



THE MANTIS

PHILIP TEMPLE

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A Novel

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On a huge hill,

Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will

Reach her, about must, and about must goe;

And what the hills suddenness resists, winne so;

Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,

Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in that night.

John Donne, Satire III – ‘Of Religion,’ c.1596

PREFACE

Michael Blackmore's official narrative of the 1977 Puthemojar Expedition, *The Last Challenge*, was first published in 1980 and has been reprinted several times since. Though it has become a classic of mountain literature, Michael was always dissatisfied that it was written too close to actual events for him to convey what he later termed a 'holistic interpretation' of what really happened. In some ways he thought he had not done justice to the climbers, the mountain nor to the motivations and conflicts which drove the expedition (and indeed all expeditions).

I became aware of his uneasiness and his plans to write something more ambitious as early as 1990 when we climbed together in the Pamirs. He alluded then to a 'creative narrative' that he was planning to write about Puthemojar. I did not hear him refer to it again until October 1998, after his terminal cancer was first diagnosed, when he confided to me that he had a manuscript in draft. After his death the revision, editing and polishing of this unusual work was entrusted to me by his widow, Mrs Joan Blackmore.

In the final version of this 'creative narrative', I have concurred with Michael Blackmore's decision to cast himself into the third person, placing him equally with his friends and colleagues. But I have trimmed much technically and scientifically centred material which I felt hindered the main story and would make the book less accessible to the wide readership that it deserves.

Inevitably, this book will be described as a fiction, if only because Michael could not possibly have known exactly what happened high on Puthemojar in 1977 – and despite the evidence uncovered later by the Japanese expedition. In answer, I can only point to the epigraph which he chose for this book, which John Donne instructs us that the truth may be reached only indirectly and with great difficulty. Michael clearly understood that the direct approach of traditional expedition books is always partial, always leaves much unsaid. So that, in recognising the powerful creative nature of this narrative, we must also be aware that no-one knew these men better, or understood the circumstances better, whether this involved the details of an individual's speech or the pain and psychological stress of climbing at high altitude.

If nothing else, *The Mantis* is cogent testimony to Michael Blackmore's sense of what was authentic to these men, in that place, at that time.

Philip Temp

The longest day. The few extra minutes of light that Blackmore needed. Already the bottom of the mountain was in night shadow and he doubted if the orange and red tents would show up. There, through the big wide-angle lens, he could just see them on the edge of the glacier, bottom left of frame. Damn the tripod. It still wasn't level. But there was no time left – it would have to do. It had been like that since they started the march-in. No time for side excursions to get those big panoramas he had promised himself. 'Sorry Mike,' Strickland had said, 'but we've got to try and pull back a day or two of lost time.' Blackmore smiled. After ten days in Islamabad waiting for a plane, Joe Dodge had said, 'If Allah had wanted the Pakistanis to fly he'd have given them fucking magic carpets.'

Blackmore fumbled for the bulb of the shutter release, his fingers numb from the frost of the camera metal. God what a mountain. He squeezed off the first shot and re-cocked. Watching the summit winnowed by a cloud glowing with the false heat of sunset, he imagined it on the cover of *Mountain*. A certainty if they made the first ascent; still likely even if they didn't. The scale of Puthemojar was such that even the big wide-angle was inadequate for Blackmore to capture the image of the mountain he had registered in that first visual shock of granite and ice: an image of the ultimate tower standing victoriously over the remains of a collapsed adversary, loser in some ancient tectonic battle.

He released the shutter again and straightened up. The light was going fast. One last shot. He would have to return the next day, climb back up this bluff overlooking the glacier, and take some more pictures when the sun was high on the south face. Then it would throw the summit tower and ridges into granite relief against the indigo sky. In lunar shadow, every subtlety of the Curtain wall would be revealed, and the icefall which amputated its western shoulder, and the spurs and ridges which climbed brokenly to the uppermost icefield.

The ridges of Puthemojar lost all light and the summit tower demonstrated its special height, pink and violet, the ice patch below its brow a bloodshot eye. Blackmore had not learned the meaning of its name until Afzal Hussein had pointed among the bushes of the garden at Islamabad.

'Puthemojar,' he'd said. 'Like your mountain. Yes?' and laughed. Perplexed, Blackmore had shrugged and Afzal had shaken the branches until it fell into his hand, an insect erect with exaggerated menace. 'Oh, I see,' said Blackmore. 'A mantis, a praying mantis.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' said Afzal slyly. 'The Puthemojar.' Grinning at him.

The air radiated the glow of the glacier. Blackmore shivered, zipped up his duvet and pulled on his anorak. He packed the camera and tripod into his rucksack and slung it over his shoulder. Before darkness drove him down to Base Camp, he looked up once more. Now why would they call it that? And how many Balti travellers had come up here before the climbers? Maybe Afzal's pulling my leg. Then Blackmore fancied he saw the parallel. After all, the peaks Moitok and Katok either side of the summit tower were of about equal height, raised up like the high forelimbs of the insect at Islamabad. Maybe. The eye of the Mantis was now blank.

Among the mugs and farts, books, dirty canteens and stench of stale food, Blackmore picked out Joe Dodge from the words, 'This Side Up' knitted into the crown of his balaclava. 'Welcome home, chuck,' Dodge said. 'Afzal's saying 'is prayers over yer clangers and smash. Should be fit for human consumption by now.' He belched and sucked his Gauloise. Its smoke was pulled up by the heat of the pressure lamp and dispersed in a blue tide across the peak of the tent.

'Here,' said Afzal. He handed Blackmore a pannikin of half-congealed stew and rehydrated potato. 'I'll go out now.' Blackmore began eating without looking into the dish.

‘Just take it easy on Afzal, Joe,’ Strickland said. He stared at his file with studied care. The Führer Buch, Doug Lowrie called it. ‘Mein fuckin’ Kampf more like,’ Joe Dodge had said.

‘I don’t see much point in deliberately offending him,’ Strickland added. ‘He’s only doing his job.’

‘Yes sir, Captain Afzal Hussein, sir, three bags full sir,’ said Dodge. He took a last drag on the Gauloise and flicked it neatly through the small aperture Blackmore had left in the zip-door for ventilation. ‘I thought this was a bloody climbing trip.’

Strickland turned a page: ‘Knock it off.’

Blackmore swallowed hard on the last lump of stew and considered the doubtful truth of the mountaineer’s adage that it didn’t matter what the food was like providing there was some. At the back of the tent, Alan Wyllie said, ‘Hussein didn’t want to be a liaison officer.’ His pale eyes and off-white hair rose over Doug Lowrie’s recumbent shoulder. ‘He was just posted. Told me at Askole that his wife’s expecting.’

‘Oh my bleeding heart,’ said Dodge. ‘He’s probably got eighteen of the little bleeders already. Apart from offcuts in Rawalpindi.’ There was silence. Dodge got up and pushed out of the tent.

Lowrie turned over and opened his eyes. ‘What’s that?’ he said, staring at the swinging lamp.

‘Go back to sleep, Doug,’ Wyllie said with precise tolerance. Lowrie focused on him for a moment, then closed his eyes and turned over again.

Blackmore steadied the lamp, asking, ‘Everyone like a cup of tea?’ and then, ‘What was all that about?’

Strickland nodded and puffed out his cheeks. He tossed the file aside. ‘The route,’ he said. ‘There just isn’t time for what he wants.’

Blackmore looked at the smudged label – ‘Puthemojar – British Karakoram Expedition 1977.’ Everything inside the file was right, except the dates – weeks behind. Those awful days of waiting in Islamabad. Though now their luck seemed to have turned. The weather had remained fine since they first saw Puthemojar, two days out on the Baltoro Glacier. There Joe Dodge had first earned Afzal’s displeasure by dubbing it the Pakistani version of the M1. On June 16 Blackmore had written in a letter to Joan: ‘The mountain seems to grow higher the closer we approach it. It glowers.’ Now, squatting in the mess tent among moraine hills at 15,000 feet, Blackmore sensed Puthemojar’s remaining 10,000 feet as a poised weight in some gigantic balance. A silly childish idea recurred to him, that if one of them should inadvertently disturb the wrong stone, the entire icy mass would topple and flatten them.

On June 18, Blackmore had told the pages of his journal: ‘Here at Base we are too low and too close to see the summit tower of the Mantis or either of its outliers. Directly across the glacier is the icefall broken ridges to its left, and then – to the right – an immense containing wall of granite – ‘The Curtain’ – which stretches from the icefall to Moitok Col at the head of the glacier. “The Curtain” is somewhere between five and seven thousand feet high and the Mantis sits on and behind this. We are splitting into three parties to make recces tomorrow.’

Two days later, Doug Lowrie had fingered the flaw in the Curtain. ‘Homer’s nose on Helen’s face,’ he had said dreamily, staring at the bulging rock rib, a chance for climbing Nirvana.

‘Stuff Homer,’ Dodge had replied. ‘Lead me to Helen.’ He had made his intentions plain by setting off across the glacier with his hands held like predatory paws, and Lowrie had shambled after him, drunk with anticipation.

Strickland shifted the file from Blackmore’s gaze. ‘The rock rib won’t go,’ he said. ‘Not in the time left. And even if we reached the top of the Curtain we’d still be 3,000 feet short.’

‘What site is there for a camp?’ Blackmore agreed. ‘Can’t say I fancy taking loads up there.’ He had

always been excessively tolerant of Joe Dodge, allowing the kind of grace one must for genius; but the impending monsoon must swallow even that.

Alan Wyllie screwed up his nose and looked at them reprovably. 'They want to try,' he said.

Strickland looked away: this trip was no 'Strickland Special' no matter what the media tried to make of it. It was small-scale, alpine-style, just friends – a relief from those business-efficient sieges of K2, Everest and Makalu. Doug Lowrie had done his Basil Brush act for the cameras at Heathrow: 'All chums together, what? Read all about it in Boy's Own. Boom, boom. Cor!' But now there was no time for private games. The money was the money only he could attract; there were still pipers to pay.

'Do you want to try it?' Strickland asked.

Wyllie dropped his head, shrugging. Then he bared his teeth, looking directly at Blackmore: 'Where's that tea?'

Strickland sniffed in satisfaction. He had steered Alan Wyllie and Peter Chase towards the spurs and ridges left of the icefall. Tacitly, Wyllie acknowledged that there lay the way through. To convince himself finally, Strickland had gone up the glacier with Blackmore the day before and attempted to reach Moitok Col at the foot of the east ridge. Rockfall and avalanche had forced them back.

Blackmore poured warm water into their mugs and tossed a box of tea bags among the clutter of pots. 'Are we out of Earl Grey then?' said Wyllie, fastidiously stirring his tea with a dirty spoon. The tent door parted and fell away. 'Did someone say tea?'

'Hell, Peter,' said Wyllie. 'I thought you'd fallen in the bog.'

Chase's whiskered face filled the opening. 'Just been following half of my Uncle Fred's advice. He paused expectantly. 'Well, mate? Aren't you going to ask me what it is?'

'What did your Uncle Fred advise?' Wyllie asked wearily.

'Always keep your mind and your bowels open.'

'And which half did you follow?'

Chase lunged at Wyllie's head with his mitt. 'Come in if you're coming,' Blackmore said, flinching at the cold air. Strickland's nostrils flared in distaste.

'Don't mind if I breathe, do you?' said Chase.

'Yeah,' Wyllie answered.

As Wyllie and Chase cuffed each other, Blackmore quietly asked, 'What did Joe say?' Strickland looked up at him and for a moment his expression was uncontrolled. The pressure lamp threw an interrogator's light on his face and Blackmore noticed the first shadows of age. Strickland's upper lip appeared weighted and Blackmore thought he detected an emotion which, in any other, at the beginning of such a climb, would have caused him acute alarm. But he must be mistaken. He turned his head away and closed his eyes: I really am damned tired; it's the altitude. He sipped gratefully at the lukewarm tea as Strickland said, 'Joe? Joe insists on the rib. Of course.' Strickland's expression was closed now and he did not need to say more.

It was inevitable that Dodge would want the rib, though Peter Chase, new to this old climbers' club, had not realised that until he had first heard Dodge's exposition on the true line of climbing. Strickland had heard it, even helped to refine it, in the days when the climbing law was to down a pint of Guinness for every piton placed on a new climb. They had observed that law in every pub in North Wales, the legend said. Doug Lowrie had first heard it on K2 five years before. Trapped in a half-collapsed tent in the snow morass of a blizzard, Dodge's 'true line of climbing' had never made more sense. Alan Wyllie the tyro, head cocked to his master's voice, had heard it first in a frost-nipped bivvy on the Freney Pillar of Mont Blanc. They had all heard it. Now Chase and Lowrie had told him solemnly, 'Look to it, youth. When you go back to Mount Cook, ensure that all antipodean apes

hearken to the words of Dodge.'

'There, chuck,' Joe Dodge had told Peter Chase as they sat on the bluff above the glacier and studied the Curtain wall. 'There, chuck, is the true line.' He had clamped his mouth over his fag and squinted hard through the smoke and straight down the barrel of his outstretched finger. 'That rock rib amounts to the true line of climbing.' Dodge looked so intensely, almost comically, serious that Chase thought to laugh, until he saw the look of incipient outrage in his eye; and Chase realised with mortification that he had stopped just short of laughing at the great Joe Dodge.

'D'yer see it? D'yer see it?' Dodge demanded.

'Yes, yes, of course.'

'What d'yer see?' The cigarette still in his mouth, Dodge braced his arms akimbo and waited for Chase's response.

Chase stared across the glacier. 'The rib,' he said. 'It's a beauty, a real beauty.' He twisted his hand through the air to indicate its ineffable sinuosity.

Dodge nodded slowly. 'Yer getting it.' He paused. 'Are yer a tits or a bum man?'

Chase cleared his throat and scratched awkwardly at the back of his head as Alan Wyllie began to snigger. 'Aw,' he said. 'Depends.'

'Depends? God 'elp the 'uman race,' said Dodge. 'And climbing. It's not the face you go for, not the head, is it? Not the tits. No. It's all lower down. Starting at the leg, always the leg.' Dodge took the fag from his mouth and moved his hand over an invisible calf and thigh, over the outline of the rib on the wall across the valley. 'That's the only thing that matters, the true line, the leg, where else do you need to go when you've climbed that?' Dodge warmed to Chase's discomfort. 'Yer can't catch anything, lad. She's a virgin.'

Strickland tossed a rucksack into Dodge's chest and said, 'C'mon, let's get going. Promise not to tell Vera.' Dodge had pushed the butt back between his lips and thrown the rucksack back. 'Fuck you, Strickland!' Chase had stared at them in alarm until he recognised their game, one that depended for its competition on shared experience and a knowledge that could not be fully revealed unless both were ready for the game to end. Chase felt solitary, a green young kid, as Strickland and Dodge trotted down the side of the bluff, jostling each other for the best footing.

Peter Chase made no comment now and carefully drank his cold tea, knowing it was all past a joke. Strickland squinted in the lamp glare and said: 'No worries, Mike. No worries. Tomorrow. Is. Another Day.' He frowned slightly, stalling Mike Blackmore's question. Wyllie lurched on to all fours and began crawling over their legs towards the tent door. 'I'm off to kip. What's the plan for tomorrow?'

'You're on breakfast,' said Chase.

'Thanks for nothing.'

'Make it six o'clock, Alan,' Strickland said. 'Then we can get the conflag over early and get on with it. What do you say?'

Doug Lowrie rolled over again and sat up, rubbing his eyes which he seemed to discover with some surprise among the black forest of his hair and beard. 'Beddy-byes Doug,' Wyllie said sharply.

Lowrie yawned and then mumbled, 'Take care, youth, lest thy elders chastise thee with a mighty rod.'

'Cor,' said Wyllie with an edge of contempt. As Wyllie half stood to leave the tent, Lowrie reached out with deceptive speed and tapped his left ankle. As Wyllie fell through the tent door, Lowrie said, 'God moves in mysterious ways.' He yawned again and saw Strickland directly before him. He frowned as if he suddenly recalled a recent bereavement. 'I feel it's really sad, Geoff, really sad. Not the bivvy site on it. Hammock country. And it's such a beautiful line.' His hands began to work. 'Not you'

quintessential leg. But ah! abso-bloody-lutely ravishing!’

Strickland lay on his back, the sleeping bag hood pulled tightly about his face, and stared into the night of the tent. It did not have the darkness of interior rooms; a faint glimmer penetrated the nylon walls, ephemeral against the pale wash of universal light. He remained still, but Mike Blackmore was restless in his sleep and Strickland wondered if he was disturbed by the sound and clash of his own thoughts. All those nights he had lain with Liz, neither had been able to sleep if the other lay awake, no matter how still, and they agreed that it was the power of their thoughts, the tension of malignant anxieties that came to press on eyes and mind. There had been no-one since to share his sleeplessness; the somnolence of the women at his side was evidence of their faithlessness.

He twisted his head to listen, lifted the hood with his finger so that he could hear more clearly. He could have sworn that someone had called. Here, in this frozen bed-chamber of the Himalaya? No-one else was booked into the valley. They had all its mountains to themselves. He listened hard but there was no sound beyond the tent, everything stilled by the tide of frost. The silence became quickly threatening, bearing down upon the tent. Then he heard the voice, indistinct, words muttered in sleep. Doug, he recognised, from the memories of endless bivouacs. Sleep talk that kept you awake without the compensation of secrets or sexual diversion. Doug muttered nocturnally in his blue bag, beside Joe who never stirred for eight hours in his green bag, beside the red tent where Alan slept beside Peter, and Geoff lay beside Mike and Afzal Hussein alone, bodies in rough containers, waiting in a vast cryogenic vault for some fateful call to action.

Strickland turned over carefully and closed his eyes, pushing his face into the pillow of his squashed duvet. They would be all right. Joe and Doug were in good form, they just had to make the right decisions, there'd be no summit without them. Mike would always keep his end up, deceptive, never seemed to have the power and then ended up leading the summit push. Alan Wyllie had that lean and hungry look. In a few years he would be a force; it was a little like looking into a 20-year-old mirror, when he had been on his first 8,000-metre peak, with Mallinson on Gasherbrum, pushing, taut, anxious and hungry. Wyllie would be OK if he made it the same.

Strickland opened his eyes again. And Peter Chase. Since Martin and Dan Rogers had died on K2 he had vowed to climb only with the devils he knew, yet here, at this late hour, there had been one member of the team he had not met until they gathered in Islamabad. Chase looked strong, easygoing – maybe, too early to tell – and he should be good on ice, Kiwis cut their teeth on it, not so good on rock, but Doug had seen him and Wyllie had been forceful, they'd done all the north faces in one season – Eiger, Walker Spur, Dru West Face – can't be that weak on rock. Wyllie had been adamant and Doug had said, 'C'mon Geoff. You need some new blood or the old firm'll go out of business.'

Strickland closed his eyes, and the pictures rolled in remorseless replay ... 'Of course it's a business to you, isn't it?' She had sat erect, pad and ballpoint on jeaned knee, sweater, silk scarf, cool, with an expression that said, 'Looking at me like that Mr Strickland will get you nowhere'. The black recorder clicked on the departure lounge table, waiting to spool his mind.

'Journalism's a business, too, isn't it?' he had replied. 'Does that take the excitement and challenge out of it?' The woman's lips had compressed slightly. He could still see them, full, unreachable: talk about challenges.

'But climbing is a sport, adventure, and the biggest mountains are supposed to be the ultimate test of a person's body and spirit.' She had looked faintly respectful. 'If you do it all the time, for a living, doesn't it become artificial, contrived in some way?'

That was easy. 'Ah, but the challenges are never the same. You go on from one challenge to another

Each one is that bit harder than the one before, each one makes a new, bigger challenge possible.’ The real answer was that he had never looked good on the beach; it had been easier to pull birds in the mountains. Then climbing had become a passion, a compulsion and the challenges had been easy to accept and to overcome when he was doing what he must do. He still carried guilt from the time he first understood that heroes are named for letting their worst compulsions get the better of them, for showing their fallibility, their membership of the human race, impelled by the supercharge of self-interest. The real challenge would always be in surviving a life without choices – butchering to support six kids, mining to pay the mortgage, emptying bins for a holiday in Blackpool.

She had not really sussed him out, the media never would; they still needed their heroes. Except when it was time to put the boot in: ‘How long do you think you can keep it up? It’s a young person’s sport, isn’t it, high altitude, that sort of thing?’

He had laughed, casually, a touch of patronage. ‘Oh Good Lord, no. The more you climb at altitude, the better adjusted you become. And it depends on the individual. The Austrian – you know, fifty, several years older than I – has just climbed another 8,000-metre peak.’

‘So you won’t be retiring yet?’

‘Not for a long time.’

‘Ah. And what do you have to say about, how shall we say, those *melodramatic* stories about the so-called “Strickland’s Curse”?’

‘I thought your newspaper was quality.’ She smiled sweetly and said thank you; she had wiped that look off his face.

Strickland turned on his back again and rubbed his aching knees. Who was it who had said you begin to die around 21 or 22 but don’t realise it for ten years or more, until the body begins to tell you in thousands of tiny ways? He rubbed his knees harder. A long time? Damn that woman. There was always someone ready with the knife, ready to report, to encourage the swift decline and fall of everybody. Bugger them. Everything was fine. Sponsorship covered the whole lot, he would stop off the U.S. on the way back: book, new lecture itinerary. Just get on and get it done, like fifteen times before.

He squinted as the ache in his legs refused to go away, despising his subterfuge. Itineraries, print-outs, logistical lists, diaries and interviews, like fifteen times before. Voluminous but hollow, they were the authorised notes for official accounts which together made up the history of his heroic and undaunted progress, despite physical odds and the weaknesses and foibles of his men. The images of ordered courage and striving included in the blurb for his last book could well be repeated for his next. ‘In telling the story of the expedition with honesty and precision, Geoffrey Strickland establishes its significance in the front-line of exploratory endeavour and rejoices in the success of a team that selflessly worked together to achieve a triumph where so many had failed.’

Strickland rubbed harder at his knees, trying to massage away both the ache and the truth, yet accepting both with dulled resignation. All his books, articles and interviews were blurbs for the partial life he had constructed and conspired to propagate. From every page he sprang forth with the unmistakable profile of a man who was, finally, in control. In another time, a popular account of his life would have been called *Strickland Wins Through*. He had known what he was about. Early, he had realised he could never match a Dodge or Lowrie, always he would be second on the rope. But his chief virtue and weakness had been his determined failure to accept anything so blatantly inevitable. Making sure he always climbed with the best, he had shared their prestige, become the accountant to their artistry, and from second on the rope had begun to pull the strings. Joe Dodge knew it too well; though even he would admit the achievement of that. But Strickland had lived for a long time with the

knowledge that, in part he enjoyed the spurious fame of a television host, bleeding the willing participants in his mountaineering talk-shows.

This time it was not proving easy to fill in the forms of the official account. Strickland did not care to identify the source of his uncertainty – beyond Joe Dodge’s bloody-mindedness, Alan Wyllie’s self-centred competitiveness and Peter Chase’s ingenuousness. But now, after fifteen times before, the ageing seams of his fabrication had begun to show. He left his knees alone and abruptly turned back to the tent wall ... that’s who it was, Martin Chester – talking about age 21 or 22. And he would say that was one startlingly modern, original piece of technological thinking that had been enshrined in the human frame right from the very beginning – planned obsolescence. There was always a new model coming up behind. But not for Martin. The fixed image returned like a video on pause, the binocular view of empty slopes beneath K2’s Black Pyramid where Martin had been standing, moments before so that he had rubbed hard at the lenses, unbelieving. No planned obsolescence for Martin. He had made the ultimate trade-in. Gone to Joe’s Great Equipment Shop in the Sky.

Grimly, he remembered that it was Liz who always knew better, always understood. Whenever she chose she could turn them all into children playing games. Would she come back? Could she? He remembered Doug waxing lyrical about *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, his hands twisting through that mane of black hair as he went on about how the technological, the physical, the artistic and the spiritual all fused into one in mountaineering. And Liz had tossed back her sorrel hair as a sign to be feared, and said, ‘That’s quite impossible. You’ll never be in a state when you’ll have it all together. In youth, you are physically strong, morally naive, emotionally fearful and intellectually ignorant.’ Strickland had tried to avoid her eye. ‘By middle age, you are intellectually wiser, emotionally experienced, morally uncertain and physically weaker. The more you know what has to be done, the less strength and moral justification you have for doing it.’ She had looked only at him: ‘What’s middle age anyway, except a point from which youth and old age recede with equal rapidity, one with regret, the other with wishful procrastination.’ He remembered that Doug had blinked and shaken his head as if someone had struck him hard between the eyes.

Strickland turned his head at the familiar sound. Someone was peeing among the stones not far from the tent. He took a deep breath. Really everything would be all right. His uncertainty, his soul-searching, his unreasoning self-flagellation was all to do with the altitude, the isolation, the fear. Wasn’t it always like that? Look. Everybody was feeling OK. They had everything they needed. Even – what did they say now? – the right *stuff*. Nights were always like this at the beginning. Soon there would be too much to think about, too many problems, strains. Challenges. The passion and the compulsion were undiminished, he told himself. He stared, unseeing, at the blank wall of the tent.

JUNE 23

They crouched among the tents, worshipping bowls of porridge as the sun scoured the valley. A dry ice breeze, swirl from the northerly gale which blasted spindrift across the high ridges, ruffled the pennants which they flew to comfort friends and sponsors. The Union Jack; its dull New Zealand cousin; Galibier for Boots; Vango Tents; Strickland’s stained Parachute Regiment pennant; Lowrie’s Basil Brush flag; Dodge’s World Cup streamer and his simple white on black pennant, ‘McWordle.’ Dodge had said to Peter Chase, ‘If you don’t know what McWordle means, yer’ve no bleedin’ right being ’ere.’

Dodge said he was taking the day off, so he could keep Afzal Hussein company and write his letters. Afzal didn't want his company and, as Vera had told Geoff Strickland years ago, 'If Joe writes a letter to me when he's away with the likes of you, I'll know there's really something up, y'know what I mean?' Strickland did, but he had decided there was nothing up, nothing that a day off wouldn't fix. Blackmore begged off for another day of photography and the rest of them crouched in the half shelter of the mess tent to study again the photograph which had started it, the stray print which Strickland had seen on the desk of the editor of *Climber*. It had made the hairs rise on the back of his neck. For Doug Lowrie, the real-ale stain in the sky was a personal trademark, stamping the first time he had seen it in the pub at Keswick. He said later that seeing the photograph of the Mantis had been the psychic equivalent of an instant erection. The real thing provoked instant detumescence and the tatty photo, flicking in the ice breeze, reflected the substance of their dreams.

Strickland's research had found that Puthemojar was first seen by Martin Conway's expedition in 1892. Their distant view had yielded the prosaic verdict, 'Unclimbable.' It had remained anonymous, tagged with the Karakoram Survey number K515 (25,311 feet) until Shipton picked up a garbled version of its name just before the Second World War – Pumjar. In following years, expedition after expedition had travelled past the junction of the Puthemojar and Baltoro glaciers on their way to K2 and the 8,000-metre summits of Gasherbrum. But no detailed information or photographs had been obtained until an illegal attempt on the mountain by two American climbers in 1963. There had been four attempts since, only one had made progress on the summit tower. Each previous expedition to the Mantis had lost a man, and the mountain had rapidly become one of the Last Great Problems of the Himalaya in the quickening expedition competition for height and status. Puthemojar – the Mantis – had been an appealing but irritating fragment at the edge of Strickland's tunnel vision as he remained obsessed with the brutal problems of K2. When they were done with, the stray photograph of the Mantis had appeared like a well-timed invitation.

Strickland knew that the trick was not to be intimidated. It was an old rule. Each of them had to come to terms with the mountain, grapple with it and bring it down to size. There were different ways comparing sections of it to past climbs, gaining the reassurance of having climbed that kind of problem before; or taking it day by day, pitch by pitch, never presupposing or discounting anything. That was professional. Whatever the approach, they had to have fire in their bellies, a need to win, not only against the mountain but against each other. Nothing less would succeed. Strickland brushed a curl of black greasy hair away from his eyes and admitted that truth, no matter how he sometimes tried to qualify it.

'Let's break it down,' he said, pushing at the photograph. 'There's the summit tower, the main objective, defences unknown, guarded by this broken upper icefield.' Peter Chase looked up from the photo, curious at Strickland's unconscious lapse into an old lingo. Next there'd be K rations, SLRs, doublemarching and jump, Major Strickland, jump. For a moment, Chase had no difficulty seeing the braid and the swagger stick. 'Now we still think that the base of the tower is at about 23,000 feet, leaving about two and a half to the top. The view we had the other day confirmed that, OK?'

Lowrie nodded and Alan Wyllie added quickly, 'It also looks as if there's some kind of pillar which would give us a good line to the summit.'

Chase said, 'That ice patch, the thing Mike calls the Eye – how far d'you reckon that's from the top?'

Strickland looked at Lowrie: 'What? Five hundred feet?' Lowrie nodded.

'It could be a bivvy site,' Chase said.

Strickland called over his shoulder: 'Joe, do you want to take part in this? We'd value the benefit of

your vast experience.'

From the tent twenty yards away, Dodge replied, 'I'm writing a fucking letter aren't I?' As Strickland turned back, Dodge added, 'The true line, chuck, the true line.'

Strickland stared at the photograph and then at the wall across the glacier: 'Well, what do we think about it – Homer's Nose? Is that the way to the icefield, the foot of the tower? Doug?' He pulled back from them, back from direction.

Lowrie stuck his fingers in his beard. 'It's beautiful, that line. Magic. How can we go home without it?' Wyllie squatted before the photograph and his hands made decisive chopping motions as he began to speak. Scratching at his own stubble, Chase noticed that Wyllie had shaved. He looked preternaturally clean and Chase knew that his hair would be combed beneath his woollen hat. His clothes looked as if they still had their price labels on; he could see iron creases in his shirt, matching the lines of his nose and jaw. Briefly, Chase felt disgusted with himself. 'Yes, Doug,' Wyllie said, chopping downwards. 'It is a beautiful line. Wow. But what have we come to do?'

'Climb,' said Lowrie. He began to growl. 'It's supposed to be a climb.' He waved his hands.

Wyllie rocked back on his haunches in exasperation. 'Bullshit Doug. You're a nice man, but we came to crack that summit tower not some boulder problem.'

Lowrie reddened. 'Don't be so bloody condescending.' He jerked his head towards The Curtain. 'Let's see you crack it.'

Chase said, 'I think that ...' but Strickland held out his hand as Wyllie clamped his mouth shut and began to stand up. 'OK, OK,' he said, 'you're both right.' He paused, looking hard at Wyllie and Lowrie. Wyllie slowly sank back on to his haunches and Lowrie half-looked away, muttering.

'No, really,' said Strickland. 'Look.' Chase saw that Strickland was making a good attempt at not being leader. But there had been all those years of it: he remembered from the autobiography that Strickland's first expedition had been with a schools party to Iceland in 1953. Startled, Chase realised that had been in the year before he was born.

'Look,' Strickland said again, squatting down closer to the photograph, 'Doug's right, we've had it up to here,' finger to nose, 'with the big campaigns. It's a chance of freedom from the baggage train, all the damned paraphernalia. And that gives us some freedom to be choosy, er ... creative, about the route.'

'The true line,' Lowrie muttered, nodding.

'It's great being creative,' said Wyllie. 'Isn't it creative just to make the first ascent of this mountain? The summit, the summit ...' He bared his teeth, unable to say what he meant. Chase looked up at their gigantic spectator. None of them would deny that the summit was their reason for being there. Wasn't it the place where the threads, all the lines, came together? Chase shivered. His stomach felt suddenly vacuous and a creeping flush of fearful excitement rose through his body. He dropped his head into his hands, sure it must show in his face.

'And Alan's right, too,' Strickland was saying. 'We all set off – from London, from ... New Zealand ... wherever – we all set off for the summit. We simply have to reconcile what else we want from the climb. And we can all choose, OK? But if we don't all make choices which enable us to pull more or less in the same direction, then we have to be prepared to sacrifice the summit. This mountain is that big.'

There was a disturbance behind them. Dodge pushed his way out of his tent. Beyond him, seated on rock at the edge of the camp, Afzal Hussein paused in the delicate operation of trimming his beard and he stared coldly at Dodge as he pulled himself upright by the tent guy, clad in pink long-johns and an orange duvet. 'Bloody choice is right,' Dodge said. 'It's a choice between a quick fuck and a night in

bordello.'

Strickland stared intently at the photograph. 'You have a fantastic way with metaphors, Joe, really fantastic.' He spoke deliberately. 'How about this one, Joe – you don't try 69 with a virgin.' He waited. When Dodge said nothing, Strickland squinted up at him and said quickly, 'Well?' Dodge still did not reply. He walked round to the rear of the tent and noisily relieved himself; then he returned and lit a cigarette. As he climbed back into the tent, he said, 'I'll write a fucking letter first.'

Chase was transfixed. It had been amazing when Alan got him invited on this climb in the first place, then it was fantastic to walk under mountains that had only existed before in flash coffee-table books, now it was too much to stand there listening to this. Geoff Strickland, the genius behind face climbs on K2 and Makalu? Joe Dodge, everything from Eiger Direct to the Muztagh Tower? Doug Lowrie, who carried a man down from 26,000 feet on Kangchenjunga? Maybe they did this every time, maybe it was their way of getting their heads sorted out before a big climb. Dodge and Lowrie: ever since he was a kid, first saw a mountain, the combination had been as familiar as bread and butter, Morecambe and Wise, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. It used to be Strickland and Chester, too, then Strickland and Elliott, but not quite the same. Strickland and Blackmore? Chase became aware that Strickland was scrutinising his face: 'Peter. Are you with us?'

'What? Oh, yes, sorry.'

'Doug was asking your opinion on the spur. Alan was saying it should go in two or three days.'

'What? Oh, yes.' He flushed.

'Don't be bashful, youth,' Lowrie grumbled.

Chase pointed to the photograph and then, feeling stupid, at the spur itself directly across the valley. The Curtain ended, to their left, where the Mantis icefall broke through like the frozen flood of a burst dam. To the left of the icefall a long spur rose more than 4,000 feet from the glacier floor to a crooked pinnacle which Mike Blackmore had christened Chesterfield Spire after the twisted steeple of his home town. Chase said, 'We almost reached where that subsidiary spur joins the main one, about 17,000 feet, I think. The bottom bit's just a doddle, up that snow shelf on the side. The face up to the crest of the spur gets steep. We'd need fixed ropes for load-carrying I think.'

'And the rest?' asked Lowrie.

Wyllie answered, 'It's not as steep as it looks from here. Further up we can get across the east face of the Spire on to the ridge leading into the top icefield. It'll go. Guarantee it.'

Strickland smiled: 'In writing?' Wyllie half laughed, a small explosive blast of air which released the tension in them all. 'Doug? OK?' Strickland allowed Lowrie to take his time, to shift his weight on the stones, to peer quizzically at the photograph and then doubtfully at the real thing. 'OK. Yeah, I suppose.' He sighed and scratched his head: 'That's the way. But it's not the most beautiful route in the world.' Lowrie sucked on a tooth. 'Mmm. Yes.' Chase felt a surge of confidence and eagerness.

'Right,' said Strickland, standing up.

Lowrie grabbed him by the ankle. 'Moitok Peak as well,' he said, grinning. 'It's beautiful, Geoff, beautiful.'

'Bastard,' Strickland said genially. He shook his foot free and picked up the photograph.

'What about rope?' asked Wyllie.

'We'll pull it up behind us if we're short,' said Strickland. 'But there should be enough of everything. Except time. Three weeks maybe, then ...'

'Hello monsoon,' said Wyllie.

As they began to move away, Strickland said, 'There's just one last thing.' He addressed himself to Chase and Wyllie; they were new and they must not mistake it. 'I don't want to sound pompous, but

Doug will bear me out – it really is your choice, everyone’s choice. In the end we’re six individuals, each responsible for himself. Eyes open.’

Wyllie grinned, ‘Right boss,’ but Chase saw the gravity and the withdrawal in Strickland’s eyes. Now it began to get serious. As Chase walked back to his tent, he passed Afzal Hussein, groomed, his boots and mess gear arranged impeccably before the door of his one-man tent. ‘What do you think?’ Chase asked cheerily. Hussein lifted his hand, palm up to the sky. ‘Insh’allah. If Allah wills.’ Lugubrious bastard, Chase thought. More likely if Strickland wills. Or Dodge wills.

Wyllie, halfway across the glacier, had to return for his overboots, so Lowrie and Chase reached the foot of the spur first. The tracks up the snow shelf from Wyllie and Chase’s reconnaissance were still visible but they both felt a sense of beginning. Lowrie took his first step from the moraine on to the snow and then stopped. He looked out to his right, his eyes lingering on the vast grey wall of The Curtain and then up, past the bizarre chaos of the icefall. Above a belt of twisting cloud, the top of the summit tower was just visible. He dropped his head and, for a moment, closed his eyes and tucked his chin against his chest. It was a ritual for every real beginning, not prayer or supplication, but a mark of reverence. ‘Stay reverent,’ he told Chase, ‘and you’ll be all right.’ Then he started climbing up the snow shelf and Chase saw he was as strong as the books told, but that even superstars found the air thin.

Lowrie and Chase climbed the snow shelf unroped, fifty steps and rest, fifty steps and rest, leaning over their ice axes to suck in air, swimmers in a long distance race. When lungs and blood adapted, it would become a walk, a stroll. In the present trudge Chase switched his mind into neutral, there was nothing that needed fine control, so he could ignore the aches at the bottom of his chest, at the top of his thighs, in his shoulders under 50 pounds of ropes and pegs, food and gas. On his right, his attention was held by the mixed rock and ice face which rose steeply from the edge of the shelf to the crest of Chesterfield Spur. The mountain fell away to the glacier from the edge of the shelf on his left and his sense of exposure increased as they climbed higher. Frequently, Chase saw Lowrie scan the slopes left and right, trusting only his own judgment, double-checking, though he and Wyllie had already proved it safe. No cracks, no slabs; like in the carol, the snow was deep and crisp and even. There was nothing to worry about yet. It was a bit of a grunt, a thousand feet of this, but it was safe and easy and gave them a chance to get into rhythm, to allow sepia-goggled eyes to adjust to the astonishing glare, to let exposed cheeks take the temperature, two degrees celsius, minus the wind-chill factor; to feel and adjust boots, overboots, hard hat, crampons, windproofs, mitts and overmitts, rucksack straps and belts, the feel of the axe head in the hand, the measure of weight and balance of equipment for two conquistadors of the useless.

Chase put that thought out of his head as he came to the turn. Lowrie was already adding to the cairn he had built to mark the exit from the shelf on to a diagonal ledge which rose halfway up the thousand feet of face beneath the spur. Chase could just see the flutter of bright red tape where the ledge petered out. From there, two days before, Wyllie had explored a way up the system of cracks and ice runnels towards the crest of the spur. They had stopped two hundred feet short when wind and darkness pushed them back.

Lowrie pulled off a mitt and ran his hand over the grey-brown granite. Chase had always imagined that geologists tapped briskly at rocks with small hammers. But Lowrie touched the granite the way an artist might run his fingers over the material for sculpture. Chase could not discern the expression on Lowrie’s face. Hair, beard and goggles disguised everything except his nose and teeth, which were now bared in a slow smile. ‘This is what we came for,’ Lowrie said. Chase dropped his head in

uncertainty and Lowrie swiftly jerked his mitt: 'Reverence, lad, reverence.' Chase felt uneasy. His head buzzed. He cursed, banging the heel of his hand against his helmet.

They started up the ledge and Chase paused to give Lowrie room in the lead. They still moved unroped. Any fall would end in the soft snow of the shelf; even higher, when a fall might kill, they would not use the rope. Fear saved them from falling: Chase could never understand why people who did not climb thought climbers were fearless or reckless; it was the fear that kept them going. There was no point in climbing a mountain if there was no risk; but it was always a matter of finding the right line, the true line, Chase thought wryly, between fear and confidence, courage and caution.

And then there were the rules. He repeated them to himself as the face opened up beneath him. The first rule of climbing is that you do not fall off. The second rule is that, if you do fall off, you fall off in the right place. He saw that rule as double-edged. On the face of it, it meant that you should fall off only when your mate had the rope well anchored, when there was a snow drift to catch you or where a helicopter could come and get you if the fall was bad. But the rule also meant that you were only allowed to fall off a pitch of the right grade. It would be humiliating to fall off this, thought Chase. You just didn't. It was reputation, status, mana, it kept you trying harder. The only time you could afford to fall off was trying something beyond yourself, something that stretched the fingers and mind and calf muscles further than they had ever been stretched before. That kind of fall was forgivable, evidence of the right stuff. But it still paid to do it in the right company.

At the top of the ledge, Lowrie clipped his rucksack on to a peg hung with red marker tape. He uncoiled the ropes and laid them out, long bights of red and yellow sliding down the face beneath his boots. His fingers moved methodically, without conscious direction, but his head was still as he watched to see that everything was right, checking already for defects or wear, assessing length and strength, supervising the proper knot, the correct lie, trail and run. Lowrie shackled pegs and a couple of ice screws to his waist and looked up, sighting the next red ribbon, then he gazed down the ledge, waiting for Chase to close up. A good youth, he thought. Are they all quiet and slow in New Zealand? Perceive the deliberate gait, safe, but it could be the altitude, the youth has not been so high before, and what of his grip, is his line also deliberate, or does he have grace?

Lowrie glanced down as movement impinged on the edge of his vision. Strickland and Wyllie were directly below on the snow shelf, he could spit several hundred feet on to their heads. They were coming up quickly. He could see their anxiety – Lowrie's not going to burn us off this soon.

When he lifted his eyes he was wrenched from his close preoccupation with the mountain. He was now high enough to see beyond the buttress which had blocked the view down valley. The distance they had marched in seemed immense. The glacier wound down towards the super highway of the Baltoro in the segmented form and sinuous attitude of a centipede. Either side lay a confusion of unexplored mountains and, beyond the Baltoro, lay a horizon of peaks and pillars, towers in an endless savage city, ranks of mountaineers' challenges.

Chase came up. 'Are you right?' he asked breathlessly.

'As right as I'll ever be,' said Lowrie. 'Take these.' He handed Chase the double ropes. 'Umbilical, lad. We shall forever feed from each other – the Gospel According to McWordle, Book One, Verse Fifteen.'

Chase did everything right for Lowrie as he climbed so smoothly for a big man, following the markers to their end and then striking out on unclimbed ground towards the crest of the spur. They needed no aid from the rope, but the face was severe enough to demand their respectful consideration to choose crack, ledge and ice bulge with care. The sun disappeared as clouds rolled in from the north. For Chase, the sudden cold was shocking, as if he had stepped from a cooler into a deep freeze. The

granite, warm and brown in sunlight, now fell away from him grey and rapidly chill, plunging into the dirty white smear of the shelf. The only hint of warmth was the signalling orange spot of Wyllie's crash helmet, moving slowly five hundred feet beneath him. He was glad to move again when Lowrie shouted for him to come through and as he generated heat in his limbs, the sunlight came back in a long swathe over the high, cold face.

Chase slowly shed his trepidation. As the sunlight grew or waned over him, Lowrie and the others receded into a distance which grew in exponential leaps with each foot of rope he drew up behind him. Balancing, bracing, each foothold was secure in his mind, each peg rang sound as he hammered it in for the fixed line. It was *all right*, augury of a real boomer as the crest of the spur seemed to float down towards his reaching fingers. Lowrie yelled something but Chase didn't respond, there was no alarm in it. He pulled himself up with a last comfortable mantelshelf and the wind hit him across his nose and cheeks. He gasped, not from the cold or effort, but at the world that filled his eyes. His few moments of fine climbing diminished to the gymnastics of a crab. On the close, circumscribed plane of climbing the face it had been possible to think of control, the rock under one's ego, an easy day for a lady. Now, the Mantis took hold of Chase and squeezed him slightly. He gasped again.

He had climbed far enough up the mountain to see behind The Curtain. Now the entire maelstrom of the icefall could be seen, from the point where it crumbled from the edge of the upper icefield, to the space two thousand feet beneath him where the base of Chesterfield Spur diverted its flow through The Curtain and into a groaning heap on the edge of the valley glacier. The neck and head of the Mantis rose from the pitted breastplate of its icefield and seemed to overhang, to fall perpetually towards him as clouds swept over the summit, twisting and roiling silently before they disappeared under the magic of the dark blue sky. At first, Chase thought the tower of the Mantis was unattainable like all the unclimbed mountains of imagination. He could not reconcile it with his experience and parameters of judgment. And then he began to see. In all of the eight thousand feet that remained there was no compromise in ridge, ice face or headwall. There was a way; there was always a way. But each part of the climb would comprise a summit in itself.

Lowrie came over the top and nodded to Chase as he sheltered in the lee of a slab tilted across the top of the narrow spur. He continued nodding as Strickland appeared almost immediately and cried, 'Hell! The wind's strong!' Wyllie climbed up curiously silent and when Chase spoke in his ear, loudly over the noise of the wind, Wyllie shrugged and stared out at the long shadows on the glacier.

Strickland became agitated as they huddled together. His face was the white of dry plaster, flaking at the sides of his nose and over his left cheekbone. His light voice became almost shrill as he raised it stridently against the wind: 'I think we should push on. We can afford to. We can get back to Base in less than two hours from here. For about an hour. Agreed?' Chase grimaced and nodded, the others kept their heads bowed beneath their anorak hoods in tacit consent. 'We've got to find a campsite. Sheltered. Secure.' They were all still for a moment, pinned by the wind. Then Lowrie got up, shrugging his rucksack straps more comfortably into his shoulders.

Bent low, clutching at each hard hold, they clambered up a further five hundred feet. The steep spur unexpectedly broadened and flattened slightly as it curved away from the icefall towards its next precipitous lurch and the drunken pinnacles of Chesterfield Spire. On a wide ledge in the shadow of a boulder they dumped tent, ropes, food and hardware, weighting it all with rocks before they wordlessly turned for home. Abseiling down the face was swift, easy, warm. They jogged down the shelf in a race which Lowrie won and left Wyllie far behind.

At camp, Blackmore had tea ready and Dodge said, 'Bit windy was it, lads?'

Strickland wrapped his fingers round the warm mug: 'Have a good day, Joe?'

Dodge pulled a fat airmail envelope from the pocket of his duvet. 'Finished my letter, didn't I?' Strickland saw that it was addressed to Vera. He stared at it with incredulity. 'What's up?' said Dodge. Strickland shook his head. 'I'm not just a pretty face, yer know.' Dodge pushed a biscuit into his mouth and spoke through the crumbs: 'Written to Liz lately?'

The shot did not penetrate. Strickland was confused, filled with inexplicable doubt.

JUNE 27

Blackmore wrote: 'Base Camp – weather continues to be quite kind, at lower altitudes anyway. But we don't seem to have made as much progress as we should. Isn't that always the way? Joe has got over his letter-writing bug and, after the wind problems on the 25th, he and Doug (26th) pushed the route out to 19,000 (about), underneath the old tottering spire. Haven't seen movement today (9 a.m.). Wind again? They (we) really must get a move on, time and monsoon wait for no man. Peter's nose out of joint I think. Until Joe bounced back he and Doug were simpatico. Peter's big chance gone? Make way for Joe. Peter and Alan not yet the combination we all expected from their big ones in the Alps. Honeymoons don't survive the Himalaya? It's the air, I tell you. Yesterday we took about 50lbs each to I. The others had excavated two pretty good tent platforms. They now have enough rope up there to truss the Albert Hall but Joe thinks there still won't be enough. Off again today. Will soon have enough loads at I to support a push right through to the summit tower. Doug says we must have carried up all the gas in Base Camp. Can't please anyone. Am feeling pretty good so far. No problems with stomach, the old hardness coming on and no trouble with altitude, but we haven't put much on yet. Still, no death zone on this one. Not unless you count the last thousand feet. Strick not himself yet. Has not looked for the lead. That last lecture tour must have been a killer.'

Blackmore quickly tossed the diary inside his sleeping bag as Strickland's shadow flickered over the tent. 'Won't be a jiffy, Strick. Five minutes.'

'No panic, Mike.' Strickland's tone was matter of fact, faintly resigned.

'Oh?' Blackmore stuck his head out.

Strickland twisted the binoculars in his hands: 'The wind is beating hell out of the tents up there. At least, the one I can see.' He looked down at Blackmore as if he barely recognised him. 'No panic old chap. Take our time. There'll be no room at the inn up there tonight. Just go up at our leisure and dump our loads at the edge of the spur, out of the wind.' He raked his fingers over his head, separating knotted strands of hair. 'Might as well finish that game of chess.'

Blackmore frowned and nodded. 'OK. Whatever you say.'

Strickland turned and walked with deliberate briskness to the lookout boulder on the edge of the moraine. He climbed to its top and stared through the binoculars at Chesterfield Spur. Blackmore saw that it was a self-conscious act of serious intent. Strick was pulling all the right levers but there was no head of steam. Blackmore was sure it would come. It was best not to do or say anything, lend silent support. It could be the lingering effects of that tour, it could be to do with Liz or maybe it was just a spot of the Delhi Belly. Or Rawalpindi Runs. He became aware of Afzal Hussein, moving slowly around the campsite, picking up bits of paper, discarded sticking plaster and polythene bags, which they had shed like dogs moulting hair. 'Afzal!' he called. 'We don't expect you to do that, you know. We should have done it ourselves.' He snatched up his ice axe and followed him, stabbing at debris with the spike. 'The world's highest litter attendant,' he smiled at Afzal.

‘I will make a fire,’ Afzal said, moving away.

Blackmore walked after him. ‘Are you all right? Not too lonely for you, is it?’ He saw immediately that it was a stupid question. Afzal Hussein regarded him with careful tolerance and then bent to put a match to the rubbish. ‘What I really meant,’ Blackmore added quickly, ‘was that it must be so very different to normal army duty, masses of men and all that. I don’t know much about it but ...’ Afzal straightened up and inclined his head politely. ‘Well, I have to admit,’ Blackmore went on, ‘climbers are a pretty undisciplined lot. They wouldn’t be climbers otherwise, would they?’ Blackmore stopped, relieving Afzal’s patience.

Afzal smiled slightly. ‘I am doing my duty, Mr Blackmore.’

‘Michael, Mike, surely.’

Afzal nodded. ‘I am doing my duty. My C.O. said that I must make sure there is no rubbish left about any campsites.’

Blackmore nodded. ‘Of course. I’m sorry.’

‘An order from GHQ says that liaison officers must report on environmental impact of expeditions in proposed areas of national park.’ He paused. ‘Already I have begun writing my report.’

‘Anything we can do to help?’

‘My C.O. also instructed me that rubbish left lying in campsites may be for scavengers coming up from villages. That will cause trouble.’ Afzal Hussein looked up at the mountain and Blackmore was struck by the care with which he had trimmed and combed his moustache and beard. His brown skin revealed a fine patina of oil, there was scarcely a crease beneath his large and liquid eyes. ‘The mountain has no discipline,’ said Afzal Hussein. ‘The climbers have more discipline than the mountain. We have made the camp here, the climbers are on the mountain, whatever happens to the climbers or to the mountain, it is God’s will.’ His words had the cadence of a prayer. Blackmore was abashed and poked at the small, guttering fire with his ice axe. Afzal pulled more paper and plastic from his pockets and dropped them on the flames. ‘I was with another expedition, Mr Blackmore, a big one and German. Three hundred porters. Just before the Base Camp one porter fell down a crevasse. He died. He went all that long way to die.’

Blackmore sighed. ‘Yes,’ he said ruminatively. ‘We all must face the risks.’ They did not understand each other.

Blackmore became aware of a change. He looked up quickly and saw that Afzal was grinning. The Pakistani wrapped his arms about himself and shivered theatrically. ‘For me,’ he said, ‘Allah wills that this place is too cold and I think for all sensible men.’ He began walking quickly towards his tent. ‘It is not lonely Mr Blackmore, in the presence of God, but he tells my hands and feet that I would find him better company far away from here!’

Strickland put down the binoculars and called out, ‘Ready for that game of chess, Mike?’

Chase and Wyllie’s tent was further from the shelter of the boulder. ‘Trust those cunning old buggers to grab the best possie,’ Chase grumbled. The tent hung over the edge of the spur. ‘All that stands between my backside and two thousand feet of nothing are a few ounces of down, some closed cell foam and whatever the floor of the tent’s made of!’

‘Heavy duty nylon,’ said Wyllie.

‘The wonders of modern science.’ He spoke to Wyllie’s down-encased feet as they lay in head-to-tail privacy. Forgetfully, Chase twisted on to his back. The tent wall, goaded by the relentless wind, hammered a violent tattoo against his head until he retreated into the safe position he had devised for himself, half-foetal among the ropes and mounds of packet food.

‘Privilege of the aged,’ Wyllie muttered.

‘What?’ Chase shouted over the rattle and clap of the tent.

‘I said, privilege of the aged!’

Chase noted the clipped end to Wyllie’s last word and felt his legs contract. He pulled back as Wyllie began to wriggle out of his bag again. Chase closed his eyes, thanking God he had to face that only once a day. Crapping in this wind was like submitting to the lash. Even with the big crutch zips, his balls retracted in the cold as quickly as a jet fighter’s undercarriage. White-faced, Wyllie struggled out into the gale. ‘Hang in there, Al! Hang in there! Crap over the edge!’ Wyllie snatched at the safety line between the tents and disappeared in an explosion of drift. Chase snuggled smugly into his bag. He’d always had an iron gut. Could eat anything. He slid deeper so that only his nose protruded through the tightened hood. Damn it! Must be thought association! He struggled up again, ducking away from the vibrating tent wall. What a great invention the pee bottle was. You just had to be careful you tipped it through the door away from the snow you needed for drinking water. Though Joe said it didn’t matter, an Indian president had once recycled his urine as an aphrodisiac. But up here, how would you know it was your own?

Chase felt there was nothing more comforting than to slide back into his warm sleeping bag when the cold was so intense that it threatened to peel even the duvet from his back. He felt a special contentment when he had just emptied his bladder and knew he would not have to get out again for maybe half a day. He could compare the sensation only with a memory so diffuse that it was more an imbued understanding of the very nature of comfort, of absolute security. Nothing else could compare with this intense feeling of gratification. An image of Jill slipped into his mind, flushed and dishevelled among rumpled bedclothes. No, not that, not even afterwards; the conclusion was too often a sense of incompleteness or a cold, bare backside.

Chase quickly thrust the image from his mind and stretched out, taking advantage of Wyllie’s brief absence. It was always the same with mountaineering: either flat out or flat on your back, like mountains – hot or cold, black or white. He began to think they should have gone down to Base but now the wind was so strong and the visibility so poor, it would be dicey. But if conditions didn’t improve they should try and get down the next day, to conserve supplies in the camp. And if the wind dropped? Chase visualised the remainder of the spur above them. It had become more of a buttress – was as steep as it looked from Base – the yellow thread of fixed rope tracing the route up step, overhang and side traverse.

Lowrie and he had developed a rhythm and pace that exactly suited them both. He replayed memories of the difficult layback he forced up the second step, and the sight of Doug Lowrie casually grasping the hold above an overhang before he hauled himself up, brute strength in balance. Then Dodge turning up, Andy Capp in a hard hat, shouldering his way to the front, as if only he had temperament. ‘Yer’ll ‘ave ter shift,’ Dodge had told Chase matter of factly when he saw his gear beside Lowrie’s in the tent. Lowrie had half lifted his arm in objection, and then Chase felt like the best friend at the reunion of an estranged couple. It had been too good to be true. The firm of Chase and Lowrie was a dream. He could see no humour now, only a strange aptness, in the legend printed on Joe Dodge’s helmet: ‘If unclaimed, return to sender.’ The address at the back was, ‘The Great Equipment Shop in the Sky, Manchester.’ And now Alan’s shits were getting worse. Stuff them. Stuff them all.

Wyllie’s snow-covered head and shoulders suddenly appeared at the tent entrance. ‘Christ, you’ve been a long time!’ Chase said harshly. ‘Lose your way or something?’

Wyllie smiled weakly: ‘Not as fast as I thought. Tried to pass a bus.’ He slowly shrugged himself

inside, brushing the snow from his clothes.

‘Careful!’ cried Chase as the wind jettied a spray of drift into the corner of the tent. Then he sensed Wyllie’s depression. He sat up and punched the roof of the tent, hard, where it was pressed down by the wind. ‘Here. I’ll make us cup of tea.’

They leaned on their elbows, head to head. Chase peered at the black scum line inside his plastic mug. ‘The water doesn’t ever get *really* hot, does it?’ Wyllie nodded, his face white and pinched. A few colourless hairs had begun to straggle down the side of his chin. ‘Altitude and boiling point and all that,’ Chase continued. ‘Want a biscuit or something?’ Wyllie shook his head and stared more intently at his tea. Chase pushed a piece of mint cake into his mouth. ‘Think you’ll get that Outward Bound job, Al? Be something to look forward to.’ Speaking loudly and clearly above the wind noise, Chase’s questions sounded persistent and demanding.

Wyllie frowned. ‘I’ve got a pretty good chance,’ he said sharply.

‘Yeah. I should think so. But it’s a bugger to know what to do, isn’t it?’

‘What d’you mean? Senior instructor at Borrowdale is a damned fine opportunity.’

‘No, I didn’t mean that. Or not exactly. I meant that it’s hard to find the right job that gives you the chance to climb – and the cash – and which at the same time adds something to your climbing, widens your skills and experience. Know what I mean?’

‘Borrowdale would do all that.’

‘Yeah, maybe,’ Chase said. ‘But not really. You’d get in some rock-climbing. But you’d have to be there for X number of courses a year. Do this, do that. Then look at me. Be hard to get a job teaching just now but I can always get work and money with my old man, building. But what’s that got to do with climbing?’

Wyllie lay back and pulled his sleeping bag up to his chin: ‘When I started climbing I had it all worked out.’ Chase strained to hear Wyllie as he stared at the flickering orange roof and seemed to speak to himself. ‘It was the year Geoff Strickland took that first expedition to K2. I was really gripped by that book. I still think it’s his best.’

‘Rogers and Chester disappearing after they set off for the summit?’

Wyllie did not seem to hear him: ‘I thought – that’s what I want to do. Climb mountains and write books about them, make films.’

‘And here you are.’

‘Yeah. And Geoff Strickland will write the book and Mike Blackmore will take the pictures.’

‘Aw, c’mon Alan. Thousands of climbers would give their eye teeth just to be here.’

‘Yeah, here I am trying hard not to shit my pants.’ Wyllie was silent for a moment; a spasm of discomfort creased his face. ‘On Makalu last year we had disposable underwear.’

‘Nappies.’

‘Hell. I could do with them now.’

Chase studied Wyllie’s preoccupied expression. ‘Joe and Doug don’t write books or make movies,’ he said.

Wyllie grimaced. ‘We can’t all run ruddy equipment shops, there’ll soon be more shops than climbers. And we can’t all be consultant geologists to oil sheikhs.’

Chase sighed and tossed his mug into the billy. ‘Farewell, cruel world.’ He slid down into his bag. ‘There’s only one thing to do, mate.’

Wyllie squinted at him suspiciously: ‘Another gem of genuine kiwi philosophy?’

‘Dunno, But I read somewhere that it didn’t matter what money or what contacts you had. If you knew, *really* knew, what you wanted to do and you were good at it and you just did it, then everything

else – money, what have you – would take care of itself.’

‘Micawber. Something will turn up,’ Wyllie snorted, ‘What’s this one thing we have to do, then?’

‘Climb this bloody mountain. I mean, right to the top. Next year the Kangshung Face of Everest. The year after, who knows?’ Chase opened his eyes wide in mock wonder; but Wyllie saw the determination. He nodded, averting his face. He wanted the Mantis more than Chase. They had come as a pair but he did not care who his partner was. He would climb it with Chase, with Dodge, with Strickland, even by himself. In this game you got to the top by getting to the top. Strickland had said himself: they were six individuals, each responsible for himself. On a mountain like the Mantis, only the fittest and strongest finished the race. He shoved his fist into his stomach and for a moment the gripes disappeared. Why now, for Christ’s sake? At the start of the march-in he had been Al, all that weight training and hill running had paid off. One hundred per cent fit, he’d had his head in the right place, and last year he’d gone well at altitudes higher even than the top of the Mantis. It had all been perfect. Now this.

‘Want some tucker?’ Chase asked.

Christ! ‘Naw,’ Wyllie mumbled and fumbled in the pocket of his pack for a pill. He doubted if it would do much good. The pains began again, across his stomach, stabbing hard at his diaphragm. Wyllie turned to face the wall, knowing Chase watched his every move. Surreptitiously he pulled his knees up, pushing both his fists into his gut, leaving no room for pain, willing the sickness, the weakness, away. Why only him? Why didn’t Peter get it? Sooner or later he would. Yeah. It would hit Peter higher up the mountain, and by that time he would be all right. Wyllie felt the sweat forming on his neck. It was probably a bug that did the rounds. Wyllie had a vision of himself leaving a tent beneath the headwall of the Mantis, bidding farewell to the prostrate figures of Joe Dodge and Lowrie. Alone, and with confidence and perfect technique, he climbed effortlessly over prodigiously difficult rock to the summit. The sour smell of butane-propane drifted past Wyllie’s nostrils and then he heard the low roar of the gas stove. ‘I think I’ll have something,’ Chase said. ‘Keep the old strength up.’ Wyllie began to pant from the effort of containing his stomach pain, and from the intensity of his loathing.

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As Dodge tied off the fixed rope, Lowrie looked down the buttress. Five hundred feet below, Chase and Wyllie were negotiating the second step. From his angle of view it was the grey prow of an Edwardian battleship, almost vertical, cutting away at its foot and displacing an invisible bow wave of frigid air. Chase had overcome it first with his fine layback up the corner on its western edge. Now, as Wyllie waited his turn, Chase spidered his way up the fixed line which hung from the very nose of the prow. Turning gently over the shadowed icefall, he slid the jumar clamps and stirrups smoothly up the rope. Left jumar up, left foot up, right jumar up, right foot up, all fear controlled, harnessed to the method, to concentration on the jumars’ serrations as they clamped into the spongy fibre, teeth into a thick steak, a thousand terylene filaments, some bending, breaking under the pressure of the cold metal, suspending 217lbs, mostly animate, blood, cloth, hair and metal, indifferently above the void.

‘Looks like he’s been doing it all his life,’ said Lowrie. He looked pious. ‘That young man will go far.’ Dodge lit a fresh Gauloise, expertly sheltering the flame of his match with cupped hands as the first breeze of the morning flickered over the cold granite. He flipped the dead match into the space

beneath his boots and briefly watched it sail and wobble and spin, disappearing into the kaleidoscopic confusion of broken ice, rock and snow. Cigarette stuck to his lower lip, Dodge moved closer to Lowrie on the ledge, the fingers of his left hand finding friction on the rugosities of the vertical wall that rose above them. He jerked his right thumb over his shoulder. 'Aye. An' looks like the king's out of bed. Better get a move on.' 'E'll be wanting lead tomorrer.' Far below, beyond the one tent left at Camp I, Lowrie saw two minute figures detach from the tents of Base and begin moving slowly over the glacier. Lowrie nodded as Dodge stretched past him and clipped into the network of ropes and slings. He gave Lowrie one look, reading the signs of care and readiness, and then set out on the east face of Chesterfield Spire.

The day before, Strickland had noted it all precisely in his expedition log: '27 June: The route from Base Camp, up the Chesterfield Spur, to the edge of the Spire face at 19,000 feet, is now marked and roped. The crux of access to the upper mountain depends on a secure traverse across the face. Doug L and Joe D. are to lead the traverse and Alan W. and Peter C. will back them up with all the gear for a good Camp II beyond. This is essential for the push to the summit. Wind is a problem but weather is basically fine.'

The face was a thousand feet across. Lowrie and Dodge agreed to alternate the lead, two rope-lengths at a time. 'How long?' Lowrie said, squinting as the sun began to flare over the high eastern ridges.

'All day,' Dodge replied. 'All tomorrer. Till next bloody Sunday. Is the wind going ter blow?'

Lowrie watched Dodge leading out on the first twenty feet, thinking in a perennial cliché that the vertical was Joe's natural medium. At sea level he seemed weighed down by the heavy atmosphere, lugubrious, even his fag drooped, and his arms always looked too long, his shoulders too big. Allowing Joe to climb a huge untouched rock face was a kindness akin to releasing a caged jaguar on an endless pampas filled with game. It was the natural environment for his fingers, and feet so small that Lowrie took them almost as a personal affront, giving Dodge an unfair advantage. But Lowrie still felt humble before the sight of Joe Dodge climbing: his progress across the 70-degree roof of the Spire was fluid and considered. Balanced on the balls of his feet, he reached for holds or slots for pitons as if he worked out the climb several moves in advance, served one move so that the mountain would allow him to volley as he wished.

Dodge's Gauloise was now a cold butt on his lip as he felt past a protruding rib and found a crack. With the economical skill of a good chippie he hammered in a piton, the rising crescendo of the penetrating metal sounding sweet to his ears. He clipped a karabiner into its eye and pushed the two ropes through its gate: red for safety, yellow for aid or, as Dodge put it, red for rabbits and yellow for chooks. Then he stepped around the rib and out of Lowrie's sight.

Dodge ran out half the rope in a rising traverse which took him over a bulge plastered with snow. He braced his feet apart, clipped a sling into the next peg and leaned out on it at 45 degrees so that he could see further. The face trended away in a slight curve, hiding its configuration. Dodge spat out the butt and looked up. A fine crack pointed directly to the summit of the Spire; a great line if they had been going that way. It originated beneath his feet, far down in the bowels of the cirque which had been scraped out by an extinct tributary of the icefall. A faint crackle and hum broke the immense silence. Reflexively, he pulled himself into the face and ducked. Pressing the front of his helmet against the rock, he peered sideways to locate the path of the falling stones. The morning sun was now full on the face and it had begun to loosen the grip of ice on the shattered slabs near the top of the Spire. Dodge leaned out and looked up again. Snow was beginning to shift also, slides too small to cause avalanches but distracting if they picked up momentum or swept down more stones.

Dodge waited, assessing the activity. Not nice, but not dangerous. In the terms of calculated risk,

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