

How the "Ice Goddess" Defended the Unscaled Peak of Mt. Everest

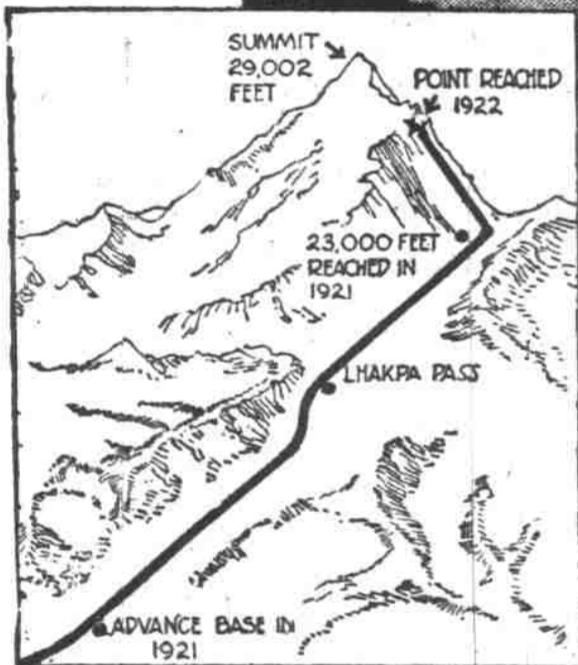
A Member of the Expedition Wearing the Oxygen Helmet, a Necessary Part of the Equipment on the Higher Slopes of Mt. Everest.



—And the Snows of World's Loftiest Mountain Top Are Still Untrodden by Man Despite the Desperately Heroic Drive That Reached Beyond Any Previous Expedition in History



Baggage and Stores Carried by the Mt. Everest Expedition Up to the Point Where the Final and Most Difficult Stages of the Climb Began.



Star Indicates Point Where the Climbers Stopped and from Which They Retreated After Their Final Unsuccessful Dash for the Top.

Was it the monsoon or was it "mountain fear?" A weird and mysterious story has just come out of Asia in the wake of the failure of General Charles G. Bruce's expedition to reach the summit of Mount Everest after ascending to within a few hundred feet of the final goal. The official message which came back to civilization stated that the attempt had been abandoned "because of the unexpected early breaking of the monsoon," which raged in a terrific fury of wind and icy rain around the ice-clad peak. But some of the native Tibetan bearers, according to an account from Bombay, declare it was not the monsoon that caused the collapse of the expedition. They say it failed because the white men of the party were attacked by "mountain fear"—that strange psychic malady which has never been analyzed by western science, and against which—like shell-shock and certain other strange nervous diseases—the hardest bodies and most courageous souls are at times helpless. The superstitious natives declare that this "mountain fear" was a magic spell cast on the white men by the dreaded "Goddess Mother of the Mountains," a Tibetan deity who is supposed to dwell amid the ice and clouds, and to whom the summit of Mount Everest has been sacred for thousands of years. She is the awful "Ice Goddess" of whom the most fear-inspiring legends have been told from immemorial time in the wild fastnesses of the Himalayas. Her breath—the chilling hurricane from the region of eternal snow; her touch—the icy hand of death. But to the natives of Tibet the "Goddess of the Mountains" is more than a mere personified force of nature. She is personal and real. She guards with jealous eyes the approach to her sacred dwelling place, and by her supernatural power strikes down the intrepid unbelieving wanderers who would scale her heights. It was she, the mighty goddess, Chomo-

lungma, who said, "Thus far and no further!" to the white explorers, according to the story of the native guides. It was she, according to the native belief, who froze their hearts with the "mountain fear" and forced them to give up the quest. Mountain climbing experts in America, especially those acquainted with the higher ranges of the Himalayas, believe there may be some truth in the story of the native guides. It goes without saying that they do not share the fantastic beliefs of the Tibetan peasants about the "Goddess of the Mountains," nor do they attribute any supernatural origin to the forces which forced General Bruce and his companions to abandon their effort with its end only a few hundred feet away. But they say that "mountain fear" is a very real thing which has been experienced in the past by other mountain climbers, and which is thoroughly recognized, though not altogether understood, by modern medicine. Captain Achmed Abdullah, who was born in Afghanistan, soldier of fortune, explorer and now a well-known author and playwright, living in New York, tells of having observed the effect of this "mountain fear" years ago when the historical Younghusband expedition made its reconnoissances of the higher slopes of Mount Everest. "It has nothing to do with mountain sickness," he declared, "and is not directly the result of any physical hardship or discomfort, though the cold, rarified air and weakness may make a man fall easier victim to it. 'Mountain fear' itself, however, is a purely psychological phenomenon. It may be compared to the terror which is sometimes inspired in the bravest heart by confrontation with something which seems to be ghostly, occult or supernatural. It seems to be induced by the appalling loneliness, the tragic grandeur, the other-worldliness of the amazing landscapes which are encountered above the clouds among the peaks and the ice and snow. Though born and bred in the wildest mountains, I myself have felt this peculiar fear, and I assure you that it is very real. It is a deep psychological mystery over which the conscious mind and will have no control. I believe it is quite possible that the Everest explorers may have experienced it. If such a thing did occur it was entirely beyond their control. Bravery and strength of will are no defense



Personnel of the Expedition. Seated: Captain Finch, General Bruce, Commander, and Mr. Strutt. Standing: Messrs. Crawford, Norton, Mallory, Somerville, Morshead and Wakefield.

against it. To have succumbed, if they did, from this cause, would be no more a reflection on their courage than if they had been struck by lightning. Whether it was mountain fear or not that turned them back, other experts declare that whatever it may have been it was not the monsoon. The native bearers who were with the expedition say the monsoon—which is a great driving wind and hurricane accompanied by rain that sweeps across Asia at the opening of the rainy season—never reaches the higher Himalayas, and that the rains and winds which the climbers believed to have been the monsoon were merely a passing storm. They assert that if the expedition had waited at a height of 20,000 feet it might have encountered calm, sunny days later on, when the summit could have been reached. What seems to have actually happened, from the reports, is that the party, including General Bruce, Captain Finch, Messrs. Mallory, Somerville and Norton, reached a height of 26,800 feet without the use of oxygen, and that in a final dash from this point General Bruce, Captain Finch and one Gurkha made a dash with oxygen tanks for the top, and reached the height of 27,200 feet—only 1,700 feet from the summit which is 29,002 feet high. Remaining at 26,800 feet, suffering incredible hardships, other attempts were made to reach the summit, but without success. Seven native porters were killed by an avalanche, and white leaders of the party narrowly missed destruction. Even the failure, however, was a glorious one, for they had climbed higher than human beings had ever climbed on foot before. There is much discussion as to whether a subsequent expedition can succeed where this one failed. Many believe the failure of General Bruce proves the task humanly impossible. Sponsored and financed by both the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society, the party set out equipped with every appliance science could suggest and money could buy. They had electrically warmed clothing, "artificial lungs," the most nourishing of tinned foods, mule transportation up to 20,000 feet, and perfect motion picture apparatus to visualize the "footage" made on the ice-clad steeps. When the mules could go no further, native carriers were used, so that the explorers could conserve every ounce of muscular energy for the final dash. A mountain climber of twenty years ago, who had nothing but his knapsack, ropes, ice hatchet and alpenstock, would have been amazed at the picture presented by the General Bruce expedition two-thirds of the way up the mountain. He would have seen a long line of Tibetan mules loaded with silk tents, carrier packs, boxes of food and scientific equipment. Strangely garbed, thick-chested, swarthy natives, some of them as heavily laden as the mules, would have aroused his curiosity, and he would have been even more amazed at the long cylindrical metal tubes which were the most important part of the equipment. These, with masks and harness to be strapped to the back, were the "lungs" of the men, to be used in the last extreme effort to scale the ice-crowned peak. When an expedition equipped in this manner, and composed of the most intrepid and experienced mountain climbers in the world failed to reach the summit of Mount Everest, it is no wonder that many experts flatly declare the ascent to the summit to be humanly impossible—despite what the native bearers said about the monsoon never reaching that altitude. Opinion, however, is divided among mountain climbing experts both in England and America, and there are those who believe that a future attempt may meet with success. Certain it is that if Mount Everest's summit is ever to be reached on foot, it will have to be by the same route, and by much the same methods used by General Bruce's party.