

VANITY FAIR
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ON THE KINCHIN LAY (Part 2)
THE GLACIER

By
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On Tuesday, August 22nd, the Doctor and I went up the right bank of the glacier to a small grassy spur jutting from one of the buttresses of Jannu,¹ where we established our Camp I. The last hour was over moraine as bad as only virgin Himalayan moraine can be. On the 24th we went on to Camp II, a mere ledge under an overhanging rock; the road was good, save for some short passages, where we were obliged to take to the moraine.

The 25th was a more eventful day, for, having carefully pointed out to the Doctor and Reymond, who had joined us at Camp II, the route to be followed, I thought I was safe in going ahead and finding a good spot for a camp. I did so, by a large square boulder, which I solemnly climbed, and proposed to call Pioneer Boulder, in delicate compliment to Sir Martin Conway's Pioneer Peak. The points of analogy are salient; nobody ever saw it before nor probably will ever see it again. There is, however, this point of difference, that I certainly saw it at the time, and there is no doubt whatever that it is there to be seen. It is open to anyone who has been on the Baltoro Glacier to doubt the existence of Pioneer Peak.

Well, at Pioneer Boulder I waited all day, while the Doctor led his coolies in a circular direction round the head of the valley, letting them camp at the foot of the ridge (Pioneer Ridge), so that I had to run down and join them, in a mood to ice-axe the lot. I said little, however, having to bewail the fact that the rearguard was already becoming slack in the matter of sending supplies up. The Doctor's excuse for stopping on his ridiculous glacier was the rumour that I had broken my leg on the moraine.

It may yet take generations to teach people that mountain accidents are always the results of incompetence. A man who breaks his leg on a moraine is only fit to walk up Ludgate Hill between

steady guides. On the 26th we went slowly up to the Pioneer Boulder, Camp III.

On the 27th, I awoke at 3 a.m., and by stupendous efforts got off the men by six o'clock. The Doctor strongly opposed me, urging that the men should be allowed to warm themselves thoroughly before starting; in other words, to go at about 11 o'clock, when it is too hot, and the snow too soft, to make any progress worth speaking of. We went on to the glacier ice at once, and soon began to mount the actual slopes of this ridgelet of Kinchinjunga. The men were much afraid of falling, but a short exhibition of glissading on my part soon convinced them there was nothing to fear. Unfortunately, both the Doctor and Reymond were a little out of sorts, and contributed by their evident fear of the perfectly easy slope to the demoralization of the coolies. However, we at last reached Camp IV by a somewhat nasty slope of rock. The camp itself is perched on a little ledge, and is highly inconvenient. The next day we were obliged to rest, the Doctor being very ill. In the afternoon Pache arrived unexpectedly, and without orders. It was becoming increasingly evident that my comrades were too ignorant to understand that any instructions I gave were for the good of all, and they consequently began the practice of finding ingenious excuses for disobedience. Immediate result: one of Pache's men went off somewhere on his own account, fell, and was killed.

On the 29th the Doctor recovered, went down to find the body, and sent up Pache's valise and some food. Pache had left his coolies half an hour from the camp, and they had, of course, run away. Nobody here will agree with me that strong measures should be taken to prevent the dastardly crime of desertion, nor back me up in any way.

With Pache and Reymond I went up the slopes to Camp V, on the next edge of the little ridge. Reymond works well, but is always annoyed that I will not go first. It is not laziness on my part, though I am as lazy as any man ever was, but the necessity of getting the coolies to go, which they will never do unless authority is behind.

On the 30th we rested and starved, and Pache shivered, no valise nor petroleum having arrived. I spent the morning screwing our shovels to the spikes provided for them, the first occasion on which I have been able to keep on making original spades without

protest from dummy. Not a sign of any relief party. Oh, if only I could be in the rear guard! But, unfortunately, there is nobody who can choose the route but myself, and to give orders, instructions, or explanations is becoming sheer waste of breath or paper. Nothing short of the eloquence of Sir Boyle Roche plus the aptitudes of his bird would have set things straight. Camp V, where I write this, is some 20,000 feet high, as near as I can judge.

On the 31st the men whom I had sent down to try to get some food returned, having partially succeeded, and I immediately took some of them to make a way up the slopes of the ridge of the little Subyichany peak (which I may call for the moment Peak Y), under which I am sitting. From this ridge I hope to force a passage to the ridge of Kinchinjunga, or to the column visible from Darjeeling. These slopes proved excessively bad after a while, the snow lying thin or hard blue ice at an angle of 50 degrees or more. Easy enough for me with my claws; difficult or impossible for the men. The leader in fact who was unroped, fell but, supporting him, I caught and held him safely. But the shock of the fall shook his nerves, and he began to untie himself from the rope. A sharp tap brought him to his senses, and probably saved his life; the only occasion on which I have had to strike a man. I insisted on continuing the ascent for the sake of moral; but, finding things grew worse, went back before nightfall. The men, however, all went down during the night, with wonderful stories of how they had all been swept away by an avalanche, and how the "Bara Sahib" had beaten them with axes and long sticks, and was going to shoot them, and how—But is there any limit to the Tibetan imagination?

On the 1st September I renewed the assault with the four men left me, and after a good deal of trouble, Reymond, Pache, and Salama got up the worst of the ice slopes. Again disregarding the instructions I had given, they went on with the rope out of sight and call, so that I was left sitting four hours on the slope, unable to get my three loaded men either up or down. The Doctor and De Righi arrived at Camp V, the latter full of petty personal pique, and not in the least ashamed of his failure to supply our camp with food; on the contrary, resolved to desert us, though, in the generosity of his heart, he actually offered to leave us our servants! I descended to Camp V, having with great difficulty induced the Doctor to send up a rope and a man to help down my poor coolies.

On the safe arrival of all at camp—it was later in the day, about 5 o'clock—I especially warned De Righi and Pache, neither of whom knew anything about mountains, of the folly of attempting to descend to Camp III at that time with the Doctor, who, I assured them, at the best to be benighted on the mountain. But the Doctor was in great form, and insisted on taking down every man, except Salama and my personal servant, Bahadar Singh, thus leaving me perfectly helpless. My last words to him were that I should descend in the morning *en route* for Darjeeling, and to Pache that I hoped I should see again, but did not expect to. Ignorant or careless of the commonest precautions for securing the safety of the men, they started off, and I turned into my tent with the gloomiest anticipations—justified in half an hour by frantic cries for help and a shout from below that all save the Doctor and De Righi had fallen and were dead.

Reymond hastily set out to render what help he could, though it was perfectly out of the question to render effective aid. Had the Doctor possessed the common humanity or common sense to leave me a proper complement of men at Camp V instead of doing his utmost to destroy my influence, I should have been in a position to send help. As it was, I could do nothing more than send out Reymond on the forlorn hope. Not that I was over-anxious in the circumstances to render help. A mountain “accident” of the sort is one of the things for which I have no sympathy whatever.

It was night, and the finest and loveliest sunset I had ever seen in these parts; the tiny pale crescent of Astait glimmering over the mighty twin peak of Jannu,² the clouds lying over the low highlands of Nepal, while the mighty masses of ice and rock behind me, lit by the last reflection of the day, stood up reproachfully, like lovers, detached as if they knew that I could do no more.

Tomorrow I hope to go down and find out how things stand; but in no case shall I consent to continue a journey in which the most necessary orders are construed as brutal tyrannies, and in which the lives of the men as dear to me as my own are wantonly sacrificed to stupidity, obstinacy, and ignorance.

Notes:

1—Probably not Jannu throughout. Rare glimpses and a faulty map make certainty impossible for the moment.

2—More probably this great peak is unnamed, Jannu lying further to the S.W.