soldier Tony Streather, an experienced hand brought in to win approval for the enterprise. Streather's ascent of Kangchenjunga two years earlier had made him something of a celebrity. Barker's version of their story, told for a general audience, is in the same genre as Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void*, now a much more famous book, which in the 1980s helped reinvigorate a similar strand of narrative non-fiction that Barker was drawing on at the end of the 1950s. Think of Paul Brickhill's *The Great Escape*.

Joe Simpson of course was his own subject, had lived through his own epic and could look hard into his own soul for the meaning and direction of the story he was telling. Ralph Barker hadn't been on Haramosh or any other mountain; like the barrister in court he had to rely on his own imagination, judgement and empathy to unravel the contrasting motivations and personalities of the climbers and the complex sequence of events on the mountain. The first three-quarters of *The Last Blue Mountain* moves along crisply, setting the scene, offering concise portraits of the climbers and their mountain; but it is all preparation and context for the intense conclusion as these climbers we have come to know and like are faced with unimaginable odds. The book's great strength is the way Barker, without ever drifting from his fast-paced narrative, shows how character and fate intertwine.

Some aspects now feel a little dated. It is unquestionably a male book: inevitably given that all the protagonists are men. And the author does on a few occasions dip into language that will make some modern readers flinch a little. But despite how tight-lipped 1950s England was supposed

to have been, Barker had a liberal rein to use diaries and letters to lift the tough carapace on these men and expose a more complex version of themselves: their frailties as well as their strengths. He does this with an unfailing sympathy that prevents him from being too abrupt in his judgements. Men have died, and he is respectful of the loss others have suffered. If mistakes were made, then they were understandable and are more than offset by the sacrifice and courage of all involved. It is this combination of openness and respect that has secured the book's survival, as much as its thrilling tale.

All the protagonists are well drawn: the hugely likeable Kiwi Rae Culbert, the not-so-quiet American Scott Hamilton and the impressive John Emery. (All those I have spoken to about Emery, all old men now, speak of him with great fondness and respect.) But Barker zeroes in, correctly I think, on the differences between the expedition's leader, Tony Streather, an Army officer with immense stamina, and the project's driving force, an ambitious young climber from Huddersfield, 'very much of the Buhl temperament', called Bernard Jillott, whose climbing partners at Oxford included the young educationalist Colin Mortlock. Streather had come to prominence in a series of expeditions to big mountains, starting with the first ascent of Tirich Mir in Chitral, where he had 'stayed on' after independence and the risks he faced daily on the frontier gave him a depth of experience that his teammates, who weren't *that* much younger, couldn't possibly match. He loved Pakistan, and the expedition to Haramosh was an opportunity to renew friendships. He also understood the Hunza men who worked as porters on the expedition, their limitations and expectations, in a way that Jillott, who was driven and impulsive, did not. These two, with such different backgrounds and temperaments, would chafe against each other.

Barker may not have had experience of mountains but he understood men under pressure. After a stint on the *Sporting Life*, he had gone into banking before joining the RAF. He served as a wireless operator and gunner in a Beaufort torpedo bomber squadron attacking Axis shipping

in the Mediterranean that was resupplying Rommel's Panzers in the Western Desert: a notoriously risky occupation in such an unreliable aircraft. When Barker's crashed, killing the pilot and navigator, he returned to Britain and spent the rest of the war flying transport aircraft.

Demobbed in 1946, Barker struggled to find meaningful work and consequently re-enlisted in the RAF two years later. He was sent to Berlin during the airlift as a press officer and spent a few more years in Germany with the British Forces Network before returning to work on official war narratives at the Air Ministry. What he learned there would nourish his later career as a full-time writer. A chance remark from a colleague about the Goldfish Club, founded to reunite those serving airmen who had crash-landed 'in the drink' and survived, gave him the idea for his first book. His next described the wartime role of the torpedo bomber squadrons he had served.

How Barker swerved from military history to write *The Last Blue Mountain*, his third book and on an entirely new subject, is something of a mystery. Bernard Jillott, Barker tells us, was planning to write a book, so perhaps Barker inherited this project. Perhaps his military service made the connection with Streather, but that is simply a guess. Why the climbers trusted him is also intriguing. There was, and to some extent remains, a deep-seated antipathy among climbers to non-climbing third parties writing about mountaineering tragedies. In later life Barker concentrated on military aviation, survival and his other great passion, cricket, which he played for Adastrians, a team for ex-RAF servicemen, and El Vino's. He died aged ninety-three in 2011.

Of course, Barker's version of this extraordinary expedition is simply that: a version, albeit a compelling one. As someone who has also written about other people's mountaineering tragedies, I'm only too aware that for a general audience in particular, even a well-informed one, narratives are sometimes simplified, or someone's strongly held views contradicted. When John Emery, having qualified as a doctor despite suffering appalling

amputations to his hands and feet, died in a fall from the Weisshorn in 1963 aged just twenty-nine, his obituarist in the *Climbers' Club Journal* observed that the best account of the Haramosh expedition had come from Emery's own lips. None of which detracts from this classic of climbing literature: it is an epic story well told.

Accuracy is one thing, truth another. The title of the book, *The Last Blue Mountain*, was the suggestion of Tony Streather's wife Sue. The phrase is drawn from the final lines of James Elroy Flecker's play *Hassan* and spoken by a pilgrim; it captures the romance of mountaineering. (An earlier phrase from the same verse, 'Always a little further', was the title for Alastair Borthwick's classic memoir of climbing in Scotland in the 1930s.) The closing lines of the play, however, add a more thoughtful perspective. The watchman at the gate the pilgrims have just passed through tries to console the women who watch them go. 'What would ye, ladies?' he says. 'It was ever thus. / Men are unwise and curiously planned.' One of the women then says: 'They have their dreams, and do not think of us.' Except that Tony Streather spent long days in his tent on Haramosh, sheltering from the foul Karakoram weather, thinking of Sue and their young son, and questioning the wisdom of their enterprise and the choices they had made. Such questions would haunt him until his death, aged ninety-two, in 2018.

Ed Douglas

FOREWORD TO THE 1959 EDITION

We are living in an age which, more than ever, judges an enterprise by the tangible result; judged by this yardstick the attempt by British climbers on Haramosh in 1957 was a tragic failure. That those who reach their goal and return safely have, in an immediate and obvious sense, succeeded is not disputed; but what of others who make the journey without, in the analogy of Cervantes, reaching the inn? What of the Polar party in 1912, and of Mallory and Irvine on Everest in 1924? Did these men, and many others, necessarily fail?

The matter deserves a deeper scrutiny. The true result of endeavour, whether on a mountain or in any other context, may be found rather in its lasting effects than in the few moments during which a summit is trampled by mountain boots. The real measure is the success or failure of the climber to triumph not over a lifeless mountain but over himself: the true value of the enterprise lies in the example to others of human motive and human conduct.

Accidents are never to be sought in mountaineering. I am not encouraging them by saying that the greatness of this sport rests mainly in the risk of their happening. If we ever succeed in making climbing safe from danger, we had better give it up for something which retains the element of hazard. When an accident occurs, something may emerge of lasting value, for the human spirit may rise to its greatest heights. This happened on Haramosh.

From this truer viewpoint, this story is not one of failure but of triumph.

Lord Hunt KG, CBE, DSO

Leader of the British expedition to Everest in 1953 and author of *The Ascent of Everest*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

To write the story of an expedition of this kind is to feel the growth of a deep admiration and affection for the men who took part in it. To be entrusted with such a task was a great privilege. I was allowed to see and study the personal diaries of the climbers, in which from day to day they recorded their innermost thoughts about the expedition, about each other, and about themselves. I was able to discuss every aspect of the expedition with two of the survivors, and to correspond fully with a third.

I would like the reader to know of and share my admiration for their courage in deciding, within a few weeks of their tragic and terrible experience, that a non-mountaineer, unknown to any member of the expedition, should tell their story.

Ralph Barker

1

HARAMOSH

It had been easy, back in England, contemplating the Himalaya from a distance, with the bigger peaks of Everest, K2 and Kangchenjunga jutting into their minds, to think of their mountain, the 24,270-foot Haramosh, as being something within their compass, a mountain just about their size. And even now, as they camped in the hairpin arena of the high Kutwal Valley, 11,000 feet above sea level, hemmed in on all sides by mountains like a monstrous dry-dock, it was impossible to realise that facing them, a mile across the boulder-strewn Mani glacier, the north face of Haramosh, four miles long, soared and tumbled a further 13,000 feet into the sky.

Confronted by such a giant, surrounded by its kind if not by its equals, one's eye had no point of reference with remembered heights.

To Bernard Jillott, twenty-three-year-old organiser and deputy leader of the expedition, it seemed that some of those rock ridges that crinkled up from the base of the mountain like the pleats of a skirt might be climbed in a morning, before the sun loosened the chaotic ice cliffs that overhung every inch of the north face and sent avalanches of snow and ice billowing down the mountainside on to the glacier, destroying anything that loitered in their path. His mountaineer's eye, unaccustomed to the Himalaya, saw the problem momentarily on an Alpine scale. He ran his eye up the most

prominent ridge until it reached the forehead of ice cliffs below the summit. It looked a climb of 3,000 feet, no more. But from the known height of the summit above the valley it must be about 8,000 feet, needing at least three camps on the ridge itself, each one of which would be swept away from above almost before it was pitched.

And yet it looked easy. It seemed that the eye, like the camera lens, could not focus on so immense a subject without taking a metaphorical step back to get the whole in its aperture, reducing it as it did so to snapshot size.

For Jillott, the sight of Haramosh piling up in front of him was very much more than a challenge, real and urgent as the challenge was. It was the fulfilment of an ambition that had been conceived more than a year earlier, in 1956, when he was still president of the Oxford University Mountaineering Club. It was the realisation, though, of very much more than a single ambition. It was the fulfilment of his whole being.

Although tall and lithe, he had never been much of an athlete at school. In his work, of course, he had always been top, right through his grammar school days. Never anything but first. He got used to it and he liked it. But he had had no ability or zest for team games, and this coupled with his superiority as a scholar had tended to isolate him. An only child, inclined to be quiet and shy, he did not make friends easily. The only game he played well was tennis, which suited his liking for a personal struggle. He relished the opportunity for short, sharp conquest, complete in itself, that each point offered.

Exercise and companionship, and the beauty of mountain scenery, had been his early incentives to climb. At school he had organised parties to the Lake District, walking rather than climbing, and these episodes had become more and more important to him. Then, during National Service in the Army, stationed at Inverness, he had started rock climbing. Soon he was getting an elation from success in a hard climb that nothing else in life had ever given him.

When he won his scholarship to Oxford, he had joined the mountaineering club. He had given all his spare time to climbing. It had become a religion. He began to attempt the more difficult rock climbs. Soon he was making a name for himself. He was impatient to attempt new routes, to solve fresh problems, to know the explorer's excitement in untrodden ways.

He discovered that climbing, supposedly non-competitive, could be among the most keenly competitive of sports. Soon he had two Alpine first ascents to his credit. He began to hear his name mentioned as one of the most promising rock climbers in the country. There was only one major field in which he was still untested – the Himalaya. It was inevitable that thoughts of an expedition – his own expedition, but with an experienced Himalayan climber invited to lead – should press themselves upon him.

It was then that he had thought of Tony Streather. To get the right backing for his expedition, moral and financial, he must capture some big name in mountaineering as leader. Yet he had to choose a man whose approach to climbing was essentially amateur – someone who would be interested in taking a small expedition to an unclimbed but little-known peak just for the fun of it, without the publicity which accompanied a big expedition to a famous mountain.

Streather, he had decided, would satisfy both these requirements. He was without doubt in the very front rank as a Himalayan climber. He had climbed Tirich Mir with the Norwegians in 1950, and had been with the Americans on K2 in 1953, standing up to the disastrous fall better than almost anyone else, and subsequently helping to lead the exhausted party down. In 1955 he had gone to the top of Kangchenjunga, then the highest unclimbed peak in the world, inferior in height only to Everest and K2. And as a regular Army officer, his amateur approach to climbing was sure. The shunning of publicity and heroics would be ingrained in him.

These were the sort of thoughts that had passed through Jillott's mind during the summer of 1956. He had sought advice at Oxford on the possibility of gaining support for a University expedition, combining the mapping and exploration of a little-known area with the scaling of a significant peak. From several suggested possibilities he had selected Haramosh, mainly because of its accessibility. Although Haramosh was nearly a thousand miles north-east of Karachi, they could travel by air as far as Gilgit, forty miles west of Haramosh, leaving a day's ride by Jeep to the road-head at Sussi and then two days on foot to the Kutwal Valley and the Mani glacier. They could encompass the journey, the survey, and a worthwhile attempt at an ascent, in the long vacation.

Jillott had invited Streather to Oxford to talk to the mountaineering club about K2, and he had broached the subject after the lecture. Streather was just the sort of man he had expected – modest and reserved but free from shyness or diffidence, tremendously compact, and exuding physical and mental fitness. For all Streather's gentle manner there was an unmistakable vitality and robustness about him. His reaction to Jillott's proposal had been one of quiet but genuine interest, and Jillott was enormously encouraged. He felt at once that he could take Streather at his word.

Then there was the question of finding a team. Jillott's years in mountaineering had changed him from an unknown young man with few friends to a popular climber with many. Modest and unassuming, he had a great ability for getting on with people. Even so, in the choice of his team he was restricted to those members of the mountaineering club who could find both the money and the time. Each member of the team was asked to subscribe £100 to the expedition fund.

Eventually he settled on five men: Streather and himself; Rae Culbert, a twenty-five-year-old New Zealander; John Emery, a twenty-three-year-old medical student from St Mary's Hospital, Paddington; and Scott Hamilton, an American from Little Rock, Arkansas. All apart from

Streather were fellow members of the OUMC and personal friends with whom Jillott had climbed.

He had set about the preparatory organisation with what had seemed at the time to be inexhaustible energy and enthusiasm. Throughout the early months of 1956 he had been working hard for his finals, and then had followed a year's concentrated research. But the mass of detail necessary to the planning of such an expedition was meticulously attended to. By October 1956, plans were ready for submission to the Pakistan Government, without whose permission the expedition would be stillborn. Then there was the money side. The blessing of the Oxford University expedition council was needed, since the magic name of the University meant everything to their requests for financial support. With it, they could hope for a sizeable grant from the Everest Foundation. He remembered now the thrill of pleasure and relief when the Foundation's promise of help to the tune of £1,200 was made.

Other grants, coupled with book and press contracts, and the generosity of manufacturers in giving supplies of their goods, had more than covered their original budget, so that, apart from Emery, who had accompanied the baggage by sea, they had eventually been able to fly out, saving a commodity even more precious to them than money – time. Streather had only two months' leave from Sandhurst, where he was an instructor, and the whole expedition had to be accomplished in this time.

But the last few months before the scheduled departure date had been agonising. The most shattering of many frustrations had come when the Commonwealth Relations Office in London had informed them of the Pakistan Government's refusal to admit an expedition this year. Financial worries had beset them throughout, right up to the signing of the press contract. There had been the doubts raised by the stalemate in the Kashmir dispute. It had been many months before Streather had finally been able to confirm that he could come – and until his name could be put at the head of the climbing party it had been no use writing to

anybody. Then had come the Suez crisis. Short of time as they were bound to be, the blocking of the Canal meant that they would have to sail round the Cape, a delay that was almost insupportable. It was only at the last minute that the press contract had enabled them to travel by air.

Jillott had borne the brunt of all these frustrations; and although the Pakistan Government had been prevailed upon to change their mind, and all their other difficulties had somehow been resolved, towards the end the keenness of his enthusiasm had been blunted. He was apt to be intolerant of anything that interfered with his plans; and he had been tempted to change his plans altogether rather than endure these endless frustrations. Other climbing friends had made up a party to go to Norway, and at one point he decided that if Haramosh was going to be as tantalising as this, he would give up the whole idea and go to Norway.

But the merest reference to such a possibility had excited such disapproval from the others, all of whom were now determined to go to the Himalaya this year, that he had had to retract at once. He had started something that he couldn't possibly abandon. The momentum of the expedition, which he himself had begun and largely helped to accelerate, was too great for him to jump off now.

Besides, it was *his* expedition, a stupendous achievement, and he must stand by it. This dull feeling was only reaction from his strenuous efforts at work and play of the last three years. Once the expedition was underway, the old excitement would return.

And, of course, so it had. Although he had suffered a bad attack of dysentery on the way up from Gilgit, sufficient to delay him for two days, together with John Emery as doctor, he felt fit now and intensely stimulated by the challenge of the mountain before him.

He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was that gave him the terrific boost he got from climbing. He knew that it would always be the first thing in his life. It dwarfed everything else – home, education, ambition. The hills were home, education was a means to an end, something that

would ultimately give him the time and opportunity to climb. That was his only ambition. Everything in life he would subordinate to it. He knew that such singleness of purpose on such an issue might be censured. But he was used to having his way.

At first he had tried to keep his passion for climbing from his parents, but inevitably it had come out. He was not of a secretive nature and, although he disliked hurting them, or indeed anyone or anything, he had been glad when they knew. His mother had done everything to dissuade him, naturally enough, since he was the focus of her life and of his father's. Their last battle had been just before he left home for Haramosh.

His mind went back to that last day, saying goodbye to his family at his Yorkshire home. Everyone had come to see him off. He hadn't known how the sunlight had glinted on his fair hair, how they had caught him in an unguarded moment looking away into something remote that they had known they would never see. He had seemed to be looking beyond this world altogether. All he had been aware of was his mother's last entreaty, still troubling his conscience.

'There's nothing I can say to stop you, Bernard, is there?'

'I'm afraid not, Mother.'

'When are you going to give it up?'

That was something he knew he would never be able to do.

'People still climb at sixty. Even older than that. I shall always climb.'

He knew that his mother was baffled, perplexed, hurt by his intractability. He wanted desperately to explain it to her, to make her understand.

'When I'm on the mountain, something happens to me inside.' He spoke slowly, and with a sort of wonder. 'I know an exhilaration that's past all describing. It's a part of me. I can't change now.'

◇◇◇◇◇◇

For almost the whole of its five-mile length, the Kutwal Valley was dominated by the hideous beauty of the north face of Haramosh, rising almost sheer in tumbled masses of glittering ice, in intricate complexities of pinnacles and ridges and gullies and hanging glaciers, topped by the long line of ice cliffs, and emerging at either end into a well-defined summit. The ice cliffs formed the chain which linked the twin peaks – Haramosh II towards the head of the valley, and Haramosh I to their right. This was the challenging peak, leaning a little back from the valley, and even from its own terrible precipices, almost as though it didn't have much of a head for heights.

But as the mountain crept to its highest point, it pursed itself, and smoothed its contours, suddenly conscious, like a mountaineer, of the approach of the moment of truth. The slopes up to the foot of the final cone were smooth and feminine. So vast was the scale that Haramosh II, four miles distant towards the head of the valley, was its natural twin.

To stand in this narrow gorge of a valley, and to feel the propinquity of mountains – facing one, beside one and at one's back – was to pull the Himalaya round one like a cloak. A cloak of ebony and white. These were the Karakoram mountains, the north-west part of the Himalaya, and Karakoram meant 'black rock', a hardy rock that stood straight and sheer and refused to be wholly clothed by snow. They were harsh mountains but there was poetry in their grandeur.

John Emery, the young medical student, was himself a mixture of poet and mountaineer. The climber in him saw the mountain as an inanimate thing, something with which he would be grappling for the next six or seven weeks. But the poet in him recognised the beauty of Haramosh.

Like Jillott an only child, Emery had experienced the closer contacts of boarding school and was more deeply involved with his fellow men. He had a highly developed critical faculty, to the point of fastidiousness, but he was quick and generous in his admiration. He was perhaps the only one of the party capable of feeling that depth of affection for another

man which amounts to love. Others in the party might develop it, but in John Emery it was already there.

Younger than Jillott in many ways, he had started climbing later and therefore developed later. He was now just about Jillott's equal, and the two men climbed together with tremendous rhythm and purpose. Even so, Emery had never quite forgotten that Jillott had once been ahead of him, and he still looked upon him as the senior partner. But emotionally and aesthetically Emery was the more mature person. Jillott, he knew, had little time for women. But Emery, warm and affectionate by nature, was easily involved. Although he had felt attracted to several women, none of them had seriously vied with climbing as his first love. Not, anyway, until the voyage out from England.

At sea, travelling with the ton or more of expedition stores, Emery had been completely dissociated from reality. Events past and future seemed to lose all significance, and he had existed in a vacuum, a charming and fairyland present. Everything near seemed to be magnified by its sheer proximity; everything distant seemed impossibly remote. Then for the first time he had seen something which seemed to him to be perfection in a woman. The attachment that resulted was one which for various reasons could not possibly develop beyond its context, but he had sensed that her feelings for him were more than mere friendship. It had been a significant experience for both of them, he was sure, and not a mere shipboard flirtation. They were constantly together, and they had been amongst the happiest hours of his life.

His first few days in Pakistan had been almost unbearable. He could not share the enthusiasm of the rest of the party, although he was as keen to get to the mountain as they were; and for the moment he had a strange feeling of being outside the expedition, watching it as a spectator. Soon he would shake this off, but for the moment it was hard to find a meeting point with anyone. He could not talk about the woman from the ship yet, but he could concentrate on nothing else. Jillott wasn't interested in

women anyway, so he couldn't talk to him. Scott Hamilton, good-natured and voluble as ever, suddenly seemed trivial and immature. He thought he might talk about it later with Tony Streather, but Streather's calm self-sufficiency was a barrier for the moment. Only Rae Culbert's quietly delivered witticisms, often broad and debunking in tone, were in tune with his mood.

Then, in Sussi, with only two days' march ahead before they reached Haramosh, Jillott had gone down with dysentery, and as expedition doctor Emery had had to stay behind in Sussi to treat him while the others went on. At last Jillott had been fit enough to walk the twenty miles to the Kutwal Valley. There had followed two days of suffocating heat, of dust-laden throats, of constant consideration for a still half-sick man. He began to understand why people quickly became impatient with the illness of others. But his own patience was fortified by Jillott's determination to press on in spite of the debilitating effects of the dysentery.

And at every village Emery had been reminded of the duty he had accepted by studying medicine, so that he could never be completely carefree. There they sat, rows and rows of apathetic but exasperatingly patient villagers, determined to be cured by the 'Doctor Sahib'. To him they were an insidious personal reproach and an indictment of his calling.

He could see that they would wait for ever, and that he could almost treat them for ever. What did one do? Tell them, ninety-five per cent of them, that they were chronically diseased and that there was nothing a medical student and a box of pills could do for them? Or hand out a pill here and there and hope that faith might work miracles? What a mockery they had made of his first-class honours! And how irritable he had felt with them, and even more so with himself, because he knew how unworthy it had been. He had been obsessed with the idea of reaching the mountain and starting the climb, to scarify his being against the rugged mountain.

So climbing this time was to be an escape. Or was it? He had always

argued that it gave him perspective, a self-awareness, a reassessment of values. Perhaps once on the mountain he would be able to relate the deep emotional experience that still lay heavy on him to the larger scheme of things.

Climbing had always done that for him. Difficulties had piled up: exams, the hospital, people; and he had always known that he could go to the hills and step out of life's abrasive underwear, feeling a great sense of release and freedom. In the same way that, as you gained height, the immediate topography fell into perspective, so did the world of the mind.

Worry, disappointment, dissatisfaction – all fell away when you were on, say, the last leg of an ice climb in mid-winter, faced with thirty feet of vertical ice, with perhaps only an hour's daylight left. It was blowing a gale, snow was pouring down the pitch on to your face, and halfway up you felt that all your strength was leaving you, your arms and your legs were limp, you didn't know how to go on. It was a stark and personal struggle with the elements and with yourself. Trivialities dropped away, you found untapped reserves of strength and willpower you hardly knew you possessed, you overcame the physical difficulties of the climb, and you conquered the weakness of self. The elation when you'd done it was like a shot of adrenalin. You felt pulsatingly alive.

You went back to your problems to find them sorry creatures, easily disposed of. You were the master of yourself again, not the easy prey to idle fears. You had wrested from the mountain something of its own inviolability and peace. Like the mountain, you were satisfied just to be.

And to add to all this, and to intensify each part of it, was the comradeship. That was something the sense of which he'd lost for the moment, but it would return. It was the most solid, the deepest thing of all. Up there on the mountain you faced the ultimate danger. There was no sense in denying it; that was what lent the magic to it. Anyway, that was how it was for him. People called mountaineering a sport. It wasn't a sport for him. The difference was fundamental.

One felt a bond with those with whom one had fought a winning or losing game of rugger, soccer, hockey, cricket – the bond of shared ability, physical effort, the fluctuations of fortune, adversity, victory and defeat. But the strongest bond was that of the danger shared, strongest of all when that danger was the ultimate one. He imagined that it might be indistinguishable from the bond of danger shared in battle.

This was the bond he shared with Bernard Jillott. He had spent two seasons climbing with Jillott in the Alps, and they had climbed together a lot in Wales, the Lakes and in Scotland. He knew Jillott as a bold and determined climber and leader, absolutely trustworthy and returning his trust, a man who only gave up if the odds were overwhelmingly against him.

Jillott was a beautiful mover on rock, and tremendously sure. Emery had never seen anyone move with quite such skill and confidence as Jillott on that last weekend together in Wales. He was just as good on the granite of the Alps, though perhaps not quite so sound on snow and ice. Emery guessed that Jillott might not always be aware of his own limitations, few as they were, and that he might sometimes be bold almost to the point of rashness, but this suited his own climbing temperament.

As with Jillott, it was the sense of personal combat, personal achievement, that Emery looked for in climbing. He shared Jillott's enthusiasm for games which involved the conflict of individuals: his half-blue had been for fencing, another of his interests was boxing. Artistically minded, and highly literate, he yet preferred the sports and pastimes which offered risk of physical injury. Jillott, he felt, sought to demonstrate his ability not so much to others as to himself. He was not an exhibitionist. But, whatever the reason, they were both almost rapacious where mountains were concerned. To see one was to desire to conquer it.

Yet, outside of mountaineering, they were utterly unlike in temperament, and indeed knew each other very little. Although Emery had known that Jillott was planning this Himalayan venture, it was only as a

result of a chance meeting with him on a visit to Oxford from St Mary's the previous October that his invitation had come. One of Jillott's original choices had backed out, Streather had said that the party ought to include a doctor, and Jillott had invited Emery.

'It's a wonderful thought,' Emery had said. 'But I don't suppose I've got much chance of getting away.'

'Won't Mary's let you go?'

'I've got my finals in September next year. I couldn't very well be away half the summer.'

'Couldn't you put them back a few months?'

'I'll see what they say. I'll certainly have a shot at it. I'd love to come.'

'I'll hold the place for you. Let me know as soon as you can.'

Back at Mary's, he had felt like putting off the moment when he must ask the question as long as possible, since the answer could only be no, and he wanted to dream about it a little longer. But he had gone to see the secretary of the medical school at once. He had told his story, and then waited for the dream to dissolve under the hard light of Paddington.

'The great thing about Mary's,' the secretary was saying, 'is that when you want to do something really worthwhile, we encourage you in its pursuit.'

So far he was still dreaming.

'You say you want three months' leave. That means putting back your finals.'

The dream was dissolving and he saw that his horizon for a long time was going to be St Mary's.

'I'm sure that can be arranged. When do you want to go?'

It couldn't be as easy as this. 'I suppose some time in July.'

'Write to the Dean. I'll mention it to him meanwhile. I should think he'll very probably let you go.'

And the Dean had given him the three months' leave he'd asked for, plus an extra month to get fit!

The extra time had meant that he had been able to take on the job of accompanying the expedition stores by ship. He'd done his best to get fit before he left England, but the softening process of the sea voyage had changed all that. Now he was just about as unfit as he could possibly be. The only solution was to get to grips with the mountain.

The sea voyage was something that with time he might remember with tenderness. As yet, the pain was too acute and he must exorcise it from his memory. Love was of the valley, Tennyson had said. The mountain would set him free.

2

IN THE KUTWAL VALLEY

The head of the Kutwal Valley was the apex of a lengthy gorge that had elbowed its way between the mountains all the way up from Sussi, climbing nearly 6,000 feet on the way. And from the Kutwal Valley they could look back along their tracks, down the winding gorge, watching the ground fall away until the shoulders of the hills abutted and hid the gorge from view.

All the way from Sussi they had trudged uphill over bare, sandy earth, in stifling heat, lashed by a hot gusting wind. Occasionally, at the villages, there had been patches of irrigation, but these had been few. Dust and sand and the smell of ordure had clogged their throats and nostrils. Once or twice, as they climbed above the river, or where the path plunged into a ravine, they had caught a sudden cool rush of air, smelling sweetly of the high pastures; and once, by a rickety bridge across the gorge, there were tamarisks in full bloom. But the enervating cauldron of the gorge had been oppressively with them almost till they reached Iskere, the last village before the Kutwal Valley. At Iskere there were fields of wheat and maize, and as they moved on from the village and joined the right-hand curve of the approach to the Kutwal Valley, there was a profusion of colourful wild mountain flowers, and soon they were passing through dense and beautiful pine woods. With their

first view of Haramosh round the next corner, it had been the most wonderful end to a journey.

In their journey across Pakistan they had been approaching Haramosh from the south-west. At Gilgit they had reached just about the same latitude as Haramosh, though they had still been some fifty miles to the west. From Gilgit they had travelled east-south-east to Sussi, and then trudged north-east in a long curve until, at the Kutwal Valley, they came out on the north side of Haramosh. They were starting their reconnaissance from the north because a survey of the southern approaches by the Italians in 1954 had indicated that there was no route from that side.

Despite the powerful impression of light and space in the Kutwal Valley, it was very little wider than the gorge they had recently left. The illusion came from the slanting white walls, the azure ceiling and the mosaic of the floor.

The Mani glacier filled almost the whole of the Kutwal Valley. But in its failure to fill the valley completely it had left a margin on the opposite side to Haramosh, a green and fertile margin which at first was only a few hundred yards wide, but which opened out towards the head of the valley where the hills on that side receded. The dividing line between the glacier and the fertile margin was marked by the lateral moraine, a long, low, knife-edge ridge squeezed up by the swollen glacier, with pine trees sprouting from the top, running down the valley like a rule.

It was where the fertile margin was at its narrowest that they pitched their first camp, because here they found a lake, the Kutwal Sar, and a spring of fresh water. Here, too, they were directly opposite the main summit. They might not be able to find any sort of route up the north face, but from here they were centrally placed for reconnoitring both the eastern and western approaches.

And as well as being the most suitable place to camp, surely this was the most beautiful spot in the whole valley. They were in the middle of an open area between the upper and lower clusters of the straggling village

of Kutwal, with its primitive structures and inescapable smells. They could look higher up the valley to where the shepherds tended their sheep. They could see goats and even mountain ponies in the surrounding meadows and on the lower mountain slopes. These were the high pastures, where the people of the dusty gorge brought their animals for the summer grazing. Here they were right opposite that magnificent north face. They were far enough up the valley to get a good view of the complex of peaks that formed Haramosh II, and beyond it, right on the curve at the head of the valley, of the Haramosh La, the formidable pass leading out of the valley, the lowest point in the great circle of peaks but still a height of 17,000 feet, about 5,000 feet above the head of the valley. It was the only point leading out of the valley which had been climbed.

Here, too, was the lake, a turquoise jewel, reflecting the blue of the sky, set in an emerald-green hollow, and fringed with birch and pine trees. Here they were close to the lateral moraine, sloping steeply up to its pine-topped ridge, beyond which was the glacier, the slope itself loose and boulder-strewn, unkempt, but with a curious tidiness of its own, like a rubbish tip. It was an abrupt contrast to the fertile plain, like old snow piled high on the edge of a football pitch.

And there, beyond the lateral moraine, was the Mani glacier itself, thrusting its way straight down the valley under the north face of Haramosh, curving away in the distance towards the gorge. This was the mountain's excreta, slowly suppurating, patterned by the traffic of its own imperceptible movement, lined and grooved like a snow-covered road.

The glacier was fed by a myriad snow gullies from the mountain and from the region of the Haramosh La, and swollen by three great hanging glaciers on the north face, parallel and evenly spaced, which forced their way down into the Mani like tributaries, joining it turgidly at the foot of the mountain. Terraced craters on the floor of the glacier had formed where avalanches crashed like bombs into the valley, rippling the glacier surface like a stone thrown into a pond. And the whole glacier was

covered by its own flotsam, ton upon ton of boulders and rubble that it had dragged off the mountain, making it harder to walk across than a rocky beach.

Here, the glacier seemed like a malignant growth on the mountain, bent on its ultimate destruction, clutching it with prehensile fingers from the sky. But farther down the valley, above Iskere, where the glacier ground to a halt in a monstrous slag-heap hundreds of feet high, they had understood its inexorable creative purpose. There, freed by the rise in temperature, it emerged quietly from its chrysalis of ice into a trickle of water, bursting at last into a cascading stream.

Jillott and Emery had seen all this, though for them everything was dominated by the mountain – their mountain. But Rae Culbert, the New Zealander, Botany and Forestry graduate, had a much bigger eye for country. He could feel the challenge of Haramosh, but he was absorbed too by the setting, the whole Karakoram range, its position in relation to the Himalaya and to other mountain ranges. Whereas the eye of an Englishman was just about big enough to take in a real mountain, Culbert sought to follow where passes lead, to travel and live amongst the ranges.

Among the four students he was by far the most mature. Yet he was still only twenty-five. When he left the New Zealand Forest Service to read Forestry at Oxford on a scholarship two years ago, he had still felt extremely young in spite of his considerable experience. But when he got to Oxford he found himself a more complete person than the average Englishman of his age. And the years in England had confirmed his maturity.

Culbert had come to Oxford with everything in his favour – deep affinity with his work, a Botany degree from Wellington University, a lifetime of wandering in the backwoods of the South Island, and three years' experience in forest survey with the New Zealand Forest Service; not in the office, but out in the bush, living hard, handling and supervising gangs of men, engaged in the highly skilled work of quantity surveying and general forest survey.

He had never been so disappointed with anything as with his first year at Oxford. The lectures had seemed elementary and even childish, delivered mostly by chaps who were half a century out of date. They just didn't work like that in the bush any more. And the rest of the students were streets behind him in knowledge of forestry and in general science, so that, with no exams that year, he just didn't need to do any work to keep up.

It was easy, and galling, to look back and see his mistake. His grouch anyway had been little more than the natural one of an outdoor man confined to a desk. He should have kept ahead and increased his lead by doing his own reading, instead of virtually standing still. It was hard to regret the good times he'd had, but he'd spent far too much time chasing round Europe with a rucksack on his back. In all his travels he'd spent his time increasing his working knowledge of the forests, but it was the textbook stuff that he was weak on. It had only been the knowledge that he was giving himself the chance to travel that had kept him at his studies even back home.

In the second year the work had been more interesting, and he had buckled down and done his fair share. The Himalayan trip had taken up a lot of his time, but this had been his only outside interest. He'd met Greta by then, of course, but he was slow to make advances with women and she had been no more than an acquaintance. She appealed to him a lot, but he had sworn to stick to forestry and the Himalaya this year. Meanwhile he had plodded on steadily, dismayed at times by the way the others had caught him up and even passed him on textbook forestry. Oh, it was the tortoise and the hare all right, neatly wrapped up.

Then, five weeks before his finals, he and Greta had somehow been thrown together, and that had been it. He'd never been so completely bowled over in his life. They'd both been sensible about it, trying not to see each other, but he had fallen hard for the first time and he just couldn't keep Greta out of his mind.

The exams had come and gone, and the third-class honours had come as a hell of a shock. Everyone who had done any real work had reckoned on getting a second. With the start he'd had two years ago, it seemed unforgivable to finish up with the also-rans.

It was not fair to say that it was anything to do with Greta. Those last weeks hadn't helped, but looking back he knew that he'd had it coming to him anyway. He'd got his degree, of course, and he knew the Forest Service would be satisfied. But he hadn't satisfied himself. If he'd worked hard on his books in his first year, he'd have kept ahead. But once he got behind on the textbook stuff he was in trouble.

It had been a bitter experience, a lesson he would never forget, but it had left him unembittered. Perhaps that was the chief thing.

Anyway, he must warn his brother about it. Bill would be arriving in the old country just about now to study at the Royal College of Art. He must urge Bill to get out in front and stay there. It was probably different with art: but the Culberts were sloggers, slow and steady and sure. They didn't come from behind.

And there was still Greta. That was the best thing that had happened to him in the old country. They weren't engaged or anything, just an understanding to wait a bit and see how things worked out, how they felt about each other after a few months' separation. They were both adult enough to do this without histrionics. After all, they had really only known each other for those last few weeks.

Culbert was a relaxed person. He could look forward to things without being impatient for them to come. It would be the same with going home. He hadn't been able to pass up this chance of climbing in the Himalaya, although it meant delaying his return home. Going back to New Zealand, seeing Dad and George, as he called his mother, was one of the most pleasurable things to look forward to; but this would probably be his one and only chance of seeing this magnificent country. Even after the climb, he thought he would probably latch on to a couple of the Hunzas and

make his way over the Haramosh La, down the Chogo Lungma glacier, and then south to Skardu, before setting course for home.

He'd have himself sorted out by then. The disappointment over his degree would soften and he'd remember all he'd absorbed in the last two years. And he'd know whether his feeling for Greta was something he wanted to last right through life. He was pretty sure, for his own part, what the answer to that would be.

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At twenty-nine, Scott D. Hamilton Jnr was the oldest of the students. A graduate in Architecture and Political Science at Cornell, he was reading Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Brasenose. Apart from a short spell of National Service, he had spent the last ten years at universities. They were among the finest universities in the world, too; but to British eyes such an obsession for learning might seem to put him in danger of over-education.

Hamilton had many of those admirable qualities which are commonplace amongst Americans but which are not always to be found in Englishmen. He was frank and without artifice, ready to talk freely about himself, and always eager to please. He was an indefatigable organiser, revelled in publicity, and made one of the most significant contributions to the expedition by getting a £2,000 American press contract just when it was most needed.

He had felt at one point that his expedition colleagues were not properly appreciative of their good fortune in landing this contract. He had even wondered whether they might let it slip through their fingers, not so much through distrust of American publicity methods as through fear that the British rights might find their way to one of the less dignified English newspapers. The British were strange about publicity. In America, mountaineers had to write in order to climb: it was a natural hazard of

their calling. Hamilton knew about the so-called characteristic British reserve, and of course some kinds of publicity were distasteful to almost everyone. But the British, and especially their mountaineering folk, were apt to pay lip service to the theme that all publicity was odious. They protested that they wanted to be left alone to their climbing; but they were quick enough to write books about it when they got back. Books, to the British, somehow lent a cloak of respectability to self-advertisement. A cover, if only a dust-cover.

Even so, Hamilton sympathised with the British attitude to sport, and preferred it to the traditional American attitude. He did not climb for the glory of reaching the summit, nor for the sake of the limelight. But he came from a nation which believed in self-advertisement, high-pressure salesmanship and the whole gamut of publicity. It paid off.

He believed, too, in progress, and climbing was another form of progress. Fields of exploration, like the German *Lebensraum*, had become overcrowded. Man had been forced to explore, as in New York he had been forced to build upward. The hundred years in which mountaineering had existed as a pursuit was the natural outcome of the discovery of the continents and the natural forerunner of space exploration. Once you'd climbed Everest, your thoughts inevitably turned themselves outwards.

But with it all, the magic of the unclimbed peaks remained, and Hamilton was a genuine wanderer and climber, loving physical effort and the open sky. Taller even than Jillott, he had trained hard for this expedition, was a teetotaller and non-smoker, did not gamble or swear, and was the very antithesis of the American playboy. His grandfather had emigrated from County Down, Ulster, his family strain was pure Scottish-Irish, and he had inherited their staunch Presbyterian faith. He was a Calvinist predestinarian, which he interpreted as meaning that he would exert his freedom of will as far as possible, and then abide by God's plan for his life.

His record in university activities showed him to be a meticulous organiser who quickly gained popularity in spite of his austere outlook. Bernard Jillott was the only person he had ever met who was a better organiser than he was, and as a result he had always held him just a little in awe. He knew how dedicated Jillott was to mountaineering, he came under the spell of his personality, and he envied the political know-how which made Jillott one of the best presidents of the OUMC in a decade. He admired Jillott's strong will, even though it sometimes led to errors of judgment, and felt that he understood all Jillott's good points and could sympathise with his weaknesses because they were his own. He was utterly devoted to Bernard Jillott.

Hamilton reserved his most unqualified admiration, though, for John Emery, whose versatile gifts and wide cultural tastes seemed to set him apart from the average climber. He could talk to Emery about his many other interests as he could not talk to Jillott, and when he needed advice on his various university activities it was to Emery that he went. But his ties with both men were close. He also felt an immediate affinity with Rae Culbert.

Hamilton's relationship with Tony Streather was of much shorter duration and was therefore not so well formed. There were a number of emotions in it. Two of them were certainly prejudiced – the admiration and respect he felt for Streather's achievements as a climber, and the slight but natural animosity he felt towards the famous mountaineer who had been called in to lead. Then, when he met Streather, he found him conformist, even colourless, almost synthetic. He didn't feel at ease with him. Perhaps his whole attitude towards Streather was governed by a bigger and deeper prejudice, a national prejudice – the traditional American idea of what a regular British Army officer must be.

Hamilton could never quite make out what Streather's motives were for climbing. He himself adhered to the romantic conception of mountaineering, and the climbers he admired were Shipton, Tilman, Smythe and Geoffrey Winthrop Young. Hamilton was the only one of the party who

consciously climbed for aesthetic purposes. He told his friends that he was going into the high places to think deep thoughts. It would not hurt him to go hungry for a while when millions in the world were starving, to take his turn at fighting for survival against the forces of nature. His puritan upbringing welcomed the hardship, the self-denial, the isolation. He felt himself to be a pilgrim, seeking after truth, privileged to breathe the pure mountain air and to see such scenes as expressed the power and the majesty and the glory of God. He saw nothing of humbug in any of this, and certainly not of hypocrisy. In his letters before leaving England he had quoted the 121st Psalm in full. Later, when passing through Karachi, he attended a church service at which this psalm was used as the text, and he was so deeply moved that he could not sit through it.

If Hamilton lacked anything, it was experience of the buffets of life, experience of the frustrations and conflicts with which the working middle class has to compromise. Thus he remained an idealist, sheltered by the high walls of learning, apt to take himself and life more seriously than most of his fellows. He had taken the extreme precaution of asking fellow students to be trustees of his property should anything happen to him, and had left written messages for his mother, girlfriend, chaplain and college with the Senior Dean of Brasenose before his departure. His preparations were so elaborate that when he said goodbye to his porter at Oxford the man burst into tears. But to Hamilton any other course of action would be irresponsible. Facing the dangers of the Himalaya, he was greatly concerned to put all his worldly affairs in order. For the rest, his New Testament would always be with him and would be read nightly.

To the rest of the party, much of this suggested a tendency to self-dramatisation. But generally they found him full of animation, disarmingly self-critical, and thoroughly human and likeable. He was a good climber, but not a mountaineer, and his place in the party was first in the preliminary organisation, and second as part of the survey team. In this he had the help of a Pakistani, Sahib Shah.

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Some people had mountains thrust upon them. Some even were thrust on top of mountains. So it had been with Tony Streather. He had joined the Indian Army at the age of eighteen in 1944, inspired by a school lecture. When partition came in 1947, he was serving on the Pakistan side of the line. He had already formed a deep affection for the country and its people, and he stayed there. It was in Pakistan that as a captain in the Chitral Scouts, familiar with the Chitral area and speaking the local dialects, he was asked by the Norwegians in 1950 to accompany them on an expedition to the 25,264-foot Tirich Mir as transport officer. In Chitral, transport meant porters.

It had been a successful expedition, and Streather had managed the local men with his usual unobtrusive efficiency. But far more than that, he had made himself so indispensable to the climbing party that he had stayed with them in the later stages of the climb and finished up with them at the summit, without any proper climbing equipment, clad for the most part in little more than a golfing jacket. When he came down, he found to his surprise that he had climbed higher than any other Englishman for fourteen years. And, more important to Streather, he had liked it.

Most Englishmen, he knew, began their acquaintanceship with mountains on a modest scale, graduating through Wales, Scotland, the Lakes or Derbyshire to the Alps. He had gone straight to the top of a major Himalayan peak. Soon afterwards, with the run-down of the British element of the Pakistan Army, he returned to England and joined the Gloucestershire Regiment. He found climbing in England and Wales a disappointment; after the Himalaya, the mountains lacked grandeur. In time he learnt to appreciate them and the demands they made on the climber. But his climbing experience had been like starting one's tobogganing career on the Cresta Run. Everything after that was in danger of being an anticlimax.

He found, again to his surprise, that he was something of a figure in the mountaineering world. He had climbed Tirich Mir. He didn't think he was a man particularly susceptible to flattery, but he had to admit that he had been warmed by the recognition he had gained, albeit fortuitously, as a mountaineer. Then in 1953 had come the American expedition to K2, the second highest mountain in the world. Two of the Americans had attempted to climb this mountain in 1938, and they knew the value of having a man who was familiar with the country, had the contacts, spoke the dialects and could take his place in the climbing party as well. They had heard of Streather from the account of the Tirich Mir expedition, and after consulting the Norwegians they invited him to go with them.

Streather had no false modesty. It was nice to be sought after. His knowledge of the language, locale and people, and his experience of man management as an Army officer, coupled with his physical fitness and quick acclimatisation, justified his place in any expedition of the sort. He had accepted, subject to getting leave from the Army. It had meant a considerable sacrifice at the time. The Army had given him four months' leave, unpaid, and he had forfeited the seniority as well. (He had got the seniority back later, but he hadn't known that then.)

K2 had established his reputation. Tirich Mir could have been a fluke – it probably was. But he had stood up to the tragedy on K2 better perhaps than most. And he had been climbing then with a group of men of such character and ability as might never again be assembled on a mountain.

He had kept going on K2 when most of the others had faltered. That might have been a fluke, too, because he was comparatively unhurt in the fall; but it had given him a firm and deep-seated self-confidence. Then in 1955 he had been one of four men to reach the top of 28,146-foot Kangchenjunga. His position in the forefront of Himalayan climbers was thus assured.

Streather was still in many ways a beginner as a climber, with little experience of Alpine or rock climbing, but he knew the Himalaya as well

as almost anybody. Above 20,000 feet his stamina seemed to be sure. That, he knew, was his real strength as a climber: his quick and completed acclimatisation at high altitude.

Soon after returning from Kangchenjunga he got married, and this was his first expedition since then. Sue had been absolutely marvellous about it. Weekend after weekend she had endured the invasion of their home by the climbing party, as they packed, sorted and repacked, typed freight manifests, stencilled innumerable packing cases, arranged countless details, and talked and talked of nothing else but Haramosh. Towards the end their home at Camberley had looked more like a warehouse than an Army married quarter. Everything had been delivered there: all the food given by a multitude of commercial firms, running to hundreds of tins; all the climbing equipment, clothing, tents, ropes, sleeping bags, Primuses, medical stores. Sue had catered at various times for all the climbing party, sometimes all at once, put them up, and entered into everything with cheerful enthusiasm. And he wasn't only leaving Sue, either. He was leaving a four-month-old son.

Why did he do it? Well, there wasn't anything complicated about that. Climbing was fun. It was the kind of sport that appealed to him, because it was a hard sport, demanding absolute physical fitness. Not the fitness of the athlete – that was too brittle – but the fitness of the ascetic.

He was inclined to be scornful of romantic conceptions of mountaineering, particularly when these became emotional and extravagant, as he felt they often did. Mountaineering was a form of escapism; and as for perspective, if you couldn't think clearly in the valley, then you certainly wouldn't up there. Like the people who thought they drove better after a few drinks, the perspective idea was an illusion born of intoxication – the intoxication of height.

The years in Pakistan had given Streather something of that bigger eye for country which he recognised as being one of the things he had in common with Rae Culbert. He loved Pakistan, and this expedition was a

wonderful excuse to get back there. He liked to move among mountains, was content to do so, and was not continually obsessed by their challenge. He needed very little from mountains but their company. But he had to admit that he enjoyed climbing them, perhaps because he had accidentally discovered that he was good at it.

Another thing he enjoyed was planning the climb. There was nothing esoteric about mountaineering. The difference between climbing a mountain and climbing a hump on the downs was only one of degree. You came to a bit of a sheer drop on one side, so you looked for a gentle slope on the other. Or if the ground was broken and rocky, you looked for a firm grassy ridge. Magnify the whole thing a hundredfold, cake it with snow and ice for weather and altitude, and you had the Himalaya.

He had come to look at hills as a tank corps man looks at rolling country, applying his specialised knowledge to every crink and curve. You made a survey of the problem, you decided on a plan of campaign, and then you tried it out. It was the ideal exercise for the military mind. Indeed it was no accident that the first ascent of the greatest of all mountains was planned and led by a soldier.

It was true that by the standards of his team he was uneducated, and compared with Scott Hamilton, he supposed, almost illiterate. Streather was two years older than Hamilton; but he was half a lifetime older in experience of life and people. There could hardly be a greater contrast. A captain at twenty-one, in sole charge of large numbers of men in remote districts of Pakistan, he had learnt complete self-reliance. His conventional education had suffered; but he had never found any difficulty in making sensible decisions and balanced judgments.

The most important thing after a few weeks in the Himalaya, confined to a two- or three-man tent in bad weather, under the strain of high altitude and a meagre diet, was compatibility. You had to fit in. Second came physical fitness, with climbing ability only third. All the big expeditions that he had been on had recognised this, and the climbing

party had been chosen accordingly. But with smaller parties like this one, to lesser known peaks, the choice was more limited.

There would be some rough edges to be knocked off for all of them, in the next few weeks. That was inevitable. There wasn't a man in the world whose mannerisms you weren't capable of hating just a little after a time. Streather himself was used to the long days of waiting which beset every Himalayan climb, but none of the others were. He must try to see that everyone got what he wanted from the expedition. And he must make sure that none of them were allowed to take any unreasonable risk. Risks in mountaineering there must always be, but he was determined that nothing should happen to mar this expedition. No one knew the dangers better than he.

He hadn't quite admitted it to himself before but the truth was that, abundant as his pleasure was at being here, there had been a tiny element of duty about his decision to come. That might sound like a strange sense of values; but men who were fortunate enough to have experience of the Himalaya had a duty to pass that experience on.

He must keep clearly in all their minds that the initial aim was reconnaissance – to explore and survey the approaches to Haramosh. If the weather was kind, if all went well and they found a route to the top and they still had time to attempt it, well and good. They would gear their reconnaissance so that if a route opened up in front of them, they would have the resources to exploit their luck. They had set out in exactly the same way on Kangchenjunga, and four of them had reached the top.

Yet he had always felt that the chances of reaching the summit of Haramosh were slender. Time, the size of their party and the known ruggedness of the mountain were against them. And a sight of the mountain had very much strengthened this view. The north face was a freak; hardly anything elsewhere could compare with that sheer 13,000-foot drop to the valley. And they had already carried out a reconnaissance of the western approaches by two separate parties, which had shown that the mountain was unclimbable from that side.

Streather and Emery had climbed on the ridge which sloped up from the Mani glacier; Jillott and Culbert on the ridge immediately behind it, on the far side of another hanging glacier that swept down the mountain, out of sight from the valley. Both parties had reached about 17,000 feet fairly easily, but everywhere they looked beyond that, great pinnacles of rock barred the way, and the ridges became serrated or fell away sheer before rising almost vertically on the far side. Even if they could negotiate these huge buttresses, they would never get porters up there.

Jillott and Culbert had been able to look across to the south-western ridge, but this, too, was jagged and broken. They had ruled out the southern approaches before leaving England. Now, within a few days of being here, they had ruled out the north and the west. The only part of the mountain which they knew could be climbed was the La, and this must be their next endeavour.

Once established beyond the La, it looked as though they might swing round to the right along the snow-covered north-east ridge towards Haramosh II, and that this might eventually yield a route to the summit. But it was not a route that one would choose if any other prospect offered. It meant first climbing Haramosh II, nearly 22,000 feet high, descending perhaps 2,000 feet into the trough separating the two summits, putting probably three camps in that trough, and then finally attempting the ascent of the main summit.

And after this ascent, succeed or fail, they would have the long trudge back across the trough and then their second ascent of Haramosh II to accomplish before the real descent began. And they might well be delayed by weather between the two summits, which meant that at least one of the camps in the trough would need to be strong and well stocked. It was doubtful whether their small and modestly equipped party could establish such a camp in the time at their disposal.

But with all the obvious difficulties, it looked a feasible route. As far as they could see, it was the only feasible route; and each one of the climbers

secretly held buoyant hopes of it. Even Tony Streather, conscious that he must be the steadying if not the restraining influence, felt the general wave of optimism. He had in his party skilful, determined and ambitious climbers, well suited, once the pyramid of camps was built, to a tenacious dash for the summit.