

Nilkanta, Garhwal Himalaya, 1949

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EARLY on the morning of July 4, 1948, two rucksack-laden hitch-hikers stood hopefully beside U.S. 66 on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Their thumbs pointed east, their axes proclaimed their membership in the mountaineering fraternity, and a crudely lettered sign announced their objective as the Swiss Alps. Surely at that early hour, with the dim lights of the fading night just beginning to reveal their shabby mountain equipment, there was little about the pair to mark them as a genuine American Himalayan Expedition. This, of course, was unfortunate, since it is likely that their thumbing would have proved much more effective had the drivers only been aware that they were flashing past the main body of what was eventually to constitute the "Anglo-American Himalayan Expedition of 1949."

Initial preparations for this trip were kept to a minimum since the possible success of the undertaking was considered much too unlikely to warrant much expenditure of energy or material during its opening phases. As Herbert Rickert of Cleveland, Ohio, whom I had known in the Army, had written to me about the plan, I was simply to get together all easily available funds, collect equipment, and meet him in Zürich.

Having once joined forces in Zürich, we were to practice a bit on the Alps and then see about getting to India. There would be time enough along the way to pick up odd bits of extra equipment, additional funds, and a specific objective. No special plans would be formulated, but from time to time we would consider where our inclinations seemed to lead and follow up those which beckoned most strongly, particularly those for which opportunities were offered.

So, toward the end of August, I met Rick in Zürich with what was left of my initial \$300, a properly filled rucksack, and John Barnes (just graduated from Oregon State College in Forestry). John had "hitched over" with me for a little climbing and later stayed on in Switzerland to study the 'cello. Rick had added Harold Jaeger, another old friend, to our roster, and so for three months the four of us dragged ourselves around the Alps under the monstrous loads formed by our Himalayan equipment. Dragging along a 60-pound pack did little to enhance the attraction of a clean-cut rock climb, but we hoped that through such grinding discipline of body and spirit we would profit from the conditioning later on. This discipline



Nilkanta, from photograph by Marcel Kurz

By F. M. Linck

denied us many tempting summits available in our immediate Alpine area, but we did manage to get up, among others, the Wetterhorn, Monte Rosa, the Jungfrau, and the Matterhorn.

Weather and funds gave out simultaneously in Switzerland, driving us

north to Sweden in search of work and a ship to India. Luckily, we got a job in an iron foundry in Göteborg; however, the work proved a great incentive in expediting our search for a ship. After two months of unsuccessful inquiries, we found our way into the office of one of Göteborg's leading ship owners. The result was unexpected and magical. In four short days arrangements were completed for the transport to India, via first-class freighter accommodation, of our entire complement of personnel and equipment. The personnel had proved as fluid as our plans, with Barnes succumbing to the 'cello and Jaeger continuing work in the iron foundry. In the end it was Rick and I, with Laurie French, a young Englishman of proper spirit and stature, who finally sailed on the "Nordstjernan."

During our stay in Zürich, we had availed ourselves of the extremely cordial and capable offices of the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, directed by Herr Ernst Feuz, and with their help had selected our objective as Nilkanta in the Garhwal Himalaya. This 21,640-foot gem lies at the source of the Ganges, immediately above the sacred city of Badrinath. Its modest size and ease of access made it particularly suited to an expedition of our size, while its technical difficulty and perfection of form promised a rewarding engagement. Smythe had classed Nilkanta as second only to Siniolchu in Himalayan beauty, while both he and several other well-equipped parties had found its unusual rock-clad defenses too formidable to overcome.

The first-class nightmare of the third-class Indian rail journey carried us and our 240 pounds of baggage from Calcutta to Dehra Dun in a state of constant semi-heat prostration and gasping thirst. A few days' hospitality at the Doon School as guests of the Headmaster, Jack Gibson, and Gurdial Singh, the geography teacher, put enough starch back in our wilted spines to continue our journey. Gurdial, an enthusiastic explorer and aspiring climber himself (he was later on the successful Bandar Punch White Peak expedition), made arrangements to meet us in the Badrinath area after school was out in the spring. He was also of great help in securing the final few items of equipment and in planning our route to Badrinath.

Our approach took us first by bus through Rikshikesh and from there along the Alaknanda Ganga, as this headwater of the Ganges is labeled. This is one of the main pilgrim routes in India, and during that season the paths are thronged with devout crowds making their way up from the plains to visit the sacred shrines in the hills. From the end of the bus line in Chamoli, we had a 50-mile walk uphill to Badrinath and, though groaning under our 80-pound loads, we still counted ourselves fortunate in not having to measure each foot of the way with the length of our prostrate

bodies as was being done by a number of our traveling companions. We were as constant a source of curiosity to the pilgrim travelers as they were to us, but despite the language barrier it was seldom long before we had established contact with each new group through smiles and gesticulations.

At Badrinath we were put up in one of the basement grottoes of the local temple by one of the town's leading holy men, Swami Jnanananda, who proved an able and sympathetic advisor during our final outfitting, acting as chief go-between and interpreter for all our transactions with food and porters. He had a true mountain man's appreciation of the grandeur of our natural surroundings, and we were overjoyed when he allowed himself to be prevailed upon to accompany our little troupe to Base Camp. The secretary of the Hindu Temple was also of great service to us, donating our entire consignment of rice and dal (a total of 60 pounds) with the brief comment that he chose to consider us among the pilgrims whose welfare it was his duty to care for.

Our five Mana porters carried only to the Base Camp along the Satopanth Glacier despite their repeated vows to stick with us all the way to the col on the west ridge. We could hardly blame them for their defection, however, when the 1,000-foot slope of snow and ice below the col came finally into view. It was clearly no job to tackle without adequate mountain boots, and we had only the ones we wore. We were held up at our 14,000-foot Base Camp by a two-day snowstorm, but with clearing skies we were able to begin our reconnaissance and encountered no trouble whatsoever in picking out a feasible route to the col. From Camp I, on the "Col Glacier" at about 16,500 feet, the approach to the col was clear and uncompromising. The only problem was how to traverse it with all our gear.

By this time our style of life during the approach across India and the foothills had begun to take its toll on our physical condition. Constant attacks of dysentery, resulting from impure water, and the unfortunate lack of protein in our steady diet of fried-stuffs from the bazaars had reduced our vitality to a discouragingly low point. When the fresh snow had consolidated sufficiently to lessen the danger of avalanches, Rickert was too weak to continue, so he was left in charge of Camp I while Laurie French and I tried to put up an advanced camp at 18,000 feet on the col.

After a quick breakfast of rice, cooked the night before, we set out with our 40-pound packs by 0530. In less than an hour of easy going we reached the foot of the 1,000-foot slope leading to the col, and here the work began in earnest. The slope was studded with bare cliffs of shattered ice, among which we had to wind a careful track, avoiding the bombarded areas beneath them. The slope steepened as we progressed, and, what was

worse, the snow increased steadily in depth and softness. In the face of what was obviously moderate to extreme avalanche danger, we burrowed ahead with all possible speed, covering the last 300 feet of chest-deep powder by means of a sort of butterfly breaststroke. At the col's crest we sat down on our packs at 1415, after having spent eight and one-half hours on the 1,000-foot slope. We exchanged a few leisurely comments about our exhaustion, the ruggedness of the climb, and the beauty of the scenery. In fact, these few comments were so leisurely that it was not until 1815 that we arose from our packs and set about making camp.

Not until the packs were opened did we remember that we had originally planned to make the round trip to the col in one day. We had no bags, mattresses, stove, water—nothing but a spare tent, rope, pitons, and five gallons of gas! Nor did we have the energy for a return to Camp I, so the tent was pitched, and we bedded down on the packs, rope, and gas can. It was not until some days later that we reached the conclusion that this night on the col must have been one of the most beautiful in our experience. The night was perfectly clear with a full moon sheathing the entire Chaukhamba region in shadowed silver; the perfection was only broken by an occasional grinding roar from Nilkanta's ice-but-tressed north face. At the time, however, the cold was too intense and our exhaustion too complete to allow such scenery to register consciously.

The next morning we decided that another trip to the col was inadvisable because of the avalanche danger and our poor condition. We therefore started early and in two hours had packed all our gear back to Camp I. Our estimate of the danger of the slope was corroborated during the descent when we discovered that the entire lower half had avalanched the day before to a depth of about 18 inches! Later talks with Rick established the time of the avalanche as about two hours after we had passed its starting point. The schedule had been a tight one, and we did not care to repeat it.

Rick's internal maladies were worse than ever, forcing him back to Badrinath to recuperate. Laurie and I spent two more days at Camp I, doing nothing but guzzle snow water and cram ourselves with rice, hoping to accumulate enough energy to put through a new route to the col. The third day saw us starting up a rock rib to the west of our former ice slope, but we sorely lacked stamina and pitched our final camp at but 17,800 feet. This was our last effort, and the next day we headed down for good.

It seemed at the time that this western ridge was surely the best route on the peak, although the southeast ridge would probably go also, though much longer. Smythe tried it in 1936(?), reaching 18,000 feet before being forced back by lack of time to complete the siege. The west ridge

will prove a rather technical rock climb with pitons extremely desirable and perhaps absolutely necessary. It is interesting to note that Nilkanta was one of Sir Edmund Hillary's first Himalayan objectives and that his party got no higher than the col. When asked why he turned back, Ed answered briefly, "Too bloody steep for me!" It should also be noted that the approach to the western col from the south, through the Khiraon valley appeared much easier, with no ice slope comparable to that on the north.

After our last try, Laurie and I made contact with Gurdial Singh, who had arrived on trek. We took leave of Rick in Badrinath, as he was forced to leave India because of his continuing ill health, and walked on up into the Bhiundar Valley (Smythe's *Valley of Flowers*) for two weeks of leisurely recuperation.

For three more months Laurie and I roamed the plains of India, lecturing to schools and embassy staffs and selling our equipment for a living. We parted in Kashmir. Laurie stayed on as head of the chemistry department at the Tyndale-Biscoe School while I headed home.

Rupees 20 was hardly enough for passage home from Karachi, but a lucky job as a deckhand on a Swedish freighter did very nicely. After a four-month trip along the underside of Asia, I once more reached Los Angeles, just one year and eight months and a day after leaving home. Seaman's wages for the voyage amounted to \$250, so the over-all trip was really a very cheap one. At the same time it is this writer's opinion that the benefits of such marginal-existence travel as this outweigh in many respects the rewards of a comfortably supported expedition. Certainly the impact of the country and its people is much more stark and provoking than when the traveler is insulated from its effects by a well-padded pocket-book. The dangers of sickness and general deterioration of the health are greatly multiplied when one's funds are low; consequently, the chance of reaching many summits is much reduced. However, the quality of the mountain experience enjoyed by members of small expeditions has much to recommend it over that gained by the gigantic Himalayan task forces which have attracted so much popular attention in recent years.

Summary of Statistics

ATTEMPTED: Nilkanta, 21,640 feet, Garhwal Himalaya, 1949.

HEIGHT REACHED: *ca.* 18,000 feet.

PERSONNEL: Laurie French, Herbert Rickert, Willi Unsoeld.