

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# A Slender Thread

Stephen Venables

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## About the Author

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Stephen Venables was born in 1954. He started climbing whilst reading English at New College Oxford. His first book, *Painted Mountains*, won the Boardman-Tasker Prize for mountain literature whilst *Himalaya Alpine Style*, won the Banff Mountain Literature Festival Grand Award. *Everest Kangshung Face* told the story of a remarkable new route up Everest's biggest wall in 1988, when he became the first Briton to reach the summit without supplementary oxygen. He earns his living as a writer and lecturer, living with his wife and two children in Bath.

PAINTED MOUNTAINS  
EVEREST: ALONE AT THE SUMMIT  
(*FIRST PUBLISHED AS EVEREST: KANGSHUNG FACE*)  
ISLAND AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD  
A SLENDER THREAD  
OLLIE  
VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS  
HIGHER THAN THE EAGLE SOARS

*With Chris Bonington*

MEETINGS WITH MOUNTAINS

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*For children*

M FOR MOUNTAINS

*for Rosie, Ollie and Edmond*

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# A Slender Thread

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## Escaping Disaster in the Himalaya

Stephen Venables



arrow books

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Graham Little *GL*

Dick Renshaw *DR*

Victor Saunders *VS*

Stephen Venables *SV*

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## Author's Note

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There were many threads to the Panch Chuli expedition and each of us could have written a completely different version of the same events. My account is deliberately subjective and if it seems to underplay the achievements and contributions of some of my fellow expedition members, that is not because I do not value them; I just had to keep the plot simple, focusing on my own personal experience.

Recalling the accident several years after the event has posed surprisingly few problems. Factual diary notes honed the detail of my own vivid memories of the expedition. Victor Saunders's own account, *No Place to Fall*, corroborated much of that detail, while Dick Renshaw and Stephen Sustad discussed some of the fine points over the telephone. Where I have described events that I did not actually witness, I have based my version on others' accounts in publications such as the *Himalayan Journal*. Daily emails from Harish Kapadia also helped, as did a long interview with Chris Bonington over an excellent breakfast at the Institute of Directors. The precise timings of helicopter movements came from a detailed log supplied by the Indian Air Force (along with a very reasonable bill which was forwarded to our insurers).

Tom Longstaff's letter to W. H. Murray and the latter's thoughts on the Khumbu Icefall are quoted from an article in the 1981 *Alpine Journal*.

I would like to thank all my expedition companions for allowing me frequent joggings of the memory, particularly Chris Bonington, who checked pertinent passages in the manuscript, and Harish Kapadia, who provided the very latest Indian place-name spellings, insisting that they would all have been correct in the first place, had it not been for the mistakes of the British Raj.

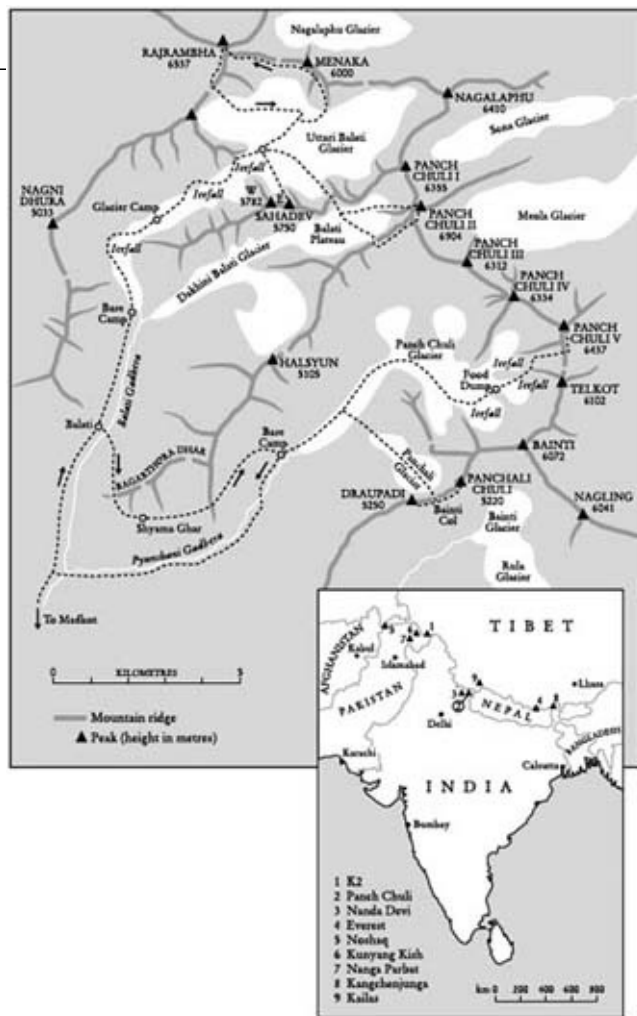
I am also very grateful to Chris Bonington, Harish Kapadia, Graham Little, Dick Renshaw and Victor Saunders for lending photographs – particularly their grittily professional coverage of the accident and rescue. Nearly all their pictures came from the Chris Bonington Photo Library, managed by the ever helpful and efficient Frances Daltrey.

Anthony and Charlotte Rowe provided a blissfully peaceful haven for me to write the book and usually sent me home with fresh vegetables or luxuriant bunches of peonies from their garden. My wife Ros gave me masses of confidence-boosting encouragement, as did my editor, Anthony Whittome, with whom it was a pleasure to work. I would also like to thank the designer, Roger Walker.

I would like finally to thank all the people without whose compassion, skill, good humour and determination I would never have been here to write the book at all: my fellow expedition members including the splendid support team, the people of Munsiry, the staff of Bareilly military hospital, Geeta Kapadia, Romesh Battacharjee, Sudhir Sahi and Motwan Kohli; above all, those two brave pilots, Squadron Leader P. Jaiswal and Flight-Lieutenant P. K. Sharma, who risked their lives to bring me down from Panch Chuli.

Stephen Venables

November 1999



Route of the 1992 Indian-British Panch Chuli Expedition

# Prologue

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IT WAS A damp arthritic sort of cold that seeped insidiously into weary bones. I stamped my feet and clapped sodden mittens, more out of boredom than for any hope of relief. I just wanted this long, long night to be over. Even the thunder sounded weary, rumbling far out over the plains, thousands of metres below, where the sultry land waited impatiently for the Monsoon.

Soon, in just a few days, we would be down there, on the hot plains. Harish was already back in Munsiairy, organizing our transport home. The village lights, twinkling yellow against the black hillside thirty miles away, seemed infinitely attractive but our immediate goal was a closer glow of torchlight just a hundred metres below, where Bonington was waiting in a little tent perched on the edge of the mountain. By now he would have the stove going, melting snow for the first of many mugs of hot sweet tea.

We had left him almost twenty-four hours earlier and during that time our only body fuel had been a bar of chocolate and a shared water bottle. But at the tent, as well as tea, there was still some solid food. We would be able to eat a meal and perhaps there would be time for a couple of hours' sleep before continuing the descent. It would be nice to sleep longer, but today was the day we had promised to return to Base Camp, so we would have to press on down the tortuous maze of icefalls up which we had woven our improbable trail three days earlier.

We had only reached this unexplored glacier basin in the final week of the expedition, almost as an afterthought. There had been no time for a leisurely reconnaissance, but we had managed to find a way through to the jagged rim of the basin and on from there to the previously untouched summit of Pano Chuli V. The bold spontaneous gesture had paid off and the reward was to return home with a deeply contented sense of wholeness – of a journey completed.

We had reached the 21,400-foot summit at three o'clock in the afternoon. Twelve hours had now passed, and soon it would be light again. By then we should be back at the tent, for we reckoned there were two more abseils to complete. Dick had gone first on this penultimate abseil and was out of sight, beneath an overhang, nearly fifty metres lower down. Sustad was on his way down to join him, a diminishing flicker of torchlight suspended in the black void. Victor was waiting beside me, tied in to the same steel peg that anchored the abseil ropes. Our torches were switched off to save the batteries and I could make out only a dark outline hunched, like me, in a shivering self-embrace, shuffling his legs to stimulate circulation and relieve the pressure on feet that had borne his weight continuously for twenty-four hours. I moaned softly to myself. Occasionally I let out a self-indulgent, outraged howl. This long wait while the others descended the ropes seemed almost unbearable. If only I could fast forward an hour – no, probably two hours by the time everything was sorted out – to the tent, the luxury of lying horizontal, the sweet wetness of that tea on my dry mouth, and the delicious warmth of the sleeping bag. Soon, very soon, all that would be mine, and this terrible shivering would be over. I just needed to be patient and to remind myself that a night's discomfort was a small price to pay for success.

Victor was silent and remote. Throughout the climb he had seemed quite sceptical about the whole project, but I hoped that perhaps now he would start to share some of my satisfaction. 'I'm glad that we made the effort,' I mumbled stiffly through frozen lips, 'that we actually climbed the mountain.'

He turned towards me. Even on this cloudy, starless night there was a faint gleam of residual light on the familiar gold-rimmed spectacles, hinting at the inscrutable black eyes behind. 'We're not down

yet.'

~~Shortly after this terse reply, there was a shout from far below as Sustad reached Dick and instructed Victor to follow. He set off down the ropes and I was left to shiver alone.~~

It is a slow, laborious process abseiling on complex mountain terrain in the dark and I had to wait about fifteen minutes. When my turn came it was a joy to be moving at last, but every step had to be slow and meticulous. First gather the two stiff wet ropes just below their frozen joining knot and feed them into the friction brake on my harness. Check, double check and then unclip my sling from the anchor, committing myself to the ropes. Then, as agreed with the others, remove the back-up anchor. On this long series of abseils we could only afford to leave one piece of equipment at each anchor. Once three people had tested the main anchor, the back-ups could be safely removed.

Alone in a pool of torchlight, isolated as an astronaut in space, focused on the inert, abstract details of metal and granite, I fiddled two alloy wedges out of the rock, leaving just one steel peg hammered tight in the lip of a contorted fissure. I eased myself down, bringing my weight on to the double ropes, stretching tight the red nylon loop that connected them to the eye of the peg.

Every action was instinctive and familiar, repeated countless times during twenty years of mountaineering, yet I still felt nervous every time I had to abseil. In the normal process of climbing uphill the ropes are there just as a safeguard, handled by a trusted companion while you climb the mountain with your hands and feet; descending by abseil you dangle on a line, committing your life totally to the ropes. You are utterly dependent on their point of attachment. Once more I checked the whole system, and paused to stare at the single steel eye protruding from the rock, before starting to lower myself backwards down the mountain. The ropes ran at a slight diagonal over the rim of a ledge and I told myself to crouch low, trying to avoid any outward pull on the anchor. I had to shuffle awkwardly in the dark, using hands and knees to get over the edge, but then I could move more easily leaning out over the void, legs braced across a chimney as I walked myself backwards down the precipice.

The others were waiting nearly a full ropelength below – probably forty-five metres. One hundred and fifty feet. Craning down over my shoulder I could see the dim reflection of torchlight on snow spilling from beneath the overhang where they were hidden. In the dark, with all perspective erased, it looked such a long way down. Between me and the island of light dim patterns of black on grey hinted at the lumpen rocky crags, seamed by smears of snow, all tilted at seventy degrees. The cliff plunged down past the others into a black void, with the glacier basin invisible another thousand feet lower down.

I directed my headtorch beam back to my immediate surroundings, focusing on my legs, braced horizontally across the rock chimney; concentrated on the steady, controlled backwards-upside-down walk; ignored the space beneath my hanging body. At first I hardly noticed the sudden acceleration. The shift from measured walk to airborne flight. The head and shoulders falling backwards, leaving legs to flail behind. Even when the terrible, violent noise started, it seemed to take me a while to understand that this was the sound of my own body bouncing off rocks. Time, in a horrible, cliché joke, really did stand still – or at least distort beyond all normal comprehension – so that it was only in a retrospective replay of the sequence that I heard the trivial, jocular ping of a steel peg ripping from the rock above me, felt the sudden, awful, backwards lurch into space, and realized that I was falling to my death.

# Chapter One

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THERE WAS SOMETHING inevitable about the Panch Chuli expedition. After years of repeated visits to the world's greatest range of mountains, Himalayan climbing had almost become a bad habit for me. Even if I never foresaw the brutal plunge through the dark night, I think that there was a sense of uneasiness, even doom, when I set off for India. And yet I needed – even wanted – to go to Panch Chuli. But why? What was the need? How did I ever get into that position?

There is no simple answer to these things. If you could begin to explain in one sentence why you climb mountains, the whole activity would be pointless. So much of the reward is retrospective and yet the memories are usually of precise moments – moments when one lived utterly, totally in the present. Picking at random through a treasure-store of those moments, I could start with a summer morning, sitting alone, aged twelve, on the Welsh summit of Rhinog Fach. My grandparents were waiting below, beside the cobalt pool of Llyn Hwel. Between us lay the steep slope of crags and boulders which I had just climbed, intoxicated by the hot peaty smell of heather, the moist ferns, the dazzle of quartz crystals on warm, rough tactile rock and the sheer physical, gymnastic exhilaration of balancing through this tilted landscape. Now I sat on the flat summit, savouring the summer heat tempered by the faintest, nostril-tweaking cool of the clear air. There was a feeling of total belonging, of oneness with the mountain, with the distant blue curve of Cardigan Bay and the serene outlines of the Snowdonia summits beyond. And with the kestrel that hung in the sky, just a few yards in front of me, apparently oblivious of my presence. The kestrel was unexpected yet seemed to make the moment perfect and complete.

It was the same fourteen years later, stopping to rest beside the Hispar Glacier in northern Pakistan, returning from an unsuccessful but deeply satisfying attempt to climb one of the world's highest mountains, Kunyang Kish. For weeks we had met no other human beings. Now for the first time we could see the flat roofs and terraced fields of Hispar village, the ripe barley haloed in the evening light. Ahead of the others, I sat down for a moment to take it all in – the slanting sunlight, the extraordinary crenellated summits that still seemed sublime after all our weeks of toil, the wasteland of rubble-strewn glacier beside which some goats rooted peacefully in a green sanctuary of willow and rose bushes. There was a faint roar from the river at the distant glacier snout and the occasional clatter of rocks collapsing from ice pinnacles; then, emerging from the background noise, something I had not heard for weeks – the sound of music. It took a moment to find its source in the still form of a shepherd from the village, sitting on a rock playing his flute. The clear treble melody was serene but with an underlying elegiac sadness that fitted my mood perfectly.

I think that there was something of that same undertone – and also a sense of uncomprehending awe – for me as a child on a winter night in Switzerland, on holiday in the Engadine valley, taking the outside staircase to join one of my brothers in the downstairs flat where we slept. The Inn river was frozen silent, hidden in a deep gorge beside the chalet and lost in the wide sweep of the valley. Thirty miles away the river bent round a sharp corner on its journey to Innsbruck, but to a child's eyes the valley seemed to stop dead, walled in by an immense mountain, the bottom part forested black, the upper slopes gleaming white. There was something comforting about its unchanging, familiar presence, the uncompromising whiteness of snow, the infinity of stars above and the palpable silence which seemed to concentrate past, present and future in that one moment.

Snow, with its gleaming, glittering, reflective powers of transformation – and its destructive

potential – has always fascinated and delighted me. The ‘great freeze’ of 1963 was hell if you were poor and lived in an unheated urban squat. If you were a lucky middle-class child watching Surrey muddy winter countryside transformed into a glittering wonderland, it was a glorious treat, with frequent sledging expeditions to the normally mundane Box Hill. As the slope got icier, a local elder of the Alpine Club, Suzi Jeans, admitted to going out after dark to practise her ice-axe technique. A distinguished international concert organist and widow of the physicist, Sir James Jeans, she was always, deferentially, ‘Lady Jeans’ to us. One afternoon we accompanied her on a ski trek through tangled woods of yew and beech around Box Hill, which, as far as we were concerned, could have been the arctic forests of the Yukon. Our guide obviously made a deep impression, for one of our favourite family toys, a much-abused woolly dog on wheels, became known – and still is known to this day – as Lady Jeans.

It was at the end of that year that we visited the Alps on the first of several annual ski holidays. The second year my brother and I were allowed up the big cable car to Piz Corvatsch and I saw my first real, glaciated mountains in the Bernina massif. On a summer visit when I was thirteen I was treated to a day’s rock-climbing course with a Pontresina guide. The other, adult, novices all seemed rather clumsy, and I felt a little disappointed, after completing a single pitch up a hundred-foot cliff, wearing a rope for the first time in my life, to be told that that was the end of the day’s course. I had assumed that we would be continuing up bigger, steeper cliffs to the distant summit.

My next official taste of rock-climbing was in 1970, when I was sixteen, staying with Parisian friends near Fontainebleau. First we spent a week at their Paris apartment. I loved the city and was thrilled by the galleries – by the rich flamboyance of Poussin, David and Delacroix and the glorious Impressionist feast of the Jeu de Paume – but I was also glad after a week to escape from the cultural glut of the stifling city to the cool forest and discover its magical monolithic sandstone boulders that seemed to be sculpted perfectly for the delight of Parisian climbers. At the end of our stay my brother Mark and I joined the rest of our family in the Auvergne, while our friends the Potiers headed south for the Alps. I remember watching Jean-Pierre packing ice axes, crampons, headtorches and all the other toys redolent of alpine adventure, and wishing that I was going too.

There was nothing obsessive about my yearning, just a mental note that this was something I would like to do. At school most of my spare time was taken up with music and art, which were a wonderful escape from the awfulness of adolescent communal life. I had absolutely no talent for ball games and although I represented the school once or twice in cross-country running, I usually came in last. In the mountains it was different. I was quite a bold, competent skier and, from my tiny experience so far, seemed to have some talent for rock-climbing. Moving through steep terrain felt natural and it was a much needed source of physical expression. At home I had to make do with trees, but seaside holidays, from the age of seven – and, later, visits to the hills of Wales and Scotland – whetted an appetite for exploring the bare geological bones of the landscape. I loved to puzzle out moves, testing balance and friction, occasionally working myself into a blind sweat of fear as I made an irreversible move on some boulder, fifteen feet above a nasty landing, struggling until I could revel in the catharsis of escape as I committed trembling fingers to the finishing holds.

Those little victories over fear were all part of the game. They were also part of a bigger cultural heritage – of identifying childishly with the heroes of exploration. I read Edward Wilson’s Antarctic diaries and Ernest Shackleton’s *South*. When I was eight or nine, I followed the boy hero of James Ramsay Ullman’s *Banner in the Sky* on his fictional first ascent of the Matterhorn. On a more realistic note, I consumed Francis Younghusband’s *Epic of Everest*, lapped up the Gallic hyperbole of Gaston Rebuffat’s *Snow and Rock*, pored lovingly over Pierre Tairraz’s accompanying alpine photos, and

followed Eric Shipton's laconic odyssey through the unexplored mountains of Africa, India, Tibet and Patagonia. But the book that made the biggest impression was Kurt Diemberger's translated autobiography *Summits and Secrets*, which appeared in England in 1971, when I was seventeen. It was a dangerous, seductive blend of Germanic fanaticism and Mediterranean *joie de vivre*, bursting with life-affirming enthusiasm and the romance of adventure.

A few months later I went up to Oxford and joined the University Mountaineering Club, which seemed to consist mainly of dour, earthbound scientists from the north of England. I was of course equally gauche, probably more so, and I did after a while discover that beneath the brittle, chip-butted eating crust of my fellow club members, there lurked aspirations every bit as romantic as mine – not to mention some formidable intellects. I also learned that many of them were much stronger and more dedicated climbers than I.

Some of them became good friends and twenty-five years later they remain better climbers than I. Others died young. In my third summer, four days before starting the marathon of final exams, I decided to clear my mind with a weekend in the Lake District, persuading myself that it would pay dividends in my Wordsworth essay. I climbed that weekend with a second-year man from Christ Church called Paul Beney. He was a brilliant climber but I managed almost to rise to his level, moving with a new, fluid confidence and enjoying the best weekend's rock-climbing of my life. On the Saturday there were six of us who raced over Throstle Garth and the Great Moss, to climb on the magnificent architectural ramparts of Esk Buttress. Only two of us are still alive. Paul fell to his death a few weeks later, when an abseil anchor failed on the Aiguille de Peigne. John Weatherseed died in a separate accident, on the same day, a few miles away on Mont Blanc. Steve Parr disappeared about ten years later, exploring alone in the mountains of Nepal. Andy Brazier, always a very cautious climber, drifted gradually away from the mountains and took up marathon running; out training one day, aged thirty-three, he collapsed and died from a heart attack.

I was in Chamonix, resting in the valley after a climb, on the afternoon Paul and John died. We heard about Paul within an hour or two of the accident and I remember painfully my stunned, dazed and inadequate attempts to say something – to rise above the mundane – as I went through the motions of cooking our evening meal, hunched miserably in the polythene shelter that served as a kitchen on this squalid campsite. We did not hear about John's death until a week later. He and another Oxford climber had fallen down the Brenva Face of Mont Blanc with Dave Luscombe, who had been my partner on my first alpine season two years earlier.

Of course I was tempted to pack it all in and go home. Perhaps it was a deep-seated protestant ethic that made me stay the course – a feeling that I should see the thing through. I had always known that people might die. I myself had come close to dying the previous year, in a stupid accident in the Avoch Gorge. But I had decided then that the rewards outweighed the risks, and that I would try in future to be more careful. Now, with my face rubbed so brutally in those risks, I had to make the decision again, telling myself that it was worth reviving the dreams that had brought me here in the first place.

I had grand plans for that summer of 1975, but without a similarly motivated climbing partner the reality fell short of the dream. Nevertheless I did some good climbs and right at the end of the season I got to know Lindsay Griffin, an ex-Oxford physicist who had become a virtual full-time mountaineer. At last I had found someone more experienced, who seemed to share my aspirations and who was prepared to take me under his genial wing.

The following year I did my first alpine winter climbing with Lindsay. Later, during the hot summer of 1976, working as a stage hand at Glyndebourne Festival Opera and incarcerated for hours every day under artificial light, I was thrilled to get a letter from the Griffin. I think we were setting

up for the second act of *Figaro*. I loitered behind the Contessa's boudoir, pretending to be busy fixing a stage brace while I read and re-read the magic words, 'somewhere in the Himalaya . . . perhaps the Hindu Kush . . . an expedition next summer.' So in 1977 I didn't go back to Glyndebourne and the vague possibility of a career in opera. Instead I caught a bus to Afghanistan.

While Griffin and I travelled overland, the other three expedition members flew out to meet us in Kabul. From there we drove up the Russian-built highway to the wild northern province of Badkhash and on to the Wakhan Corridor, the buffer zone created a hundred years earlier by Lord Curzon to separate the empires of Britain, Russia and China. We climbed high into the luminous autumn blue sky of Central Asia. For the first time in my life I climbed completely new routes, where no human had ever been before. The finest was on a peak called Kohe Sahkt which gave countless precious 'moments'. Perhaps the most contented was the first bivouac, ensconced comfortably with Griffin and Roger Everett in a spacious chimney, warm in my sleeping bag, cooking the evening meal on our little gas stove, pleasantly tired from the day's exertion, delighted by the beautiful rock pitch I had just led and full of happy anticipation of more to come in the morning. At that particular moment, looking out toward Chitral through the open window of our chimney, I knew there was nowhere else in the world I wanted to be.

Kohe Sahkt's summit was four thousand feet higher than I had ever been before. Out of curiosity we then tried a much higher peak – a huge mountain called Noshaq, whose main summit is 7,492 metres above sea level. Our attempt petered out at 6,800 metres (about 22,400 feet), crushed by the stultifying effects of altitude. Equipment was part of the problem – we just didn't manage to keep warm or melt enough snow for fluid – but that was just part of a bigger failure of strategy. We didn't know how to pace ourselves and look after ourselves. We hadn't developed the psychological tricks for overcoming weakness and lethargy and I was thoroughly depressed by my failure to motivate myself.

The wonderful thing about high altitude climbing is that you get better at it. Three years later, in 1980, I reached 7,000 metres again, this time on a peak in Pakistan called Kunyang Kish. It is a giant of a mountain – the 22nd highest in the world – with a summit 7,852 metres above sea level – almost 26,000 feet. For five weeks I toiled with Phil Bartlett and Dave Wilkinson to try and complete a new route to the summit. Amongst the 'moments' on Kunyang Kish there were instances of sheer blood-awfulness. The most painful was waking up in the middle of the night as a blizzard flung snow through the entrance of what was intended to be a temporary overnight shelter. It was a nightmare struggling out of sleeping bags, forcing feet into double boots and putting on windproofs. Ice-cold spindrift blasted our faces as we dug for two hours with our ice axes, enlarging the cave interior, then narrowing the doorway to keep out the maelstrom. For six days we were marooned in that cave at 7,000 metres, unable to go up or down, eking out food supplies until there was nothing left for our summit attempt and we had to descend.

A week later we climbed back up for a second attempt, only to be hit by another storm. Once each night we had to clear the snow-choked entrance of the cave to ensure ventilation. When my turn came I was gripped by claustrophobic terror. I had to force myself to burrow headfirst into the icy powder, fighting my way through until I could gasp at the thin air outside, where the wind was still lashing the mountain and only one or two stars appeared fitfully between scudding clouds.

Those instances of animal hardship and fear, remembered in isolation, seem utterly horrible. Yet, as part of a greater struggle – of realizing the dream of a soaring line up a magnificent mountain, living and moving in the grandest vertical landscape imaginable – they were acceptable, even exhilarating. Despite our failure to reach the summit, the prolonged attempt on Kunyang Kish – where three of



gave everything we had, stretching ourselves to the mental and physical limit – was intense rewarding. On Noshag the failure had been a passive, dispirited thing; here it was a glorious failure where I felt in control and knew that, with a bit more luck, nothing would have stopped me reaching the summit. I could play this high altitude game and I wanted to do it again.

And so the habit started. Throughout the eighties I kept returning to the Himalaya, as well as seeking other adventures in Africa, Peru, Bolivia and the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia. At first I supported the habit with school-teaching. Then I left the school where I was working in York hoping to become a full-time professional mountaineer, but actually becoming a carpenter, with meagre extra earnings from the occasional lecture or article. However, in 1985 I managed at last to get an advance for my first book *Painted Mountains*, basing it in part on a particularly memorable expedition earlier that year to the Indo-Pakistani war zone on the Siachen Glacier in northern Kashmir.

If I had not accidentally dropped a rucksack full of essential bivouac equipment from a precarious ridge at 7,000 metres, Victor Saunders and I would probably have reached the summit of Rimo I – one of the highest unclimbed peaks in the world. Instead we retreated with our tails between our legs, for me to lick my wounds while Victor treated everyone else at Base Camp to spirited re-enactments of my deranged, howling anguish in the moments immediately after the fall. However, on the climb itself, during our days of pre-lapsarian bliss, edging ever higher along the knife-edge in the sky, I had been the perfect companion – skilful, intelligent and totally committed. It had been one of the best climbs of my life, with the background rumble of Indian and Pakistani artillery adding an exotic touch.

Because we were visiting a sensitive security area we had to be part of a joint Indo-British team under the leadership of a Bombay cloth dealer called Harish Kapadia. Without Harish we would never have got to the mountain and in any case the journey would never have been such fun. He approached everything with reckless, head-on enthusiasm – the frantic packing in Bombay, the long journey north accompanied by crates of his beloved Alfonso mangoes, the endless wrangles with officialdom, the interlude at Srinagar with Shikara rides on the Dal Lake and visits to the Mogul gardens, marathon feasts in Leh while he sparred again with officials, the drive over the highest road pass in the world across to the Nubra valley and finally our Terong valley, where we split into groups to roam around an entire unexplored glacier basin and make many first ascents to compensate for my fiasco on Rimo I.

Rather like the great English explorers, Bill Tilman and Eric Shipton, Harish loved to unravel geographical puzzles – to follow a valley, or cross a pass to see round the next corner. Even if at the end of the twentieth century the field had been narrowed to crossing the t's, and dotting the i's, there was still the same joy of discovery. With Harish there was also a very Indian identification with the religions, cultures and myths of his beloved Himalaya and, thank goodness, a touch of sybaritic indulgence that would probably have appalled Shipton and Tilman. You never went hungry on a Kapadia expedition.

I enjoyed the 'Indo-British Siachen Expedition' so much that I determined to plan another joint venture. Harish proved a tireless and rather bullying correspondent and the airmails zipped relentlessly back and forth between Bombay and Islington, where I was now lodging in Victor's house. We decided on a 1988 joint expedition to a massif called Panch Chuli – the five Chulis – in Kumaon close to India's border with western Nepal. I had always wanted to visit this part of the Himalaya attracted by the promise of deep forest gorges and exquisite alpine meadows, immortalized in the writings of Tom Longstaff, Frank Smythe, Eric Shipton and Raymond Greene. Unlike the famous summits of Kamet, Nanda Devi, Dunagiri or Changabang, the Panch Chuli massif, rising further east

above the great chasm of the Goriganga river, had hardly been touched. Harish was particularly keen to lay to rest an Indian expedition's claim to have climbed three of the main peaks in just over a day in 1964. The claim was transparently false, several summits were still unclimbed and there was good work to be done.

Our plans for 1988 fizzled out. On the British side we dithered. Then I was invited to join an American expedition to the Kangshung Face of Everest. A new route on the biggest face of the world's highest mountain was too good a chance to turn down, and I sent an apologetic letter to Harish. On the way to Everest, I stayed with him and his wife Geeta in Bombay and was pleased to see that my fickleness had not damaged our friendship. Four months later, two stone lighter and hobbling on crutches, with three-and-a-half frostbitten toes rotting in the Monsoon heat, I returned to Bombay, on the way home from the most powerful experience of my life. We had succeeded on our spectacular new route and I had reached the summit of Everest without supplementary oxygen, surviving a bivouac in the open at 28,000 feet on the way down. Geeta nursed me for a day then packed me off on the plane back to England with a celebratory case of mangoes, first sending a telegram to Harish, who was somewhere in the Himalaya. A congratulatory telegram came winging back and soon we were discussing more future ventures. We settled on another unclimbed peak in northern Kashmir for 1990 but then again I had to drop out, for by now my life had changed completely.

When my girlfriend Rosie saw me off at Heathrow on my departure for Everest in 1988, our relationship was quite stormy. I was for once in my life focused very single-mindedly on my ambitions and had at last managed to make a living out of writing and lecturing, almost taking pride in my selfish determination not to let anyone get in the way. The previous summer and autumn I had been away for four months in Pakistan and Tibet; now, after a brief interlude, I was off again for another four months. Rosie's feelings for me were understandably ambivalent, especially as she believed, as she told me afterwards, that I 'was going to snuff it' on Everest.

I managed not to snuff it and, on the basis of my fifteen minutes' fame, began to earn some big lecture fees, achieving some kind of security. I bought a car for the first time in fourteen years and made plans to get a mortgage on a house. To some extent Everest calmed the demon of ambition and for a while I was in no hurry to push myself hard on a mountain. Rosie felt that I had become a nicer person, and suspected that high altitude brain damage might have something to do with it.

When I next set off on an expedition, this time to South Georgia at the end of 1989, the departure felt harder, as we were now living together in a small terrace house on the edge of Bath. Returning in the spring of 1990 I was glad that I had over a year to go before the next expedition – to Kashmir with Harish. Then, that autumn, we discovered that Rosie was pregnant. The baby was due in June 1991, the exact time of the expedition – and it would be impossible for me to join Harish. Once again the expedition was cancelled. Meanwhile, however, the old Panch Chuli project had been revived for 1992, this time with a completely new leader.

I was in the bar at Plas y Brenin, the national mountaineering centre, when the idea was first mentioned by Britain's undisputed doyen of the mountain world, Chris Bonington. Twenty years older than me, he had done his first rock climbs in Wales before I was born. I was only eight when he shot to fame with the first British ascent of the Eiger North Face in 1962. Subsequent broadcasting spectacles such as the Old Man of Hoy consolidated his unrivalled position in the national consciousness, but, growing up without a television and rarely looking at newspapers, I remained completely ignorant of his existence. It was only in 1971, when I read a library copy of his recently published *Annapurna South Face*, that I finally became aware of Britain's most famous mountaineer. The Annapurna climb the previous year had been a breakthrough in Himalayan mountaineering.

tackling the kind of giant steep wall that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. For Bonington, as expedition leader, it brought renewed fame and glory which was further enhanced in 1975 with success on the South-West Face of Everest.

Public acclaim did not always equate to popularity with his peers. For a long time it was commonplace in the climbing world to deride Bonington as a ruthless publicity-seeker, whose perceived commercialism transgressed the amateur ethos of mountaineering. That sneering was typically British jealousy of success, fuelled by ignorant prejudice. Bonington's commercial clout had its precedents, most notably in the careers of Edward Whymper, the Victorian lithographer who so assiduously publicized his first ascent of the Matterhorn, and Frank Smythe, a Himalayan climber whose books and lectures had a huge following in the 1930s. While many of his contemporaries in the sixties and seventies scowled and mumbled into their beards, Bonington engaged the public with unembarrassed enthusiasm, committed as he was to making a living from his chosen pastime. There was a myth that, actually, he was not a particularly good climber, but you only had to look at his record to see how often he was at the sharp end of the rope, out in front, leading some of the hardest climbs of his day. Whilst he was the first to admit that some of his contemporaries, such as Joe Brown or Martin Boysen, had the technical edge on steep rock, as a forceful all-rounder he had few equals. Most remarkable was his ability to sustain that enthusiasm over the decades, so that when I first met him in the mid-eighties he was still tackling some of the most prestigious and elusive summits in the Himalaya.

The occasional meetings became more frequent after 1990 when Bonington became President of the British Mountaineering Council and asked me to be one of his vice presidents. At first there seemed to be a certain wariness. Rosie said that we were like a couple of male dogs sniffing each other's bottoms. Although I could not remotely match his experience, dedication and huge popular following and posed no threat to his position, there was nevertheless a hint of caution – the grand old man of British mountaineering anxious, perhaps, not to have younger men snapping at his heels. On my side, habitual reserve – and probably envy of his sustained single-mindedness – made me quite prickly.

Be that as it may, I warmed to Bonington's uncomplicated friendliness. I was also grateful for his frequent generous words of encouragement, dating back to my first book four years earlier. And I felt inevitably flattered in 1991, when he suddenly announced in the Plas y Brenin bar, 'I'm hoping to do a trip with Harish next year. He's been asking me to lead a joint expedition for ages and he's suggested some peaks called Panch Chuli. It would be really good if you could join the team.'

So, instead of leading my own expedition to Panch Chuli, I found myself joining an expedition exactly the same objective, led by Chris Bonington. I tried not to feel bitter and twisted, telling myself that a Bonington expedition was an essential in the career of any serious mountaineer and that it would probably be a great experience. After all, twenty years earlier it would have been the most thrilling and unimaginable privilege. I accepted the invitation gratefully, then Panch Chuli was filed away under 'future plans' as I got on with other more important things, such as attending the birth of my first son, Oliver.

It was a gruesome ordeal which made Everest without oxygen seem a doddle. Rosie suffered terribly and Ollie was very weak for the first few days. But then her pain healed and the strange new person in our lives began to smile and laugh and fill us with delight. Having cancelled that summer trip with Harish, I had planned a consolation climb in Nepal, in the autumn; but when the time came to leave, four months after Ollie's birth, I was surprised at how hard a wrench it proved. Despite the idyllic trek through Nepal's foothills and the intense absorption of a new route up the spectacular peak of Kusum Kanguru, eighteen miles south of Everest, I felt frequent twinges of homesickness.

The expedition finished in late November. As we were walking back down through the jungle of the Kusum Khola, all yellow, orange and crimson with an autumnal hint of melancholy in the pale, luminous sky, one of my companions, Dick Renshaw, who was also on the forthcoming Panch Chuli expedition, commented, 'We're going to have to come back again in just six months. Are you going to feel like it?'

I wasn't sure, but I had an uneasy feeling that when spring came, I might not want to drag myself back to the Himalaya, even for the glorious verdant beauty of Kumaun and its glittering Panch Chuli summits.

By chance, a few days after returning home, Chris Bonington was lecturing in Bath and stayed the night at our house, rocking the foundations with his notorious, apocalyptic snoring. The snore lived up to the legend and I made a note to pitch my tent at a safe distance on Panch Chuli. We talked briefly about the expedition, Chris quizzing me on whether I was really committed. I gave a hesitant 'yes' with the proviso that I could only go if it were completely funded. After Christmas we had a full expedition meeting at the Badger Hill, on the edge of the Lake District, where Chris has lived with Wendy and his two sons for over twenty years. There would be six of us from Britain on the expedition – Chris, me, Victor Saunders, Dick Renshaw, Stephen Sustad and Graham Little.

I had never met Graham before but had read about some of his expeditions, which usually involve travelling prodigious distances on foot, often in very remote country, carrying very heavy loads. The most recent had been to the snowy volcanoes of the Atacama Desert in northern Chile. Nearer to home he had been pioneering new rock climbs on some of the remoter Hebridean islands. As a marketing executive with the Ordnance Survey, he was probably the closest any of us came to a normal bourgeois, middle-class existence. Which wasn't very close.

Graham is tall, powerful, very fit and seemed on a first meeting to have a straightforward manner, completely at odds with, say, Victor Saunders, who is mercurial, quixotic, inscrutable and can be endlessly infuriating to those of us who like to know where we stand. His moods swing from secretive silence to manic bonhomie; conversation is precise and witty one minute, perversely elliptical the next. Once, setting off up the motorway from London, Rosie made the mistake of letting him explain why the sky is blue; by the time we reached the Lake District, six hours later, he was still talking and she was none the wiser. In the mountains he could be obsessively competitive, indulging in niggling games of one-upmanship; but, as I discovered on Rimo I, during our first Kapadia expedition in 1981, Victor could also be a kind, intelligent, generous companion. He coped patiently with all my foibles and later, as my landlord in Islington, he and his wife Maggie proved heroically tolerant of my frequent bursts of temper.

As a mountaineer, Victor had few equals in Britain and, even if he did once admit to taking Machiavelli for essential expedition reading, his great virtue was that he was never boring. He liked to share his eclectic enthusiasms, whether it was atmospheric physics, the novels of Thomas Pynchon or the churches of Nicholas Hawksmoor. His own architectural career, working for a big London council, was coming to an end in 1992, as he took the bold step of abandoning his monthly salary to become a freelance mountain guide.

Stephen Sustad, like both Renshaw and I, had spent quite a chunk of his life working as a carpenter but had now graduated to sophisticated furniture-making. I had met him briefly in Tibet in 1981, sharing the same squalid Chinese concrete hotel in a drab border post called Nyalam. I had just failed on the world's thirteenth highest mountain, Shishapangma, and he had failed on the North-East Ridge of Everest, beaten back by the same icy storm that had swept through the Himalaya that October. Long before that I had read about his formidable exploits at extreme altitude with the British guru

Himalayan climbing, Doug Scott. Of all these exploits, the most remarkable was an attempted traverse of the world's fifth highest mountain, Makalu.

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In 1984 Scott, Sustad and the French film-maker, Jean Affanassieff, spent five days forging the way up the gigantic South-East Ridge. On the twisting upper section they took a short cut, leaving the ridge and traversing down into the world's highest hanging valley, where they had to plough through knee-deep powder to get on to the final headwall of Makalu. Just two or three hundred feet short of the summit, they stumbled on the frozen body of a Czech climber, Karel Schubert, still sitting upright where he had fallen asleep eight years earlier, never to wake up. The sight of that dead body, compounding worries about the weather, seemed to panic Affanassieff, who suddenly refused to complete the final section to the summit and insisted on retreating the way they had come up. So instead of traversing the summit and descending the easier North-West Ridge, Scott and Sustad were forced to retreat into the hanging valley, then climb a thousand feet back up on to the South-East Ridge, which took another two days to descend.

Several times, wading back out of the hanging valley, starved of oxygen, 26,000 feet above sea level, with all the food finished and no gas left to melt snow for water, Sustad wondered if they were going to collapse and die, but somehow he managed to do his share of the superhuman trailblazing and return safely. Reading the accounts of that epic struggle I assumed that, like Doug, Sustad must be a thirteen-stone hulk, but when I met him three years later he turned out to be a skinny specimen, proving yet again that these things are mainly in the mind.

Sustad grew up in Seattle, where his father was a schoolteacher. In the mid-eighties he settled in Britain, where he has lived ever since. At the time of the Panch Chuli expedition in 1992 he had just split up with his wife Rose and was living in Oswestry, where he rented a workshop. With his long hair and John Lennon spectacles, he looked like an understudy for Doug Scott's 1970s persona. He loved English beer and spent much of his spare time in Oswestry's Boar's Head, or Whore's Bed as he called it. Amiable and laconic, he gave no hint of the long hours he often put in at the workshop, nor of the kind of determination that had got him through so many Himalayan climbs.

Of all the team, Renshaw had the most experience of putting up with me. Thoughtful and taciturn, he is an ideal expedition companion and we had already been on four trips together, most recently on Kusum Kanguru, which had revived an old partnership after eight years of going our own ways. As a young man Dick had been totally, obsessively committed to mountaineering, pushing himself to extremes with his fellow Manchester student, Joe Tasker. In 1975, the year Chris Bonington led an all-star team to success on the South-West Face of Everest, Renshaw and Tasker drove an old van out to India to make what was then considered a presumptuously bold two-man ascent of the South-West Ridge of Dunagiri, not far from the Panch Chuli range.

After Dunagiri, Tasker and Renshaw went their own ways, but in 1980 they joined forces again with Peter Boardman, to attempt K2. Two years later the three of them attempted the unclimbed North-East Ridge of Everest with Chris Bonington. It was here, climbing one of the hardest pitches ever done at that altitude, above 8,000 metres, that Renshaw suddenly felt one side of his body turn numb. He recovered, but down at Base Camp a mild stroke was diagnosed, forcing him to leave the expedition. A few days after he got home, the news came through that Boardman and Tasker had disappeared on their final attempt and were dead.

Rethinking his life after the disaster, Renshaw decided, on the doctors' advice, not to attempt the world's highest mountains again. In future he would stick to lower peaks; he would also devote more time to other interests, particularly his developing passion for sculpture. On the way home from Everest he had brought some specimen hardwood blocks in Hong Kong. A year later, in 1983, when

was with him on Kishtwar-Shivling, he spent hours at Base Camp whittling away with his gouges and chisels. Over the next few years his carvings became steadily more sophisticated. By the time of the Panch Chuli expedition he had sold several pieces and had just cast his first bronze. He was also starting to work in stone and was getting his first gallery commissions.

This was the team – a sculptor, an architect-turned-mountain-guide, a cabinet maker, a mail salesman, and a jobbing mountain writer – that assembled in January 1992 at the Bonington office, hammer out an expedition prospectus and delegate jobs. We all had high hopes of Chris's money-raising clout and he promised to work his magic with *The Times* and Kodak. Then he told us to hurry up and finish all our business so that we could go out to play at Castle Crag in Thirlmere. We parted at dusk after an exhilarating climb. Later that winter news came from Harish that Godrej, India's third largest manufacturing company, had agreed to cover the entire expedition costs in India. Air India gave us a generous extra baggage allowance and the ever-supportive Mount Everest Foundation and Sports Council produced grants. With just £2,000 left to find, I approached a Bath company, Futura Publishing, who agreed to sponsor us in return for a feature in their new magazine *Photo Plus*.

Meeting the publisher and editor over a pub lunch, relishing the sweet thrill of a deal successfully clinched, I began at last to feel enthusiastic about the expedition. The money was raised, the flights were booked and the whole bandobast had been set in motion; I had made the decision to go and could now immerse myself in the practical details. But there was still a niggling ambivalence. I was unhappy about the size of our group – five Indians and six British climbers – and the vague multiplicity of objectives. There were two different valleys leading into the Panch Chuli massif, with several objectives in each. Harish was determined that we should make the highest pyramid, Panch Chuli II, our prime objective, even though it had been climbed before. I was more tempted by other unclimbed summits, but there was no specific plan to attempt them. And there was the Victor factor – Saunders's penchant for manipulative gamesmanship. At least, that was the way I saw it, thinking back nostalgically to the straightforward, open, co-operative spirit of my American companions on Everest.

In that slightly paranoid, ambivalent mood, I began to dread the moment of departure. It had been a mild winter and spring came early in 1992. By early April the tulips were already unfurling in the tin garden which had become my obsession. One day Rosie and I strapped Ollie in the back of the car and drove down to Scott's nurseries in Dorset to indulge in some new shrubs, stopping on the way to visit Margery Fish's famous garden at East Lambrook. Another week, like hundreds of thousands before us, we went over to Kent to gawp at the genius of Great Dixter and Sissinghurst. On Easter Monday, we risked the crowds and drove north to Hidcote. Ollie was thrilled by the bold vista of the famous Hornbeam Walk and its huge expanse of smooth grass. Laughing, giggling, crawling at high speed, then standing up for the first time, with a steady hand on a fence, he played to the crowd with exuberant, joyful confidence.

England was at its most beautiful and I was going to miss my son's first birthday. Why did I have to lead this schizophrenic existence? Why forsake a warm, loving home for uncertainty and discomfort? Why the age-old dichotomy between farmer and nomad, settler and wanderer? Why the desperate need for contrast? I had been through it all so many times before, but this time the doubts seemed more insistent. The only way to cope was to concentrate on the practical details of last-minute preparations and to remind myself that once I was in the mountains the doubts would fade away.

Deeper fears, unspoken, were stirred by a telephone call one Sunday evening in March. Another Fanshawe, one of the country's best-known young mountaineers, had just died on Lochnagar. High winds, a moment's careless imbalance and a sudden battering fall. Random annihilation. It almost

seemed a bad omen when I was asked to take over the book he had started – an ambitious illustrated history of modern Himalayan climbing. His widow, Caroline, came down to Bath to hand over all the notes and correspondence. We talked about the magical spring day, a year earlier, when we had climbed on Scafell, returning at dusk to the cottage in the Eden valley for a huge fondue. It seemed hard to believe that all we had now were the memories of Andy's energy and huge, life-affirming enthusiasms. Caroline was very poised, coping bravely with her loss, but I couldn't help contrasting her sudden isolation with our cosy domesticity, as Ollie delighted everyone with his most engaging smile.

The flight was on 6 May, four days after my 38th birthday. One of the *Photo Plus* staff had promised to drive me to Heathrow to get a team photo for the magazine. I completed all my packing the night before and rose at six o'clock for a final potter round the garden in the dewy white light of a perfect spring morning. Everything was bursting with promise – crimson brilliance forcing open the green sepals of the paeonies, irises swelling, the muted purple of *Ceanothus* exploding into a show of lapis lazuli, and the roses . . . if only I could wait another week for the the rich, heady scent of *Souvenir de Malmaison*, *Louise Odier*, *Souvenir de Mme Alfred Carrière* . . . if only I didn't have to go through with this perverse self-exile to a bleak, all-male environment.

I had a quick breakfast on my own then went back upstairs to our bedroom where Rosie was feeding Ollie. When he had finished his bottle, I played with him, chasing him round and round the bed, loving his gurgling shrieks of laughter. Then there was a knock on the door and we all went downstairs. I helped Rick carry three heavy rucksacks out to the car, came back for a last hug and a kiss, then walked back up the path to the waiting car, turning round for a last wave to the open doorway where two faces watched and smiled bravely.

## Chapter Two

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HARISH AND HIS team were waiting at Bombay airport when we arrived at three o'clock in the morning. Victor threw himself at our old friends from the 1985 expedition, hugging, gesticulating, laughing in manic jubilation. Harish extricated himself and turned to me. 'Ah, here is Steve-sahib, the proper reserved Englishman.'

Sleepy and disoriented, I followed the crowd out into the hot night air, where we were loaded into cars and driven to the Kapadia family home at Vijay Apartments. The sparrows and bulbuls had started their dawn chatter by the time we arrived. Over breakfast Harish bombarded us with gossip and plans, which had to take into account a local strike – a Bandh – by the extremist political movement Shiv Sena. A newspaper reference to the baton-happy police 'mildly lathi-charging the crowd' soon had Victor in disdainful stitches. Monesh Devjani, the youngest member of the team and new to Islington liberalism, smiled politely. Bhupesh Ashar, also a new face to us, took Sustad and Rensha back to the airport to spend the day in heroic negotiations, extricating the expedition baggage from the steaming customs go-down. The rest of us retired to the Cricket Club, deemed an appropriate billet for Kapadia's English guests, where there was just time for two hours' sleep before we had to drive off for lunch at the model factory complex of our sponsor Godrej.

Mr Godrej enthused nostalgically about his sojourns at Davos, Crans Montana and other fashionable alpine resorts. Like several other senior figures in Bombay's parsee mafia, he had a weakness for mountains, was a tireless supporter of the Himalayan Club, and had agreed generously to bankroll the Panch Chuli expedition. After lunch I gave a talk to some of the company executives, by way of a warm-up for the main press conference in the evening, where Chris presided in a roof-top garden, responding patiently to all the old chestnuts such as 'How many times have you climbed Everest?' 'Is it true that you are leading a big litter clean-up on Everest?' 'How have you coped with losing so many friends in the mountains?' 'What are your thoughts about the Himalayan environment?' And so on.

Another day we did a double-bill lecture for the Himalayan Club. Talking to knowledgeable friends and well-wishers was a pleasure – and for me a nostalgic one – indulging in a public replay of Everest memories, recalling an expedition which had begun right here, in Bombay, four years earlier. Inevitably, though, there were inward comparisons between my hopeful excitement then and uneasy ambivalence now. There was an uncanny *déjà vu* going with Geeta to a silversmith to buy protective Ganesh pendants for all the team. I still had the elephant god she had bought me four years earlier. I had worn it to the top of Everest and Kusum Kanguru and now I had it round my neck again, on the same faded red string, blessed by a Tibetan Ringpoche in Kathmandu.

'Thank you, Geeta. I'll stick with the old one for Panch Chuli. I'll send this one to Ollie for his first birthday – it's next month.'

'*Achha*,' she acknowledged reluctantly, 'but maybe you should take two for extra protection!'

'Too much weight. This is meant to be a lightweight 'alpine-style' expedition.'

Back at the Kapadia flat, as she had done in 1988, she performed a Hindu 'pujah' – a blessing ceremony – for our safety in the mountains. It is impossible to ignore religion in India and particularly in the Himalaya – the 'Abode of Snow' where almost every peak has some religious, mythological significance and the whole landscape seems inescapably numinous. The mountains of Kumaun, source of Ganga – the Ganges – have for millennia been the goal of Hindu pilgrims, holier even than the



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