

INTO THE CLOUDS

THE RACE TO CLIMB THE WORLD'S
MOST DANGEROUS MOUNTAIN

TOD OLSON

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PART ONE

1938 The Dirty Work



The First American Karakoram Expedition

Standing from second to left: Bill House, Charlie Houston (pronounced *how-ston*), Norman Streatfeild, Paul Petzoldt, Bob Bates, Dick Burdsall. Seated: Ang Pemba, Phinsoo, Pasang Kikuli, Pemba Kitar, Tse Tendrup, Sonam.

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Because It's There

The mountain that held Charlie Houston and his team of climbers high on its slopes was born millions of years ago in a collision that reshaped the face of the Earth. The landmass we call India lay far off the southern coast of Asia. As the Earth's crust shifted beneath it, the Indian continent edged northward through the ocean. While it traveled, dinosaurs went extinct, an ice age came and went, apes began walking on two legs and evolved into humans.

This massive continent plowed into the rest of Asia 50 million years before Houston's expedition. It slowed but didn't stop. One giant landmass ground into another. Over millions of years, the land thrust toward the sky and created the highest mountains on Earth.

They're known as the Himalaya—"abode of snow" in the Sanskrit language of India—and there is nothing on the globe that compares to them. The mountains range along China's border with Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Thirty-seven of them tower more than 25,000 feet above sea level. Twelve rise more than five miles into the sky. The tallest mountain outside of Asia is the 22,841-foot-high Aconcagua in Argentina. Move it to the Himalaya and it wouldn't rank in the top 200. "Most mountains are of the Earth," wrote John Kenneth Galbraith, an American ambassador to India. "The Himalayas belong to the heavens."



A few thousand years ago—just a sliver in the timeline of a mountain's life—humans began to build homes in the shadow of the Himalayan summits. These villagers hunted in the foothills of the mountains. They used frigid river water to coax barley and wheat out of the soil. They carried heavy loads through low mountain passes to trade in other lands. They learned to call the mountains home.

Never, as far as we know, did they try to climb to the top.

Who, after all, would want to? On the high slopes of the Himalaya, there is no such thing as summer. Snow and ice smother massive slabs of rock all year round. Winds whip the summits at speeds over 100 miles an hour. Nothing grows. And nothing survives for long.

Like Galbraith, the people of the Himalaya were convinced that the high peaks didn't belong to humans. The mountains were the home of the gods. And the gods did not want visitors. In 1830, a British official named G. W.

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Trill stumbled out of the Himalaya after one of the earliest Western expeditions there. The glare from the snow had turned his eyes swollen and raw. The locals who greeted him decided that the mountain goddess had struck him blind for trespassing. Legend has it she took pity on Trill and restored his sight—after he made a cash offering at a nearby temple.

Wanderers in the mountains—traders, warriors, and religious missionaries—warned about other dangers lurking in the snow and ice. Some people told stories of a giant, two-legged snowman known as a Yeti. In the 600s, the Buddhist missionary Xuanzang returned to China from a Himalayan journey with this advice: “Travelers are often attacked by fierce dragons so they should neither wear red



The Himalaya, from the top of a peak in India.

BECAUSE IT'S THERE

garments nor carry gourds with them, nor shout loudly,” he warned. “Even the slightest violation of these rules will invite disaster.”

But gods and mythological creatures weren't the only forces keeping people off the high peaks. Travelers also noticed a more earthbound hazard: People who climbed too high on the slopes got sick. “Men's bodies become feverish, they lose color, and are attacked with headache and vomiting; the asses and cattle being all in like condition,” warned a Chinese general in AD 20. In fact, the peaks had been named for their hazards. There was “Mount Greater Headache,” “Mount Lesser Headache,” and “Fever Hill.”

Almost 2,000 years after the general's observation, science solved the mystery of Mount Greater Headache. The



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problem at the very top of the world is that breathing no longer does the body much good. As the mountain slopes rise, gravity fades and releases its pressure. The molecules that make up air—mostly nitrogen and oxygen—float farther and farther apart. Every breath taken at the top of the Himalaya has one-third the oxygen of a breath taken on the shore of the ocean. That's not enough to keep a human alive for long.

In 1953, a Swiss doctor named Edward Wyss-Dunant drew an imaginary line at 25,500 feet above sea level. "Life there is impossible," he wrote, "and it requires the whole of a man's will to maintain himself there for a few days." He called this region the "death zone."

The Earth has plenty of unwelcoming places. But humans have learned to live in most of them. Nomadic people inhabit the desert, moving from watering hole to watering hole. A research station sits atop the South Pole, and scientists huddle there through the winter. The high peaks of the Himalaya may be the only land area on the globe where humans simply can't survive.

It might as well be another planet.



Humans started exploring the Himalayan summits for the same reason they learned to blast themselves into space. They didn't want their enemies to get there first.

In the 1700s, the British came to India to make money.

Merchants from the British East India Company traded for spices, tea, and textiles in the Himalayan foothills. Before long, they had an army supporting them. British governors took over India from Calcutta to Kashmir—2,000 miles along the southwestern border of the highest mountains in the world.

Right behind the merchants and the soldiers and the governors came the surveyors, eager to stake out the boundaries of the empire. They hired local porters to lug their equipment up the mountainsides. From there they mapped the valleys and measured the peaks. They even recruited Indian spies, known as pundits, to explore the hidden passes of the Himalaya. Their job was to watch for Russians making their way across the spine of the mountains from the north.

In the late 1800s, a new kind of climber arrived in the Himalaya. These men (they were nearly all men) came from Europe and sometimes the United States. On some expeditions, they had surveyors or soldiers with them. But they went to the mountains not to make maps or extend empires. They climbed for the sheer challenge of setting foot on one of the most inaccessible places on Earth.

“If I am asked what is the use of climbing,” said Francis Younghusband, who was both a soldier and a mountaineer, “I reply, No use at all: no more use than kicking a football about, or dancing, or playing the piano, or writing a poem, or

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painting a picture.” Climbing to the top of the world would “elevate the human spirit,” he believed. It would prove that humans were “getting the upper hand on the earth [and] acquiring a true mastery of their surroundings.”

But more often than not, it was the mountains that got the upper hand. That became clear right at the start. In 1895, a British mountaineer named Albert Frederick Mummery set out to climb Nanga Parbat, at the western edge of the Himalaya. Mummery had mastered the rock and ice walls of the Swiss Alps, and when he first saw Nanga Parbat, he was convinced it wouldn’t be much harder.

He was wrong.

Nanga Parbat’s summit stood 26,600 feet above the sea, more than 10,000 feet higher than any peak in the Alps. Mummery and his climbing partners spent a month trying various routes until the mountain left them one final chance to reach the top—a steep, icy wall called the Rakhiot Face. Mummery’s climbing partners opted for a safe but round-about route to the base of the wall. But Mummery was impatient with the mountain. On August 24, he took two Indian porters on a shortcut through a high mountain pass. The three men were never seen again.



The deaths of Mummery and his Indian companions didn’t stop the new breed of mountaineers. Fourteen peaks in the Himalaya stood higher than 8,000 meters (26,247 feet),

and they became the coveted prizes in a race to the top of the world. Climbers paid for their expeditions in part by selling their stories to newspapers and magazines. Back home, Europeans and Americans devoured the tales of adventure. The names of the mountains rang with mystery: Cho Oyu, Dhaulagiri, Makalu, and Gasherbrum. The public was fascinated by the danger.

In 1921, the magazine *Lady's Pictorial* published a breathless article about one of the first attempts on Everest, the tallest mountain of all. "Who first faces and triumphs over the intense cold, avalanches, terrific winds, blinding snowstorms, loneliness, and unknown other perils of this mountain of mystery and magic will be forever famous. What an adventure! What a thrilling story to tell!" Before running out of exclamation points, the writer added, "But, alas! What certain sacrifice of life must be made in the effort."

Everest had become the great challenge in the Himalaya, and in 1924, a British climber named George Mallory nearly fought his way to the top. But he and his climbing partner vanished 800 feet below the summit. Before his final expedition, Mallory had given a cryptic answer to the question every climber had to field. When a reporter asked him why he wanted to climb Everest, he replied, "Because it's there."

By 1938, none of the 8,000-meter peaks had been

WAS THE SUMMIT OF EVEREST REACHED?

Mr. Odell's Story, which is Now Being Told from the Lecture Platform



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THE LAST PHASE OF THE EXPEDITION—IRVINE AND MALLORY SCALING THE FINAL HEIGHTS TOWARDS "THE CITADEL," WHICH, INDEED, THEY MAY ACTUALLY HAVE REACHED

Drawn by D. Macpherson from personal description by N. E. Odell

A magazine article from 1924 wondering if Mallory and his climbing partner, Andrew Irvine, made it to the summit of Everest before they vanished.