

I

BENEATH THE MOUNTAIN LAKES

I was lying in my sleeping bag, staring at the light filtering through the red and green fabric of the dome tent. Simon was snoring loudly, occasionally twitching in his dream world. We could have been anywhere. There is a peculiar anonymity about being in tents. Once the zip is closed and the outside world barred from sight, all sense of location disappears. Scotland, the French Alps, the Karakoram, it was always the same. The sounds of rustling, of fabric flapping in the wind, or of rainfall, the feel of hard lumps under the ground sheet, the smell of rancid socks and sweat – these are universals, as comforting as the warmth of the down sleeping bag.

Outside, in a lightening sky, the peaks would be catching the first of the morning sun, with perhaps even a condor cresting the thermals above the tent. That wasn't too fanciful either since I had seen one circling the camp the previous afternoon. We were in the middle of the Cordillera Huayhuash, in the Peruvian Andes, separated from the nearest village by twenty-eight miles of rough walking, and surrounded by the most spectacular ring of ice mountains I had ever seen, and the only indication of this from within our tent was the regular roaring of avalanches falling off Cerro Sarapo.

I felt a homely affection for the warm security of the tent, and reluctantly wormed out of my bag to face the prospect of lighting the stove. It had snowed a little during the night, and the grass crunched frostily under my feet as I padded over to the cooking rock. There was no sign of Richard stirring as I

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passed his tiny one-man tent, half collapsed and whitened with hoar frost.

Squatting under the lee of the huge overhanging boulder that had become our kitchen, I relished this moment when I could be entirely alone. I fiddled with the petrol stove which was mulishly objecting to both the temperature and the rusty petrol with which I had filled it. I resorted to brutal coercion when coaxing failed and sat it atop a propane gas stove going full blast. It burst into vigorous life, spluttering out two-foot-high flames in petulant revolt against the dirty petrol.

As the pan of water slowly heated, I looked around at the wide, dry and rock-strewn river bed, the erratic boulder under which I crouched marking the site at a distance in all but the very worst weather. A huge, almost vertical wall of ice and snow soared upwards to the summit of Cerro Sarapo directly in front of the camp, no more than a mile and a half away. Rising from the sea of moraine to my left, two spectacular and extravagant castles of sugar icing, Yerupaja and Rasac, dominated the camp site. The majestic 21,000-foot Siula Grande lay behind Sarapo and was not visible. It had been climbed for the first time in 1936 by two bold Germans via the North Ridge. There had been few ascents since then, and the true prize, the daunting 4,500-foot West Face had so far defeated all attempts.

I turned off the stove and gingerly slopped the water into three large mugs. The sun hadn't cleared the ridge of mountains opposite and it was still chilly in the shadows.

'There's a brew ready, if you're still alive in there,' I announced cheerfully.

I gave Richard's tent a good kicking to knock off the frost and he crawled out looking cramped and cold. Without a word he headed straight for the river bed, clutching a roll of toilet paper.

'Are you still bad?' I asked when he returned.

'Well, I'm not the full ticket but I reckon I'm over the worst. It was bloody freezing last night.'

I wondered if it was the altitude rather than the kidney-

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bean stew that was getting to him. Our tents were pitched at 15,000 feet, and he was no mountaineer.

Simon and I had found Richard resting in a sleazy hotel in Lima, halfway through his six-month exploration of South America. His wire-rimmed glasses, neat practical clothing and bird-like mannerisms hid a dry humour and a wild repertoire of beachcombing reminiscences. He had lived off grubs and berries with pygmies while dug-out canoeing through the rain forests of Zaire, and had watched a shoplifter being kicked to death in a Nairobi market. His travelling companion was shot dead by trigger-happy soldiers in Uganda for no more than a dubious exchange of cassette tapes.

He travelled the world between bouts of hard work to raise funds. Usually he journeyed alone to see where chance encounters in alien countries would take him. There were distinct advantages, we thought, to having an entertaining watchman in camp to keep an eye on the gear while Simon and I were out climbing. It was probably a gross injustice to the poor hill farmers in this remote spot, but in the backstreets of Lima we had become suspicious of everyone. Anyway, we had invited Richard to come up and join us for a few days if he wanted to see the Andes at close quarters.

It had been two days' walk from where the bone-shaking bus deposited us after 80 heart-stopping miles up the mountain valleys. Forty-six people were crammed into a ramshackle vehicle designed to carry twenty-two, and we were not fortified by the sight of so many wayside shrines to dead bus drivers and their passengers. The engine was held together with nylon string and a flat tyre was changed with a pick-axe.

By the end of the second day, Richard was feeling the effects of altitude. Dusk was gathering as we approached the head of the valley, and he urged Simon and me to go ahead with the donkeys and prepare camp before dark; he would take his time to follow. The way was straightforward now – he couldn't go wrong, he had said.

Slowly he staggered up the treacherous moraines to the lake where he thought we were camped and then remembered a

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second lake on the map. It had begun to rain and grew increasingly cold. A thin shirt and light cotton trousers were poor protection from a chill Andean night. Tired out, he had descended to the valley in search of shelter. On the way up he had noticed some dilapidated stone and corrugated-iron huts which he assumed to be empty but sufficiently sheltered for a night's rest. He was surprised to find them occupied by two teenage girls and a large brood of children.

After protracted negotiation, he managed to get a place to sleep in the adjoining pigsty. They gave him some boiled potatoes and cheese to eat, and threw in a bundle of moth-eaten sheepskins for warmth. It was a long cold night, and the high-altitude lice enjoyed their best feed for a long time.

Simon came over to the cooking rock and regaled us with a vivid dream. He was firmly convinced that these weird hallucinations were a direct result of the sleeping pills he was taking. I resolved to try some that very night.

I swallowed the last of my coffee as Simon took control of the breakfast-making and then started to write in my diary:

19 May 1985. Base camp. Heavy frost last night, clear skies this morning. I'm still trying to adjust to being here. It feels menacingly remote and exhilarating at the same time; so much better than the Alps – no hordes of climbers, no helicopters, no rescue – just us and the mountains . . . Life seems far simpler and more real here. It's easy to let events and emotions flow past without stopping to look . . .

I wondered how much of this I really believed, and how it related to what we were doing in the Andes. Tomorrow we would start an acclimatisation climb up Rosario Norte. If fit enough at the end of ten days, we would attempt the unclimbed West Face of Siula Grande.

Simon handed me a bowl of porridge and more coffee:
'Shall we go tomorrow then?'

'Might as well. I can't see that it will take us very long if we go light. Could be back down by early afternoon.'

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‘My only worry is this weather. I’m not sure what it means.’

It had been the same every day since our arrival. The mornings would dawn fine and clear, but by midday banks of cumulus would move in from the east, followed by the inevitable rain. On the high slopes this came as heavy snowfall, and the risk of avalanches and lines of retreat cut off would suddenly become a reality. When such clouds massed in the Alps, retreat was always instantly considered. These weather patterns were different somehow.

‘You know, I don’t reckon it’s anything like as bad as it seems,’ Simon suggested thoughtfully. ‘Look at yesterday. It clouded in and snowed, but the temperature didn’t fall dramatically, there was no lightning or thunder, and there didn’t appear to be any desperately high winds on the summits. I don’t think these are storms at all.’

Simon could be right, but something was nagging at me, making me question him. ‘Are you suggesting we should just climb on through a snowfall? If we do that, won’t we run the risk of mistaking a serious storm for the normal pattern?’

‘Well, yes, that is a risk. We’ll just have to see how it goes. We’re certainly not going to learn anything by sitting down here all the time.’

‘Right! I was just being cautious about avalanches, that’s all.’

Simon laughed. ‘Yeah, well, you have good reason to be. Still you survived the last one. I reckon it will be more like the Alps in winter, all powder snow and spindrift, and no big wet snow avalanches. We’ll just have to see.’

I envied Simon his carefree take-it-as-it-comes attitude. He had the force to take what was his for the taking, and the freedom of spirit to enjoy it without grumbling worries and doubts. He laughed more often than he grimaced, grinning at his own misfortune as readily as he did at other people’s. Tall and powerfully built, he possessed most of life’s advantages and few of the drawbacks. He was an easy friend: dependable, sincere, ready to see life as a joke. He had a thatch of blond hair, blue, blue laughing eyes, and that touch of madness which makes just a few people so special. I was glad that we

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had chosen to come here as a two-man team. There were few other people I could have coped with for so long. Simon was everything that I was not, everything I would like to have been.

‘What time do you reckon you’ll be back?’ Richard asked dozily from his sleeping bag as Simon and I prepared to set off next morning.

‘Three o’clock at the latest. We’re not intending to spend long over it, and certainly not if the weather breaks again.’

‘Okay. Good luck.’

The early-morning frost had hardened the loose ground and the going was easier than we anticipated. It wasn’t long before we fell into a steady silent rhythm, zigzagging steadily up the scree. The tents became smaller each time I glanced back, and I began to enjoy the exercise, feeling fitter and stronger than I had thought I would. We were making fast progress despite the altitude, and Simon was keeping to a steady pace that matched mine. I had worried unduly about whether there would be a marked difference between us. If a climber has to slow his natural pace to that of his companion, the unfit climber will soon find himself struggling to keep up. I could imagine the frustrations and tensions that would arise from such a situation.

‘How’s it going?’ I asked when we paused for a short rest.

‘I feel pretty good, but I’m glad we’re not smoking on this trip.’

I silently agreed, despite all my earlier protests at Simon’s suggestion that we should take no cigarettes to base camp. I could feel my lungs working hard in the thin cold air. Heavy smoking had never affected my performance in the Alps, but I was forced to agree that it might be wise to stop during this expedition. The risks of high-altitude sickness and pulmonary oedemas, about which we had heard so much, were all that helped me through a rough few days craving tobacco.

It took a couple of hours to put the scree slopes behind us. Then we headed north towards a high col above an area of broken rock buttresses. The camp disappeared from view and immediately I became aware of the silence and the solitude of

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our position. For the first time in my life I knew what it meant to be isolated from people and society. It was wonderfully calming and tranquil to be here. I became aware of a feeling of complete freedom – to do what I wanted to do when I wanted to, and in whatever manner. Suddenly the whole day had changed. All lethargy was swept away by an invigorating independence. We had responsibilities to no one but ourselves now, and there would be no one to intrude or come to our rescue . . .

Simon was some distance ahead, quietly climbing, steadily gaining ground. Although he had stolen a march on my less methodical pace, I was no longer concerned about speed and fitness since I knew now that we were pretty evenly matched. I was not in any hurry, and knew we could both reach the summit easily. If a fine viewing point presented itself, I was happy to stop for a moment to take in the view.

The rocky gullies were loose and crumbling. As I emerged from behind a yellow outcrop, I was pleased to see Simon settled down on a col a couple of hundred feet away preparing a hot drink.

‘The loose stuff wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be,’ I said a little breathlessly. ‘But I could do with that brew.’

‘Seen Siula Grande, just over there, left of Sarapo?’

‘God, it’s fantastic.’ I was a little awed by the sight in front of me. ‘It’s far bigger than those photographs suggested.’

Simon handed me a steaming mug as I sat on my rucksack and gazed at the whole range laid out before us. To my left I could see the South Face of Rasac, a sweeping ice slope with rock bands crossing it, giving it a sort of stripy marbled effect. To the right of Rasac’s snowy summit, and connected to it by a dangerously corniced ridge, I could see the slightly lower summit of Seria Norte. From there the corniced ridge dipped down to a saddle before curving up in a huge sweep over two shoulders of rock to the final summit pyramid of Yerupaja. It was by far the highest mountain to be seen and dominated our view as it reared, glistening with ice and fresh snow, high above the Siula glacier. Its South Face formed the classic triangular mountain shape; the West Ridge, corniced and rocky, arched

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up from the col below Seria Norte, the East Ridge curling round and dropping towards another col. The face below this ridge was an astonishing series of parallel powder-snow flutings etched like lace ribbons in the shadows cast by the sun.

At the base of the ridge I recognised the Santa Rosa col which we had seen in our photographs of Siula Grande. It formed the junction between Yerupaja's South-East Ridge and the start of Siula Grande's North Ridge. This ridge looked relatively uncomplicated where it began to climb up before narrowing and twisting in frighteningly thin edges of snowy cornice and flutings which hung precariously over the edge of the huge West Face. It peaked on the huge snow mushroom that formed the summit of Siula Grande.

That West Face was our ambition. At first it looked confusing, as if I hadn't seen it before. The scale, and the fact that I was looking at it from a different angle from that shown in the photographs, made it unrecognisable until gradually distinctive features fell into place. A huge bank of cumulus was beginning to spill up over the North Ridge of Siula Grande, as always moving in from the east where the huge rain forests of the Amazon basin, heated up in the day's sun, pushed out these regular banks of moisture-laden clouds.

'I think you're right about the weather, Simon,' I said. 'That's not storm weather at all. I'll bet it's just a convection system coming off the jungle.'

'Yeah, just getting up our normal afternoon dousing.'

'How high do you think we are now?' I asked.

'Must be about 18,000 feet, perhaps a bit more. Why?'

'Well, it's a height record for both of us, and we seem hardly to have noticed.'

'When you're sleeping at about the same height as Mont Blanc it doesn't seem very significant, does it?' Simon said with a mischievous grin.

By the time we had finished our drinks the first wet snowflakes were beginning to fall. The summit of Rosario was still clear, though it wouldn't be for very much longer. It was probably no more than 400 feet higher than our position on the col, and in clear weather could have been reached in little

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over an hour. Neither of us said anything about going straight down. It was an unspoken understanding between us that the summit would be left out this time.

Simon shouldered his pack and set off down towards the top of the scree slopes. He began to run and slide down the rocky gullies we had struggled up. Then we whooped and howled our way headlong down 1,500 feet of loose sliding screes, attempting to execute boots-together ski-turns, and arrived back at camp exhilarated and panting.

Richard had started to prepare the evening meal and handed us the mugs of tea he had made when he spotted us high on the screes. We sat by the roaring petrol stoves to tell him in rambling excited bursts what we had done and seen, until the rain came on up the valley in sudden waves and drove us into the shelter of the large dome tent.

After it grew dark at about six-thirty, anyone approaching the tent would have seen only a warm candlelight glowing red and green through the tent fabric and heard a quiet murmuring of conversation, punctuated now and then by gusts of ribald laughter as Richard told a hilarious story about eight members of a New Zealand rugby team lost in the jungles of central Africa. We planned our future training climbs before playing cards long into the night.

Our next objective was to be the unclimbed South Ridge of Cerro Yantauri, only a short walk across the river bed from our tents. Indeed it looked as if we would be in sight of camp all the way to the summit. The South Ridge ran from right to left up early rocky outcrops before forming a long and elegant corniced snow ridge which led to a highly unstable area of seracs that mushroomed to the summit. We would bivouac high on the ridge, either on the way up or on the descent, to test out our theories about the weather.

The morning was cold and sunny, but an unusually menacing look in the sky in the east persuaded us to leave the South Ridge of Yantauri for another day. Simon went for a bath and shave in a near-by ice-melt pool while I set off with Richard to see whether we could buy milk and cheese from the girls at the huts.

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They seemed pleased to see us and were delighted to sell us their homemade cheese. Through Richard's halting Spanish, we discovered that their names were Gloria and Norma, and that they slept in the huts when they brought their father's cattle up to the high pastures. They had a wild, abandoned look about them, but they took great care of the little children, who seemed perfectly well able to look after themselves. We idled in the sun, watching them at work. Three-year-old Alecia (whom I had nicknamed Paddington) guarded the entrance to the cattle enclosure, preventing the cows and calves from escaping, while her brothers and sisters milked, or held back the calves from suckling, or prepared the whey in muslin bags. Everything was done with laughter at an unhurried happy pace. We arranged for Gloria's brother Spinoza to bring us supplies from the nearest village in the next few days and returned to camp nibbling on the cheese, keeping a wary eye on the clouds, which were about to empty their loads earlier than usual. The prospect of fresh vegetables, eggs, bread and fruit was almost too much to contemplate after two weeks on a monotonous diet of pasta and beans.

The next day we left the camp early for Yantauri. It was an inauspicious start. The scree proved highly dangerous, with stone-falls smacking down on them from high on the rubble-strewn West Face above us. We were nervous and jittery, and wanted to move fast, but our heavy sacks dictated otherwise. Half-way up the lower scree Simon realised he had left his camera down where he had last rested. He dumped his sack and ran back down while I carried on upwards to the right, heading for the protection of the lower rock walls.

By six o'clock that evening we were established high on the ridge, but the weather had taken a turn for the worse and dark threatening clouds were rapidly converging on our exposed position. As darkness fell we erected our little bivi tent against a small sheltered rock wall and settled down anxiously to sleep. It snowed steadily through the night but the feared storm did not materialise. Our weather theory seemed to be borne out.

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We started up the snowy South Ridge in high hopes next morning, but at 18,000 feet we were forced to give up the struggle. Waist-deep powder snow had reduced us to an exhausted wallowing. The heavily corniced ridge would be far too dangerous. When I plunged through a fissure splitting a double cornice below the summit seracs and could see clear down the West Face we decided to call it a day.

Tired out, we returned to the tents after a trying descent of the loose rubble-strewn walls of the West Face. At least now we had some vital answers about the weather. Doubtless there would be serious storms at times, but at least we wouldn't have to retreat at the first sign of cloud build-up.

Two days later we set off again, this time for the South Ridge of Seria Norte. It looked spectacular from base camp, and as far as we knew it had never been climbed. As we drew closer we began to see why. Back home in Sheffield Al Rouse had told us that this was 'a ridge of some difficulty'. On close inspection we realised that Al's reputation for understatement was wholly justified. After a cold and cramped bivouac, we again sloughed up exhausting powder snow to reach a high col at the foot of the ridge. An astonishing series of cornices protruding almost vertically from the ridge leapfrogged 2,000 feet above us to the summit. To have touched the bottom cornice with an ice axe would have brought the whole mass of tottering ice tumbling down on to our heads. We managed to laugh at the waste of effort and wondered what Richard would think of our third failure to reach a summit. But we were fit, acclimatised and ready now for our main objective – the West Face of Siula Grande.

For two whole days we gorged ourselves on food and sunshine, preparing for the West Face. I began to feel spasms of fear now that we were committed to Siula in the next fine-weather window. What if something went wrong? It wouldn't take much to kill us off. I saw how very much alone we had chosen to be and felt small. Simon chuckled when I mentioned my worries. He knew the cause, and probably felt the same tension inside. It was healthy to be a little scared, and good to sense my body responding to the fear. We can do it, we can

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do it . . . I kept repeating like a mantra whenever I felt that hollow hungry gap in my stomach. It wasn't false bravado. Psyching up for it, getting ready to make the final move, was always a difficult part of preparation for me. Rationalisation, some people called it – bloody frightened seemed a better description, and more honest!

'Okay,' Simon said finally, 'we snow-hole at the foot of the face, then go in one push the next day. Two days up, two days down, I reckon.'

'If the weather holds . . .'

In the morning the outlook was bleak. Clouds hid the peaks and only their flanks were visible beneath a murky ceiling. There was an odd sense of menace in the air. We both noticed it as we packed our rucksacks in readiness for an early start the following day should the weather change. Was this to be a full-bore storm or simply an earlier than usual present from the Amazon? I pushed an extra cylinder of gas into my sack.

'I wouldn't mind winning the next one. So far it's mountains three, climbers nil.'

I smiled at Simon's rueful expression.

'It'll be different on Siula. For a start it's too bloody steep to hold much powder.'

'Four days you reckon, then,' Richard repeated casually.

'Five at the outside' – Simon glanced at me – 'and if we're not back after a week you'll be the proud owner of all our gear!'

I could see that Richard laughed only because we laughed. I didn't envy him the wait, never knowing what might be happening up there. Five days is a very long time, especially on your own with no one to talk to.

'You'll probably be jumping to all sorts of conclusions after three days, but try not to worry. We know what we're doing, and if something goes wrong there is nothing whatever you can do.'

Despite all our efforts to cut down on weight, the rucksacks were going to be a heavy burden. We were taking a much larger selection of hardware than before. The bivi tent was far too cumbersome; we decided to leave it behind and rely on

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finding good snow holes instead. Even without the tent, the snow stakes, ice screws, crampons and axes, rock gear, stoves, gas, food and sleeping bags all amounted to a daunting load.

Richard had decided to accompany us as far as the glacier, and we got away next morning at a steady pace under a hot sun. After an hour we reached the beginning of the glacier and started up a steep gully between the lower glacier moraines and a shield of ice-worn rock that formed the left bank of the glacier. Mud and rubble gave way to a jumble of boulders and scree. It was awkward scrambling round and over these obstacles, some of which were many times the size of a man, and it was all the more difficult with large sacks on our backs. Richard kept up well after two weeks at high altitude but a bristling series of ice spikes and mud-smearred glacier ice, visible from where we rested, presented a formidable obstacle to him in lightweight walking shoes. To get past, and up on to the glacier, we would have to negotiate a short, steep, ice cliff some 80 to 100 feet high. Large rocks were balanced precariously above the line of ascent.

‘I don’t think you should come any further,’ Simon said. ‘We could get you up there, but not back again.’

Richard looked around ruefully at the barren view of mud and perched boulders. He had been hoping for something more impressive than this. The West Face of Siula was not yet in view.

‘I’ll take your pictures before you go,’ he announced. ‘You never know, I might make a fortune selling them as obituary photos!’

‘Much appreciated, I’m sure!’ Simon muttered.

We left him there among the boulders. From our position high above on the ice cliffs he looked forlornly abandoned. He was in for a lonely time.

‘Take care!’ wafted up to us from cupped hands below.

‘Don’t worry,’ Simon shouted, ‘we don’t intend sticking our necks out. We’ll be back in time. See you . . .’

The lonely figure was soon lost amid the boulders as we headed up towards the first crevasses, where we put on our crampons and roped up. The heat of the glacier was intense

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under the glare reflected from icy mountain walls. There was not a breath of wind. The glacier edge was cracked and contorted, and we looked back at our route so as to fix the features in our minds. Neither of us wanted to forget it on the way down. Our tracks would certainly have disappeared under fresh snow by then, and it was important to know whether to go below or above the crevasses when we returned.

As a cold clear night came over the mountains we were cosily ensconced in our snow hole beneath the face. It would be a freezing early-morning start tomorrow.