

# EVEREST

## 1953

THE EPIC  
STORY OF  
THE FIRST  
ASCENT

MICK  
CONEFREY



ONE WORLD

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## Prologue

# OUR MOUNTAIN

For British climbers of the 1920s and 1930s, Everest was, quite simply, 'our mountain'. It didn't matter that it was over 4500 miles away on the border of two of the most remote countries in the world, countries that weren't even part of the British Empire. To paraphrase the poet Rupert Brooke, it was a foreign field that would be forever England. The British had measured it, named it, photographed it, flown over it and died on it. And so they assumed that one day a British mountaineer would be first to its summit.

Everest was measured in the mid-nineteenth century. It stands in the middle of the Himalayas, on the border of Nepal and Tibet and like many mountains, marks both a physical and a political boundary. Even though none of the surveyors ever set foot on its slopes, the Great Trigonometric Survey of British India was able to measure its height with astonishing accuracy from observation points over one hundred miles away. They estimated it to be 29,002 ft, 27 ft shorter than the current official height.<sup>1</sup> Breaking with convention, instead of retaining its local name, Chomolungma, they christened it Mount Everest, in honour of George Everest, a former chief surveyor. Good geographer that he was, George Everest was not so keen on this act of cartographic piracy but the name stuck.

At about the same time, the sport of mountaineering was growing in the European Alps. British climbers were very competitive, making first ascents of many peaks in Switzerland and France and, in 1857, establishing the world's first mountaineering society, the Alpine Club. Within a few years most of the high mountains of the Alps had been climbed and the more enthusiastic mountaineers had begun to look further afield for new challenges.

In 1895, Albert Mummery led a small expedition to Nanga Parbat, in modern-day Pakistan, the ninth-highest mountain in the world. His pioneering attempt ended in disaster when he and two Ghurkha assistants were killed by an avalanche. Albert Mummery's death did not act as a deterrent. Soon thoughts turned to Everest, the highest mountain in the world and therefore the greatest prize.

For men like Lord George Curzon, the Viceroy of India between 1899 and 1905, climbing Everest was almost a national duty. He called Britain the home of 'the mountaineers and pioneers *par excellence* of the universe' and actively campaigned for a British expedition under the auspices of the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society, which was set up in 1830 to promote exploration and advance geographical science. The two organisations joined forces to create the Everest Committee, to administer and raise funds for a British expedition.

Initially, it was hard to get permission from either Tibet or Nepal. Both, in theory, were closed kingdoms, which refused to allow foreigners to cross their borders. But such was Britain's military power and prestige in the region that eventually the Tibetan government agreed to allow a British team to make the first reconnaissance of the north side of Everest in 1921. And so began what Sir Francis Younghusband called the 'Epic of Everest'.

The reconnaissance expedition came back with mixed news. Everest was isolated, awesome and intimidating but not totally impossible. In 1922 and 1924 there were two large-scale attempts

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on the mountain. Both followed the same route to the northern side of Everest, via India and Tibet; both were remarkably successful, considering their very primitive equipment. In 1922 George Finch and Captain J.G. Bruce reached 27,300 ft and in 1924 Edward Norton reached 28,140 ft, less than 1000 ft from the summit. When two British climbers on the same expedition, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, disappeared close to the top, there was speculation that they might have reached the summit and perished on the descent.

The deaths of Mallory and Irvine further reinforced the idea of Britain's special link to Everest, as Sir William Goodenough, the president of the Royal Geographical Society, wrote to the Secretary of State for India in 1931:

*The [Everest] Committee feel that the fact that two bodies of our countrymen lie still at the top, or very near it, may give this country a priority in any attempt that may be made to reach the summit.<sup>2</sup>*

Tibet banned any attempts between 1925 and 1932 but granted permission for a fourth British Everest expedition in 1933. Once again it was remarkably successful, with three climbers reaching roughly the same point as Edward Norton. The final 1000 ft, however, proved to be a challenge too far. There were three more British expeditions in the 1930s but none got anywhere near the summit. A tone of desperation crept into British rhetoric, epitomised in a letter written by Sir Percy Cox, the Secretary of the Everest Committee, to the latest Secretary of State for India, in 1934:

*Owing to the number of assaults which have been made upon the mountain in the past exclusively by British expeditions, the final conquest of the mountain has become practically a national ambition ... correspondingly it would be a national humiliation were the final ascent*

*to be able to be allowed to pass to the nationals of any other country by reason of any slackening of interest on our part or lack of vigilance.*<sup>3</sup>

There was no official policy of banning anyone, nothing so crude, but effectively Britain had a monopoly over Everest because of its relationship with the Tibetan government and, perhaps more importantly, because it controlled travel through India. Climbers from other countries were welcome to try other Himalayan giants but no one ever succeeded in getting permission for Everest. Germany sent a series of expeditions to Nanga Parbat; Italians and Americans made attempts on K2 but Everest was 'our mountain'. It was the kind of gentleman's agreement that favoured British gentlemen.

The Second World War changed everything. Britain emerged weakened and wounded. The new bipolar world had room for only two global superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1947 the British Empire suffered a body blow when India, the so-called 'jewel in the crown', gained its independence. The British Raj gave way to the Republic of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. Within a decade Union Jacks were coming down all over the former British Empire. Britain's influence in Asia did not disappear overnight but its power was significantly diminished.

In the same year the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual and political leader, announced that he was closing its borders after a very poor horoscope that predicted that he would be threatened by outsiders. Three years later the prophecy came true when his country was invaded by communist China. Mao's new revolutionary government was no friend to Britain; it would be many years before any British climbing party was allowed back into Tibet.

In the same period, however, something remarkable happened. Nepal, which had for decades been as hostile to foreigners as Tibet, tentatively began to open up to the outside world. In 1949 it allowed British and Swiss parties to make exploratory expeditions to its

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mountains and in 1950 a small American trekking party was given permission to visit the Everest region.

This book is the story of what happened next, beginning with the British Everest reconnaissance expedition of 1951 and the little-known training expedition to Cho Oyu, in the following year, before focusing in detail on the events of 1953.

It is based on diaries, letters, memoirs and a variety of other archival material, as well as interviews with the participants and their families carried out over the last ten years. Its aim is two-fold: first to give the inside story of the expedition, both for the climbers and Sherpas on the mountain and the large number of other people who played crucial roles in the background. Second, it is an examination of the way that this major event was reported at the time and the myths and misconceptions that have grown up in the years since.

Foremost among the modern myths is that the first ascent of Everest was essentially made by two men: Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. No serious mountaineer has ever claimed this, and nor did Hillary or Tenzing, but over the years the rest of the team has been largely forgotten. Today newspapers and school textbooks regularly headline ‘Hillary and Tenzing’s ascent of Everest’ and the others go unmentioned. Everest 1953 was a team effort, led by an exceptional leader, John Hunt. Hillary and Tenzing were at the apex of the pyramid but beneath them were the strong shoulders of many other men. They weren’t even the first summit pair in 1953. If a small valve had not been damaged on an oxygen set, Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon could well have beaten them to the prize.

The other myth that needs to be dispelled is that this was an expedition that ran with ‘clockwork precision’, ‘like a military operation’ as the clichés go. This again bears little resemblance to the truth. The British Everest expedition of 1953 was very well planned but far from being a smooth ride from conception to execution, it was



marked by controversy at the beginning and the end and frequent crises in the middle.

Everest 1953 was also an exceptional media story, with no comparison to any previous mountaineering expedition in the Himalayas or elsewhere. Not only were a reporter from *The Times* and a freelance cameraman embedded within the climbing team but dozens of other journalists from all over the world were assigned to cover the expedition. Most stayed back in Kathmandu; some braved the slopes of Everest itself. All had one aim: to scoop their rivals. In particular they wanted to steal the story from *The Times*, the expedition's principal sponsor. This fevered competition led to some outrageously dishonest reporting, some of which had a significant impact on events. Though much of it was motivated by opportunism and occasionally sheer spite, the media circus was a testament to the importance of the expedition. The three countries most closely involved in the story – Britain, Nepal and India – were at turning points in their history and because of this the Everest expedition assumed an importance much greater than anyone had ever anticipated. Crucial to the British story was an event which had nothing at all to do with the expedition but mattered enormously to how it was received: the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The seemingly magical coincidence of the news of the first ascent being published on coronation day turned the expedition into a hugely symbolic event.

The story begins two years earlier, long before the Queen proceeded up the nave of Westminster Abbey and Hillary and Tenzing became two of the most famous men on the globe. A young mountaineer decided that it was about time that Britain staged another Everest expedition. His first step was to visit a world-famous institution.

## Chapter 1

# MR EVEREST

For almost a century the Royal Geographical Society has occupied an imposing Queen Anne-style mansion on the south side of Hyde Park in London. When it relocated in 1913 there were worries that the Society's new headquarters were too far from the gentlemen's clubs of Mayfair and St James to attract members. Since then London has grown so much that it almost seems central. Today the RGS is a busy hub of academic and cultural life but in the early 1950s it was a quiet geographical backwater, famous for its lectures, its map room and its collection of books and manuscripts. It was here in 1951 that a young British mountaineer came looking for information that was obscure even by the Society's standards. His name was Michael Ward and his mission was to find maps and photographs of the south side of Mount Everest.

Handsome, with dark bushy eyebrows, Michael was feisty, opinionated and tough. In 1951 he was in his second year of National Service with the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was very committed to medicine but his passion was climbing. When he read in a newspaper that 'foreign' mountaineers were on their way to Everest, his first reaction was that Britain had been 'caught napping' and that something had to be done. Everest was still 'our mountain', unfinished business for British mountaineers.

And so began his visits to the Royal Geographical Society, where he scoured the archives for maps, photographs and anything he could find on the history and geography of Nepal. There wasn't much. All the pre-war expeditions had approached Everest from the northern, Tibetan side and though a few British climbers had managed to look at the southern side of the mountain from vantage points in Tibet, they had been very negative about what they saw. George Mallory, whose name became so closely associated with Everest in the 1920s, described the huge icefall which controlled access to the south-west faces as 'one of the most awful and utterly forbidding scenes ever observed by man' and unsurprisingly, was very pessimistic about the chance of getting through it.

Everest was photographed from the air in 1933, during the Houston Everest Air expedition and again in 1945 and 1947, when Royal Air Force pilots based in India flew illicitly across Nepal and just happened to find themselves circling the world's highest mountain. A few of their photographs showed the southern side but they were too fragmentary and incomplete to provide any conclusive answers about a viable southern route. As Michael Ward knew from the outset, there was really only one way to find out: stage a proper reconnaissance expedition.

He set about persuading a small group of friends and young climbers to join him on an expedition to the Nepalese side of Everest. Bill Murray was a tough Scottish mountaineer, known for his pioneering winter climbs in Glen Coe and Ben Nevis and his penchant for meditation, a habit he acquired while interned in a prisoner-of-war camp during the Second World War. Campbell Seard was a tall, voluble Canadian who had come to England in the 1930s and stayed on to fly bombers for the RAF. Both he and Bill Murray had previously visited the Himalayas but the other two candidates had not climbed outside Europe. Alfred Tissières was a brilliant Swiss alpinist, then studying biology at Cambridge; Tom Bourdillon was a young

British scientist, a proverbial 'man mountain', who in spite of being built like a rugby forward was a graceful and powerful climber. Their average age was thirty-two and their average weekly wage was far less in pounds sterling but nevertheless, they planned to finance the trip largely from their own pockets. Campbell Seard realised, however, that they would have to get some help with official permissions. He offered to approach the Himalayan Committee, the successor body to the Everest Committee of the 1920s, made up of grandees from the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society.

Initially the Committee was a little sniffy but Campbell Seard was persistent and persuasive and they eventually agreed to offer financial and administrative support. The Nepalese government approved their application and the War Office agreed Michael Ward's young pretenders could hire some army tents and climbing equipment. There were setbacks, however. Campbell Seard had to pull out of the expedition because of work commitments, although he agreed to continue to help with the organisation. Alfred Tissières, the Swiss scientist, decided that his research into molecular biology was much more important than his hobby and dropped out completely. The expedition was reduced to three men, only one of whom had any Himalayan experience. And then something remarkable happened.

In June 1951 Eric Shipton, the famous pre-war climber, returned to England unexpectedly, after being thrown out of China. Shipton was a fair-haired, blue-eyed, quintessentially British hero. During the 1930s he had spent almost all his time in the Himalayas, gaining a reputation as one of the world's pre-eminent mountaineers. He had been on all four of the British Everest expeditions, led one of them and reached almost 28,000 ft on another. Between attempts on Everest, he made the first reconnaissance of Nanda Devi in India, and two extraordinary journeys through the Karakoram region of modern-day Pakistan.

Eric Shipton was famously ascetic. His favourite snack was a raw onion and, rather than taking the kind of tinned luxuries that early Everest expeditions had been famous for, he invariably preferred to eat local food. But though he was incredibly tough, Eric Shipton was not just the clichéd strong, silent type. In some situations he could be diffident and taciturn but he could also be very sociable. Countless women fell for his pale blue eyes and his ‘little boy lost expression’ and wanted to mother him. He had a string of girlfriends and lovers, sometimes simultaneously. When not on the slopes of some hellish mountain, he loved lively conversation and, in his younger days, dancing. In spite of childhood dyslexia and difficult school days, he turned out to be an extremely good writer, whose books were read avidly by both armchair mountaineers and young climbers.

The Second World War put a temporary end to his wandering. For most of the 1940s he worked as a diplomat. His most recent posting, as the British Consul-General at Kunming in Eastern China, had ended ignominiously when he and the rest of the consular staff were expelled by the Communist authorities.

Eric Shipton had been back in England for barely a couple of weeks when he left his cottage in Hampshire and headed up to London to call on his old friend Campbell Secord, at his mews house near Trafalgar Square.

Shipton’s description of their fateful meeting, in *The Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition 1951*, could have come out of the pages of a *Boys’ Own* annual:

*He (Secord) said:*

*‘Oh you’re back, are you? What are you going to do now?’*

*I told him I had no plans, to which he replied:*

*‘Well, you’d better lead this expedition.’*

*I said:*

*‘What expedition?’ and he explained the position.<sup>1</sup>*

For Campbell Secord it was pure serendipity. If Eric Shipton were to join the Everest reconnaissance expedition, the money would flow in, the press would sit up and take notice and the expedition would undoubtedly succeed.

Eric Shipton, however, did not immediately leap at the prospect. At the age of forty-three, he was not quite the carefree nomad of old. He had a wife and two children to support and no immediate job prospects. He didn't categorically reject Campbell Secord's offer but he was lukewarm. When a meeting was organised between Eric Shipton and Michael Ward, the young climber came away depressed and demoralised. As he recalled many years later:

*I told him everything and the thing that struck me was that he was rather uninterested; it surprised me at the time because I was red hot about it.<sup>2</sup>*

Perhaps it wasn't all that surprising. Eric Shipton was barely off the boat and having just escaped Chairman Mao's shock troops, was hardly looking forward to returning to within a few miles of the Chinese border. He didn't feel fit, hadn't climbed for over a year and wanted nothing more than to spend a quiet English summer with his wife and family.

But then again ...

Could he really say no?

Everest had been part of his life for so many years that to turn down the opportunity would be to deny a key part of his identity. Although he hadn't been in the Himalayas for over a decade he never stopped thinking about Everest. In 1945, just a few months after the Second World War ended, he had been part of a plan to stage another British expedition to Everest, via Tibet. Four years later, he tried to get an expedition to Nepal off the ground, with his old climbing partner Bill Tilman. Neither plan had come to anything but Tilman went to Nepal in 1949 and 1950 and accompanied the American party which

first photographed the southern approach to Everest. Eric Shipton had a definite sense of unfinished business.

In particular he longed to see the Solu Khumbu,<sup>3</sup> the mountainous region of Nepal adjacent to Everest. It was the homeland of the Sherpas, who had served as porters on many British expeditions. Eric had heard so much about it from them that in his mind the Solu Khumbu had become what he called 'a kind of Mecca, the ultimate goal in Himalayan mountaineering'.<sup>4</sup>

As he considered Secord's offer, Eric found that his wife Diana was surprisingly positive. She had realised when she married him in 1942 that moments like this were bound to arise and was determined never to be a 'nuisance'. Even though they had been apart for the previous five months, she encouraged him to go. Eric Shipton put a proposition to the Himalayan Committee: if it agreed to look after finance and publicity, he would consider leading the expedition.

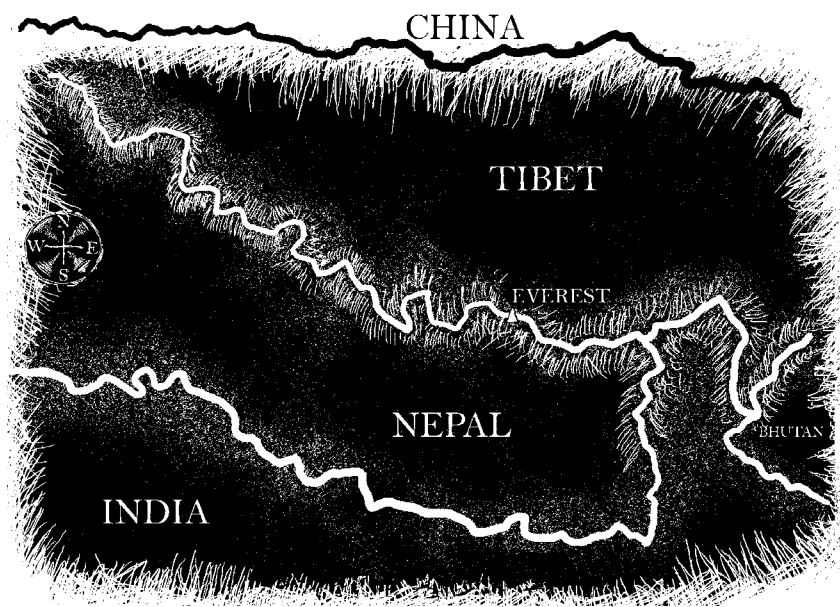
The Himalayan Committee became much keener on the whole thing, knowing that Shipton's involvement would raise the expedition's profile enormously. Michael Ward and Bill Murray had already done most of the organising and were happy to back out of the limelight and let him become leader. As soon as the press heard about it, they made straight for his cottage in Hampshire. On 4 July the first stories began to appear: Eric Shipton, 'Mr Everest', was back in the fray and once again Britain was on its way to the Himalayas. It was a key moment in the 1951 expedition and one that would have a major impact on the events of 1953.

In the days that followed there was a veritable bidding war for the expedition's story. Before the war almost every expedition had been sponsored by *The Times* but to everyone's astonishment, a popular newspaper, the *News Chronicle*, offered the enormous sum of £30,000 for the rights to cover the 1951 reconnaissance and future attempts.

The rather conservative members of the Himalayan Committee,

however, were not quite ready for the mass circulation market, however much money was on offer. They lived in constant fear of sensational reporting. *The Times* they regarded differently. It was a 'newspaper of record' and in their view could be trusted with the Everest story. They were very pleased, of course, when the threat of competition persuaded *The Times* to raise its initial offer of £2000 to £5000 for the exclusive rights. Looking ahead, *The Times* also took out an option for a future Everest expedition, if Shipton and his team were to return with positive news of the southern route.

That July was intensely busy. While Eric Shipton fended off the rest of the press and responded to letters from all manner of climbers and cranks, the others got on with assembling equipment and supplies at Campbell Secord's house. It was all a little chaotic and last minute but Eric Shipton had never been someone who enjoyed complex organisation. The whole caper reached a frenetic climax on



**Map 1** Everest lies on the border of Nepal and Tibet



29 July, when they were forced, to their embarrassment, to make an emergency call to the Women's Voluntary Service (an organisation set up just before the Second World War to support civilians during and after air-raids), to plead for help with their packing. Within a few hours several efficient ladies had turned up to sort out the chaos. Three days later, on 2 August, Michael Ward and Bill Murray left Tilbury for India, with several dozen boxes loaded with tents, sleeping bags and climbing gear. Eric and Tom Bourdillon followed by air on 18 August and after a long train journey, caught up with them at a rain-soaked Jogbani, a small town on the border of Nepal and India.

On the following day the famous Sherpa Ang Tharkay arrived with twelve men from Darjeeling. He had worked on several of Eric Shipton's pre-war expeditions and was a well-respected *sirdar*, or head porter. Over the last decade Ang Tharkay had lost his pigtails and gained a smart new wardrobe but the other Sherpas were wild-looking men, short but sturdily built, dressed in a strange mixture of Western clothes from previous expeditions and their own local costume. Four were hired as high-altitude porters for the duration of the expedition. The other eight agreed to work as ordinary porters for the march to the Solu Khumbu.

As they unpacked the crates and inspected their baggage, Eric surprised Bill Murray and Michael Ward with some news. Before leaving England he had been contacted by the New Zealand Alpine Club, which had asked if some of its members could join the expedition. That summer four of them were climbing nearby, in the Garhwal Mountains of India, and were more than willing to come over to Nepal. For weeks Eric Shipton had been receiving applications from climbers wanting to join the team but he had turned them all down, good and bad, arguing that the smaller the party the better. However, on impulse he had said yes to two extra men, because he had fond memories of another New Zealand mountaineer, Dan Bryant, with whom he had climbed in the 1930s. Michael and Bill

were bemused and a little annoyed that they had not been consulted but it was a typical Shiptonian decision that would have far-reaching consequences.

For the moment, they had other things to worry about. In front of them lay a two-week march across the spine of Nepal. They would follow the route that the American trekking party had taken in the previous year but whereas the Americans had travelled in late spring, Shipton's team would make the same journey at the tail end of the monsoon and encounter a lot more mud and mosquitoes.

The rains carried on relentlessly until, on 27 August, they loaded their gear into a huge Studebaker lorry and, accompanied by several stowaways and hangers-on, trundled across the border. The first hour was surprisingly good but thereafter they spent as much time carrying the vehicle as it did them. In 1951 Nepal had very few roads outside the Kathmandu valley where the capital city lay. Vehicles destined for Kathmandu were taken apart in India and carried in by hand, piece by piece.

Eventually, after five hours, the 'road' ended at Dharan, where they spent an uncomfortable night in a bug-filled guesthouse. The next day the real difficulties began when they attempted to hire porters for the second stage of the journey. No one travelled at this time of the year so it took a lot of haggling before Ang Tharkay managed to engage 25 Tamang villagers. Despite what Michael Ward called their 'graveyard coughs' and skeletal frames, they were incredibly tough, shouldering loads of more than 80 lb. None of them could be persuaded to make the whole journey to the Solu Khumbu. After the first stage Shipton had to stop at another small village, Dhankuta, and spend two more tedious days looking for replacements.

For Tom Bourdillon and Michael Ward, neither of whom had climbed in the Himalayas, this was a very intense introduction to the world of expedition mountaineering. Tom had married his university sweetheart, Jennifer, just six months earlier and was missing her badly.

He filled his diaries with descriptions of the semi-tropical landscape and the exotic creatures they encountered, always wishing that Jennifer could be there too. Michael Ward was more scientific in his appreciation; he noted that villages could invariably be smelt before they were seen and that the villagers were equally pungent.

In the sweltering heat they marched bare-chested, in shorts and plimsolls. Eric Shipton preferred pyjamas and shaved his head to keep cool; sunglasses and a permanently erect umbrella completed his outfit. At night they stopped in villages, sleeping in barns or the stables of peasant houses. As was Shipton's wont, they lived mainly on local food – rice and dhal and the occasional scrawny chicken.

Tom Bourdillon was fascinated to watch his famous leader at work:

*My respect for Shipton grows. He seems astonishingly casual, never quite sure about how many porters we have or where we are going for the day. But things work out smoothly.<sup>5</sup>*

Eric Shipton was also intrigued by his young teammates. He instantly warmed to Tom Bourdillon, though as he wrote to his wife, Diana, he found Michael Ward a little 'undergraduate'. By instinct Eric preferred quieter companions and found it hard to deal with anyone he considered too outwardly ambitious (or organised).

The third stage of their journey ended at Dingla, a small town in the middle of the rain forest. They took a room in a village house and stayed put for three days, while Ang Tharkay sought out a new group of porters.

Then, on the night of 8 September, they heard heavy boots coming up the stairs. The door opened and in walked a pair of filthy, emaciated figures: Harold Earle Riddiford and Edmund Percival Hillary, the pride of the New Zealand Alpine Club. For the last three months they had been climbing with two other friends in the Garhwal Mountains and had found out about Shipton's offer of two places on the team by telegram.

For the thirty-two-year-old 'Ed' Hillary, this was a moment that he had been looking forward to with equal measures of excitement and trepidation. Back home in Auckland he ran a honey business with his father and his brother Rex. When he had first heard that Shipton was willing to take two New Zealanders along, he had not been sure if he could spend more time abroad but the thought of climbing with one of his childhood heroes had quickly persuaded him, as he confessed in a telegram to his family:

*Invited Shipton Everest expedition. Could not refuse. Please forgive erring son.*<sup>6</sup>

Ed was nervous about meeting the British climbers. Would they be *pukka sahibs*: frightfully formal, gin and tonics, smoking jackets and stiff upper lips? Probably not ... but you never knew with the Poms.

Fortunately, a week into their journey, Shipton's men were anything but *pukka*. Although they had not quite reached the New Zealanders' level of trek dirt, they all sported rough beards and looked to Ed Hillary's eyes attractively disreputable. Eric Shipton walked forward with an outstretched hand and began a friendship that would last till the end of their lives.

The first thing that the New Zealanders noticed was how well-fed they seemed. Over the previous two months of hard climbing, Ed Hillary had lost nineteen pounds and Earle Riddiford thirty, almost a quarter of his body weight. By comparison, Shipton's men looked almost rotund, particularly the huge man mountain, Tom Bourdillon. For his part, the first thing that Tom noticed was the length of the New Zealanders' axes, which looked to his eyes positively Victorian.

Ed's companion, Earle Riddiford, was a lawyer by trade. This was also his first trip to the Himalayas and he was enjoying himself hugely. Earle was very organised and ambitious and much more vocal than the laconic Ed Hillary. Eric Shipton did not warm to him.

They next day was spent getting to know each other, reorganising their supplies and continuing their porter recruitment drive. From Dingla onwards, the travelling would become even harder and because no one quite knew the route ahead, they had to carry more food, and that meant more porters and more delays.

The monsoon was coming to an end with a vengeance. With the rain came hundreds of leeches, hanging off branches, waiting to sink their suckers into delicate Caucasian skin. Many of the rivers were in spate, washing away bridges and forcing Shipton's party to make long detours. Even though they knew that they had to be close to their destination, they could see little but steaming forest and swirling mist.

Then, abruptly, the rains stopped and the mists cleared to reveal a dazzling array of huge peaks above them. The journey had taken them almost four weeks, twice as long as expected, but at last they were entering the fabled Solu Khumbu. The Sherpas could barely contain their excitement. As they climbed higher up the Dudh Kosi valley, at every turn there seemed to be a local family offering buckets of *chang*, the local home-brewed beer, and hot potatoes.

The young British climbers were shocked by the sudden beauty of the surroundings. In his diary Tom Bourdillon could barely contain himself, although everything as always was seen through the lens of his longing for his wife, Jennifer:

*I spent half an hour sitting in the sun on the river bank watching half a dozen white capped redstarts and one plumbeous redstart playing twenty yards away on the other side. It was an enchanted place. Am sure that Eden was in the Himalayan foothills. But now there is no Eve. And you would love it, I'm sure.<sup>7</sup>*

For Eric Shipton, their arrival in the Solu Khumbu was a moment of nostalgia and revelation. After weeks of mud, mosquitoes and rainforest, they had emerged into a wondrous landscape of pine trees

and towering peaks. Mountains that he had only known from the northern, Tibetan side now revealed their previously hidden southern aspects.

The local Sherpas greeted him like a returning hero, reminiscing about the adventures that they or their relatives had enjoyed with him during his expeditions of the 1930s. Tom Bourdillon wrote in his diary that he had never seen so much alcohol being consumed. Michael Ward called it one long party.

For three days they settled into Namche Bazaar, the Sherpa 'capital'. The celebrations continued relentlessly for everyone apart from Ed Hillary. He was ill when he joined Shipton's team and two weeks travelling in the monsoon had done nothing to improve his health. Stomach pains had developed into dysentery and a fever that wouldn't clear. While the others prepared to move on, he lay in his sleeping bag, with a temperature of 102.5°F (31.9°C). There was no chance that he could continue, so Ed Hillary reluctantly decided to stay in Namche until he recovered.

Eric Shipton's final stop before Everest was at the Thyangboche Monastery, the 'sister' institution of the famous Rongbuk Monastery on the Tibetan side of the mountain, about which the pre-war climbers had written so much. But whereas Rongbuk was high up on a rocky ridge in the middle of the barren Tibetan plain, the Thyangboche Monastery was in an idyllic pine-filled valley.

The monks were pleased to see the British team and showed them around their monastery's dark mysterious rooms, which were filled with paintings and prayer wheels. The tour climaxed with a hearty meal of yak milk; boiled potatoes; the local fire-water, '*rakshi*'; and Tibetan tea, served with great ceremony in the main room. Then, much to the climbers' amusement, they were shown a gong that was sounded every evening to warn any women in the vicinity to leave before sunset. On inspection, it was discovered to be an empty oxygen cylinder from a pre-war British Everest expedition, salvaged from across the border.

From Thyangboche, the summit of Everest was just visible above the huge wall of rock that ran from Lhotse to Nuptse, the two mountains next to Everest. Soon they would reach the Khumbu Glacier and the legendary icefall that was the gateway to Everest's southern slopes. Would it be passable? Eric Shipton did not hold out much hope. Back in Britain, he had estimated that the odds were thirty-to-one against there being a viable route and more recently, he had confided to Ed Hillary that he was more interested in exploring the ground *around* Everest than wasting time on a futile attempt on the mountain itself. Michael Ward and Bill Murray were much more positive but they too had come with a Plan B: to investigate a nearby mountain, Cho Oyu, if the approach to Everest proved impossible. Everything depended on the state of the Khumbu Glacier. Three marches later, they arrived.

The landscape was entirely different. The lush valleys of the Solu Khumbu had been replaced by a harsh panorama of rock and ice. All around were huge rocky peaks and tall *seracs*, towers of ice, which poked from the surface of the glacier like enormous teeth. In the mornings the weather was fine but every afternoon there was a brutal snowstorm.

Ed Hillary caught up with them at their base camp in a small hollow on the west side of the Khumbu Glacier. After three days taking it easy, he was now completely recovered but just when they were most needed, the three young British climbers started to falter. As Eric Shipton wrote to his wife, Diana, they were showing the classic symptoms of altitude sickness:

*Bill has been like a pricked balloon ever since we got to the glacier ... Michael is feeling weak and is cheerfully frank about it. Poor Tom tries mightily and gets so disturbed that he is so feeble – he is such a nice person ...*<sup>8</sup>

Leaving the others in the camp, Eric Shipton and Ed Hillary climbed

up one of the glacier's huge terminal moraines, the enormous piles of rock spewed from its far end, to take a closer look at the task ahead.

The view was dominated by the Khumbu Icefall, a vast, chaotic mass of ice, 2,000 ft high and roughly half a mile long. Formed by the movement of the Khumbu Glacier over steep rock, it was a surreal sight: a twisted giant's carpet, riven by huge crevasses and covered in apartment-sized blocks and vast tottering towers of snow and ice. Behind it was a high valley, formed in a depression between the slopes of Everest, Nuptse and Lhotse. In 1921 George Mallory had given it the incongruously Welsh name of the Western Cwm (valley). Towering above everything was Everest itself: 29,029 ft high, by over 700 ft the highest peak in the world.

Their first real opportunity to study the southern approach to Everest was far from encouraging. The summit was plastered with snow and looked un-climbable. The sight-lines weren't good enough to see properly into the Western Cwm but it looked inaccessible. They were very aware of the huge avalanches that regularly bombarded the Khumbu Icefall from the flanks of Everest and Nuptse, obliterating everything in their path. If this was the only way into Everest from the south, then perhaps they should now start thinking seriously about Plan B.

The next day Eric Shipton announced a three-pronged attack. He sent Earle Riddiford and Ang Tharkay to explore the centre of the icefall and the recovering Michael Ward and Tom Bourdillon to investigate the right-hand side. Meanwhile, he and Ed Hillary took some binoculars and headed for a rock buttress leading to Pumori, a beautifully-shaped mountain that offered the best view of the southern approach to Everest.

A year earlier Eric Shipton's former climbing partner, Bill Tilman, and the American mountaineer Charles Houston had climbed a nearby peak,<sup>9</sup> to take the first photographs of the Western Cwm from the south. They came away feeling very pessimistic about the



chance of there being a viable route up Everest but while Houston and Tilman had stopped at 18,000 ft, Eric and Ed kept on going for another 2000 ft. This made an enormous difference, providing them with quite a different view.

From this new vantage point the whole of the North-West Face of Everest was visible in its savage splendour – their powerful binoculars enabled them to follow the final stages of the pre-war route from the Tibetan side: the North Col, the high pass between Everest and Changste; the ‘Great *Couloir*’, the steep gorge that Edward Norton had first climbed on the 1924 Everest Expedition; the rotten rock of the ‘Yellow Band’; the dark cliffs of the Black Band and the impossibly steep Second Step, a rock face at 28,140 ft that no one had ever been able to climb. As Hillary reeled off the names with reverential wonder, Eric thought back to the successes and frustrations of his three previous expeditions to Everest. Part of him was bored with Everest, bored with the bureaucracy and hyperbole that went with a ‘British Everest expedition’ but another part was still full of wonder and awe.

After a few minutes the clouds parted to reveal the full length of the Western Cwm and the southern slopes leading up towards the summit. To their astonishment, they realised that there was a feasible southern route. The Western Cwm was revealed as a gently angled valley; at its head Shipton could see a way via the southern face of Lhotse up to the South Col, the 26,000-ft plateau that lay between Everest and its sister peak, Lhotse. From there a sharp ridge led up to the summit itself. It was first time that anyone had ever had a proper look at the slopes leading to the South Col, a wonderful, exhilarating moment and one that took Eric Shipton by surprise.

Before they got carried away contemplating a new route, there was one large problem: the Khumbu Icefall. They could just make out the tiny ant-like figures of the New Zealander Earle Riddiford and his Sherpa, Pasang, trying to thread their way through the crevasses and

*seracs*. Eric Shipton knew that they would have to find a route that could be used many times. It was one thing to force a way through the icefall but for any serious attempt on Everest, they would have to carry thousands of pounds of supplies and equipment into the Western Cwm and set up a series of camps. This would mean multiple trips by heavily-laden Sherpa porters, so the route had to be as safe as possible.

Back at base camp that night, Eric Shipton and Ed Hillary questioned the others. Michael Ward and Tom Bourdillon still looked weak. They hadn't had much success on the flanks of the icefall. Earle Riddiford, on the other hand, was very positive about the central zone. It was dangerous, he said, but not impossible. Although he and Pasang had not reached the top of the icefall, he was convinced that there would be a way.

And so at 8a.m. on 4 October Eric Shipton, Ed Hillary, Earle Riddiford, Ang Tharkay and Pasang trooped from their tents, aiming to become the first men to set foot in the Western Cwm. Tom Bourdillon accompanied them but no one expected him to get very far. With the sun still low in the sky, it was bitterly cold. Ed Hillary and Earle Riddiford were the first to suffer. They had never expected to stay in the Himalayas beyond the monsoon and wore light summer boots. Their feet soon froze and had to be massaged back into life. By late morning the shadows had lifted and the sun blazed down, turning the freezer into a furnace.

There was nowhere to hide from the sun, so they plugged on in shirtsleeves. By mid-afternoon, Tom Bourdillon was too unsteady to continue, so he stopped by a tall snow pinnacle, which became known as 'Tom's *Serac*'. The others moved on, sensing that they would soon get to the top of the icefall.

At around 4p.m. they arrived at the foot of the final obstacle: a huge trough full of icy rubble surmounted by a steep, hundred-foot-high slope that led up to the Western Cwm. It was covered in loose unconsolidated snow and looked distinctly unsafe. There was no alternative: climb it or turn back.

Everyone roped up carefully before they tentatively moved up and across, taking a diagonal path. Pasang was in front, followed by Earle Riddiford and Eric Shipton, with Ed Hillary acting as anchorman at the rear. Everyone was nervous but the Western Cwm felt close and Pasang made steady progress.

Then, without any warning, with a loud crack, the slope began to collapse, breaking up into large blocks that plunged into the crevasse below. With great skill, Pasang leapt above the avalanche line and dug the shaft of his ice axe deep into a patch of firm snow. Eric Shipton somehow managed to dance his way down, skipping from snow block to snow block until he reached the point where Ed Hillary had a good strong hold. Earle Riddiford, however, could not stop himself from being carried down the slope towards the frozen chasm below.

Then the rope suddenly grew taut and, to everyone's enormous relief, held.

Earle Riddiford hung in the air, suspended between Pasang above and Eric Shipton below. He was winded but unhurt and wanted to carry on. Eric Shipton knew that it was far too unsafe, so with only a few hours of daylight left they made a hasty retreat, collecting Tom Bourdillon, who was by then cold and very worried about his friends.

It had been a salutary lesson for everyone. On the north side of Everest, the early stages were relatively straightforward and the mountain became progressively more difficult. Here it was different. The Khumbu Icefall was about as hard a first stage of a climb as you could imagine.

The next few days were spent recovering and planning their next move. Like many new boys to the Himalayas, Michael Ward and Tom Bourdillon were finding it difficult to get used to the high altitude. Eric Shipton decided to split the party: he and Ed Hillary, with a couple of Sherpas, would explore the area to the east of Everest while the others would head north-west to ascend a pass into Tibet. Both parties would return in a fortnight and make a second attempt

to reach the Western Cwm. By then Shipton hoped that everyone would be well acclimatised and a lot of the loose snow might have blown away.

For Ed Hillary it was beyond his expectations: two weeks with his hero, solving blanks on the map. They did not climb anything particularly taxing but it was the sort of free-wheeling exploration on which Eric Shipton thrived. He was so pleased with the way things were going that he sent a runner to the British embassy in Kathmandu, carrying a letter asking for a formal application to be put to the Nepalese government for an expedition the next year.

On 19 October Eric Shipton and Ed Hillary were the first to return to the Khumbu Glacier, accompanied by Ang Tharkay and another Sherpa, Utsering. There was no sign of the others so, after re-establishing base camp, they started work on the Khumbu Icefall. Early progress was good but when they reached the centre, they were forced to stop.

Just beyond 'Tom's *Serac*' they were shocked to see a vast new obstacle: a seemingly bottomless chasm that ran from one side of the glacier to the other. They managed to find a way to cross it but were shocked by what lay beyond. The whole area looked as if it had been hit by an earthquake, with deep crevasses at every turn and new, frightening, towers of ice poised to topple at any moment. In *The Times* Eric wrote that it reminded him of 'a bombed out area of London during the war'<sup>10</sup> but the name they gave it was even more dramatic: 'The Atom Bomb Area'.

When Ed Hillary chopped the edge off a *serac* that blocked their way, it fell deep into a crevasse. Moments later, with an ominous rumble, the surface of the glacier started to shudder and wobble. Ang Tharkay and Utsering instinctively threw themselves down; Eric and Ed managed to keep their dignity and stay upright – but only just. Acknowledging that discretion was the best part of valour, they retreated.

That night they discussed the issue that Eric Shipton had broached at the beginning of the month: even if a way could be found through the Atom Bomb area, would the Khumbu Icefall ever be safe enough as a porter route? Seven Sherpas had been killed by an avalanche on the second British Everest expedition in 1922. Ang Tharkay was now distinctly worried by what he had seen.

Eric Shipton's more pressing concern was the fate of Michael Ward and the others. They were several days late and he would soon have to send out search parties. Perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea to split the group.

Fortunately, they turned up on the 26th and admitted they had mixed up the dates. Michael's party had not managed to reach the pass that led into Tibet but as Eric had predicted, everyone was now much better acclimatised and mustard-keen to get into the Western Cwm. Eric told them the bad news about the Atom Bomb Area but they were not prepared to retreat quite yet. Two days later they climbed en masse up the ridge on Pumori to have a look at the Khumbu Icefall. It appeared just as impassable from above but Eric Shipton agreed that a bigger party might be able to get through.

On the morning of 28 October all six climbers, plus Ang Tharkay and two Sherpas, set off from their tents. Within two hours they had reached the Atom Bomb Area and were warily crossing it. After some very tricky climbing, they arrived at the ice-cliff that had avalanched three weeks earlier. Eric split them into three parties to look for a way around it. The first two were unsuccessful but Tom Bourdillon fared better: he found a large spike that had detached itself from the slope. After two hours of hard work, he had chopped a series of steps along it that took him into the Western Cwm itself. Very nervously, the others followed.

Their moment of triumph was short-lived. Barring the way to any further progress was the biggest crevasse that any of them had ever seen; in places it looked almost 50 ft wide.

Tom Bourdillon and Michael Ward wanted to try to cross it but it was clear to Eric that they had neither the time nor the equipment to go any further. It would soon be November and the days were getting shorter and colder. They would have to wait until next year; in the spring there would be less loose snow and more daylight. With a bigger team and better equipment, they might succeed. As Eric Shipton later wrote in *The Times*:

*The dragon guarding the Western Cwm is now in restless mood; it is not unreasonable to expect that in the spring he may be found sleeping.*<sup>11</sup>

A few days later, they were back in Namche Bazaar, knocking back *chang* and *rakshi* and making fools of themselves learning the local dance steps. Their return had coincided with festival season in the Solu Khumbu and the Sherpas were determined to carouse the nights away. Eric Shipton, however, had other priorities.

There was still more than a month before they were due back in India for the return voyage and his two weeks of exploration with Ed Hillary had whetted his appetite for more. The prospect of exploring unmapped regions was as exciting as making an attempt on a particular peak, no matter how high or famous it was. Eric was fascinated by topographical puzzles, working out how one glacier fed into another and how mountain ranges fitted together. When he made a first ascent, he would comment on the other mountains he could see from the top, as well as the joy of conquest. He would have agreed with the nineteenth-century traveller, Isabella Bird: 'Everything suggests a beyond.'

Ed Hillary had run out of time, so he said his goodbyes and went directly to Kathmandu, with Earle Riddiford. Shipton split the remaining men into two parties. Tom Bourdillon, Bill Murray and most of the Sherpas headed for the Nangpa La, the high pass used as a trade route between Tibet and Nepal. Eric took Michael Ward and

Sen Tensing to the unexplored area around Gauri Sankar, a mountain once thought to be the highest in the world

For Michael Ward this type of exploratory mountaineering was something entirely new. He had made his name as a daring rock climber, braving difficult routes in Britain and the Alps but he succumbed to the romance and excitement of travelling through virgin territory, making maps and naming features. Ultimately, however, it was not this party's geographical discoveries that made the headlines in Britain but something very different and totally unexpected.

As they crossed a remote glacier in the Menlung Basin, Eric Shipton spotted some curious tracks. At first they were large and indistinct but further down the glacier, where the snow cover was thinner, their outline was more precise. They were footprints made by creatures with four middle toes and a large big toe that projected perpendicularly. The tracks were just over twelve inches long and in places there were marks where the creatures seemed to have leapt over small crevasses and dug their toes in on the other side. Sen Tensing had no doubt about their origin: they were Yeti tracks!

Michael Ward and Eric Shipton were not totally convinced: there had been many reports of this legendary beast but no one had provided any solid, scientific evidence. Sen Tensing was adamant and claimed to have once seen a Yeti close to the Thyangboche Monastery. According to local legend, there were two types: one that ate humans and another that preyed on yaks. Both stood about five feet six inches tall and had pointed heads, reddish fur and hairless faces. Female Yetis were said to be slower-moving, because of their large, pendulous breasts.

Eric had encountered mysterious footprints previously in the Himalayas but they had never been as well defined as these. He took a series of photographs, with Michael Ward's ice axe and boot acting as a reference for their size. When the images eventually reached Britain,

they caused a sensation in the press and prompted an exhibition at the British Museum.

There were some sceptics who insisted that it was a hoax. After all, wasn't Eric Shipton known to be a practical joker? His rather cryptic comment in *The Times* that it was 'a little sad, to note that so far the British Museum appears to have taken the matter more seriously than the Society for Psychological Research' added to their suspicions. However, throughout their lives both he and Michael Ward maintained that the photographs were genuine.<sup>12</sup> There was corroborative evidence: when Tom Bourdillon and Bill Murray followed a couple of days later, they too noticed the strange footprints:

*The tracks were about 18" apart and staggered, the pads 10"×8", probably walking on two legs ... The Sherpas are used to them apparently. A man was killed by one of them at Lunak last year and one or more were seen at Thyangboche recently. The Sherpas insist that they are not [from a] bear, though since the bear they know is the brown bear of bamboo country, they might not class something like a polar bear as such. But a polar bear in the Himalayas?<sup>13</sup>*

When the party reunited on 12 November, they spent much time discussing the mysterious footprints but it wasn't long before Eric Shipton made an uncomfortable realisation that was much more pressing than the threat of man-eating Yetis. The events of the next few days were as dramatic as any on the expedition but Eric Shipton did not include them in his dispatches for *The Times* or write about them for many years. The reason was simple: they were lost and had inadvertently crossed the border into Tibet.

For centuries Tibet had been considered one of the most inaccessible countries in the world. In the early 1900s a succession of European and American missionaries and travellers had tried, failed and occasionally been killed while attempting to reach Lhasa, its



fabled capital. The British Everest expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s had only been permitted because of considerable diplomatic pressure, backed by Britain's status in the East. After the Chinese invasion of October 1950, everyone assumed that Tibet would become even more hostile, to Westerners at least.

The Sherpas didn't quite see it like that. Their very name meant 'people (*pa*) of the East (*Shar*)' because they originally came from Tibet. Nepalese pilgrims and traders regularly went back and forth across the border without undue attention. A party of British climbers, however, was very different. Having recently been expelled from Communist China, Eric was in no mood for a confrontation with either the Tibetan authorities or their new Chinese masters.

They had two choices: turn around and retrace their steps or climb the steep cliffs above and head back along a different route to Namche Bazaar. Ang Tharkay was not keen on either. He told Eric that there was a much quicker and better alternative: press on through the Rongshar valley and cross a bridge back into Nepal before heading on to Kathmandu. He and the other Sherpas, he said, were familiar with this area from previous cross-border smuggling trips; if they travelled at night they would easily be able to get past the Tibetan fort just before the border without anyone noticing.

The fort? The idea of coming anywhere close to a military encampment filled Eric with dread. A decade earlier, when Tibet was independent, they might have been able to bribe their way out of trouble if caught. A newly installed Communist Chinese garrison was unlikely to be so easily corrupted. Ang Tharkay was adamant that Chinese troops had not yet reached the border areas. It would be no trouble, he insisted. The route was straightforward and they could even rest for a few hours at the nearby house of a friend. Eventually Eric gave in but when their camp was spotted by a group of Tibetan women collecting firewood, he began to regret his decision.

Fortunately, there were no further visitors. They waited until dark

before descending towards the village next to the fort. In the clear light of a full moon, they saw herds of wild deer far away in the distance but mercifully no one spotted them. The normally ferocious village dogs stayed miraculously quiet as they made their way along the path, past dark houses and their sleeping owners. They silently blessed their new rubber-soled boots, which made no sound.

After passing the village, Eric relaxed a little but insisted they should press on quickly and make good their escape. The Sherpas began to complain about their heavy loads so Eric relented and allowed them to sit down for a short rest and some food. He and Tom Bourdillon woke up two hours later and started to cook but the Sherpas refused to get up, so they too went back to sleep. When they woke for a second time, it was dawn. Eric Shipton hurried everyone out of camp.

The path took them through an immense gorge, with the river on one side and a smooth, almost vertical cliff face on the other. As Tom Bourdillon wrote in his diary, 'it was a most unreal place'. Gradually, the walls became lower and less intimidating but when Tom looked back he saw an extraordinary sight:

*One Tibetan armed with a sword appeared with much shouting. We went on for a while, Ang Tharkay shouting louder, till seven more appeared. Not so good.<sup>14</sup>*

The Tibetans carried ancient-looking muskets and huge swords. There were too many of them to ignore. The redoubtable Ang Tharkay, however, kept his cool. He told Eric Shipton and the British climbers to sit down and returned the soldiers' cries with a verbal barrage of his own. For twenty minutes the two sides engaged in a shouting match that seemed to go first one way, then the other. Eric Shipton calculated that he had 1200 rupees of expedition funds left but he doubted that the soldiers could be bought off. After what seemed like an eternity, Ang Tharkay came back with an apologetic

smile. The negotiations were over and he had lost. It was not a good moment.

Then Ang Tharkay grinned: it wasn't what they thought. For the last half an hour, Ang Tharkay had been haggling over their price, not pleading for their release. What was more, it would cost a mere seven rupees each for their freedom. Eric Shipton paid up, breathed a huge sigh of relief and moved on quickly before anyone changed their minds. One hour later they crossed a bridge marking the border with Nepal and after two, thankfully less dramatic, weeks they walked down the dusty road into Kathmandu, narrower of waist but infinitely richer in experience.

It had been a wonderful expedition. They had confounded their expectations and succeeded in finding a southern route to Everest. They had crossed many unknown passes and glaciers, stalked a pair of Yetis and to top it off, outwitted the Tibetan army. As they headed towards the luxurious confines of the British embassy, they thought about next spring, when they would return to complete the job and climb Everest.

But when Eric arrived at the compound and greeted the smiling Ambassador, he heard some utterly shocking news. He would not be returning to climb Everest in 1952, because someone else had asked first.