MEN OF THE MOUNTAINS

DARJEELING has always been associated with mountain climbing. The other hill stations along the lower Himalayan ranges—Simla, Mussoorie, Nanital —are essentially sanatoriums cool havens from the sun-scorched northern plains. Not so Darjeeling. It was born to nobler endeavours. The men who came to wander about its cool ridges were restless souls, who gazed longingly across the misty valleys at the Kanchendzonga massif, the peaks of Pandim and Kabru, and passionately longed to possess them. They walked away down to the Teesta valley and beyond, some to succeed and return in triumph; others to fail and remain on their chosen mountain.

Darjeeling cherishes the memories of these men, for their story is her own. How many times must Gen. Bruce have sucked his pipe, and gazed out of the window at the well manicured tea gardens, as his toy train huffed and puffed up the hill, carrying him to the start of yet another Everest adventure. Mallory must surely have walked the misty roads of Darjeeling in quiet contemplation, or sipped a lonely drink in the Planters Club. Karma Paul, all of 80 years, companion of Bruce, aide to every pre-war Everest team, walks proudly down the Mall and points to the very spot, where he hired the young Tenzing Norgay for the 1935 Everest. Eighteen years later, Tenzing, young as ever, an infectious disarming smile about his lips, strode up the hill, with the news Darjeeling had waited for, for thirty years. This was as it should have been. The people of Darjeeling were no hill coolies, fit only to pull fat memsahibs to their tea parties. The proud sherpas and hardy Gourkhas, had climbed shoulder to shoulder, with the Sahibs, on every mountain in the Himalayas. They had notched up remarkable feats of courage and loyalty over the years. Who can forget the faithful Gaylay, who chose to die with his leader Merkl on Nanga Parbat in 1937, rather than abandon him?

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Is it not therefore appropriate that the 20th anniversary of the Everest climb, should see the finest men of the mountains gather in Darjeeling? They came to celebrate the saga of Everest, and the 15th birthday of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. But above all they came to celebrate Darjeeling, the mother of all climbers, who sent them out on their lonely trysts, and waited anxiously for their returns. Lord John Hunt preferred to come the old way —walking slowly into the town at the end of a 20-day trek from the Everest region of Nepal. Lady Hunt walked too, and complained of the ever present leeches.

'Did you carry salt?' querried Karma Paul.

"Yes, of course. Little packets to put on the leeches", replied Lady Hunt

"You should have tied little salt bags on sticks. A touch of this bag and the leech falls off, "Karma Paul gently chided her. 'Gen. Bruce always carried one.'

The Swiss were there in strength— Albert Eggler, Henry Dunant, and of course the peerless Raymond Lambert. They had after all been the first to try from the South Col in 1952. How hard they tried, both before and after the monsoons! Lambert and Tenzing, two kindered souls twined about one rope. Two nights spent at 28000 ft. without oxygen, but Sagarmatha was not ready for them. How close and yet how far. You ask the bald, squat. wrestler like Lambert, how does it feel to have come so close to success, and been denied the prize by the weather Gods? He waves his arms, almost spilling his drink, shurgs his gaelic shoulders, and smiles. A tinge of sadness perhaps around the corners of the mouth. You ask Tenzing would be have preferred Lambert of the frost bitten feet for the top? Tenzing gives his million dollar commercial grin. But you know.

Mr. Maurice Herzog, the first man to climb 8000 meters, with Tenzing's niece and wife.

A square jawed, brozen Green God floats about the gathering. Norman Dyhrenfurth, successful man of Everest, leader of the American team in 1963. First climb of West ridge! first traverse of the mountain; six men on the top, what more could one ask? Yes, but Dyhrenfurth also of the 1970 International expedition. Memories of Harsh Bahuguna, suspended helpless on the west ridge wall, the bickering on the icefall, the collapse of the very ethic of climbing in the national scramble for glory. Norman is a compassionate and sad man. He squares his square jaw: "Never again an international expedition with the top flight temperamental national stars. The ideal is to have promising young climbers. They are so "unselfish. The prestigious national expeditions are out. We must climb together as brothers in the spirit of man and not for national glory." Good old Norman, never the one to give up. No doubt we shall soon see an international expedition of young climbers.

Walking down the misty byeways of Darjeeling, I pass a lonely figure in the gathering dusk. Tall and slim, he is a handsomer and older Mark Spitz. He walks with slow deliberation. A look at his stubby shoes indicates why — the toes have been left on some high mountain. He puts out a hand to shake yours in greeting. There are no fingers; only the stubs around the palm. He smiles a shy sad smile. Why, this is prometheus himself. The spirit of man in physical form. Maurice Herzog. The man of Annapurna.

Did we do not all read his classic Annapurna story in College. The first climb of a 8000 metre peak in 1950 by Herzog and Lachenal. The night out in the storm, the stumble down the monsoon lashed mountain, Herzog's delirious, semiconscious journey by porter basket, away from the snows, to the sunny Seine banks, the loss to the physical self, the ultimate triumph of the spirit and will, The spirit of Maurice. The Annapurna story will remain a landmark in the annals of man.

I ask Maurice the one question that is upermost in my mind: "Looking back on it all after 23 years, do you regret it? Would you do it all over again?"

He leans forward, smiles, jabs me in the chest with his fingerless palm, and says in his heavily accented English:

"Oh Yes. I have not the slightest doubt that I would. You see, if something in me outside is less, something in me inside is more."

He walks away to put his arms around Tenzing's pretty neice Dolma, and pose for photographs, while Lambert and the Swiss wolf whistle. Maurice, Maurice—they tease. He only throws up his hands in mock helplessness.

At the inaugural function a distinguished old gentleman sits in the front row-silver white hair, pink cheeks, thin gold rimmed spectacles and a twinkle behind them. A spontaneous cheer goes up as Sarin the President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation introduces him:Paul Bauer, the man of Kachendzonga. Twice he challened this giant in the thirties, and left his name on the mountain in the form of the Bauer spur. In 1938 he went to the killer mountain Naga Parbat, to dig his friend Willy Merkl out of her flank. Now he walks the winding ways of Darjeeling, 'calm of mind all passion spent.' But occasionally he pauses in mid stride, to jab his walking stick at the Kanchendoznga ridge, and explain his Herculean labours of forty years ago. Kachendzonga is his mountain, no matter who climbed it in the end. Darjeeling his true natural home.

Looking across the crowded reception hall, I spy a man standing by himself; tall slim, brown suit, golden brown beard, a pair of intense grey eyes, that glide over the assembly in rapid, but deliberate motion. In another age he was Sir Francis Drake, sailor and Buccaneer. In this one he is Chris Bonnington climber of mountain faces; the north wall of the Eiger; the south face of Annapurna; the south west of Everest. The Annapurna climb is already an epic. The Everest attempt last year took him to 27500 ft. in the month of November — temperature 40C on the face, with wind of 150 kmp velocity. Next year he hopes to attempt Changbang, another Impossible face in the Garhwal mountains. But Chris is on wild gambler. On the contrary he is slow and deliberate about his mountain. It is just that he is able to peer over the edge a little more than others; to demonstrate the ultimate control of mind over matter, by performing these well nigh impossible feats of physical endurance. All the while he is intensely aware of the limitations of lesser mortals. Talking of the unfortunate Harsh Bahuguna, and his own plan for a joint Indo-British expedition he explains: "If I knew a chap's limitations, I would stay bloody close to him!'

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My mind wanders away from the galaxy of present stars, to those who sleep on the mountains. Gaylay and the faithful sherpas of Nanga Parbat and countless other peaks: Herman Buhl the ultimate conqueror of Nanga Parbat, who sleeps on Chogolisa, and of course Mallory who rests in the lap of Everest. The list of those who dared, and paid the price is endless. But it is as well to end with Mallory, who combined in him the unquenchable spirit of Promotheus and the lyrical gift of Shelley. Withal he was humble and recognised that:

"The climbers must have above all things, if they are to win through, good fortune, and the greatest good fortune of all for mountaineers, some constant spirit of kindness in Mount Everest itself, the forgetfulness for long enough of its more cruel moods; for we must remember that the highest of mountains is capable of severity, a severity so awful and so fatal that the wiser sort of men do well to think and tremble even on the threshold of their endeavour."

— *M. S. Gill*