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Medicine …. And Mighty Mountains

NOVEMBER 1974 – NEPAL

The blue and white Bell Jet Ranger rose smoothly upwards between the white-capped peaks which flanked the yak-grazing pastures at Pheriche. In less than an hour the helicopter would land in Kathmandu and transfer its passenger, a young Japanese girl semi-conscious with pulmonary and cerebral oedema, to the care of the doctors at Shanta Bhawan Hospital. In the thin, cold Himalayan air at fifteen thousand feet she had come perilously close to death.

Her story was typical. She and her boyfriend were with a group who were trekking to the site of Everest Base Camp. A week earlier they had flown into Lukla at 9,337 feet, one of the most dangerous airfields in the world. In 1974 it was really little more than a sloping field of grass, cropped short by grazing yaks and cut into the steep mountainside. A couple of

wrecked planes alongside the green landing strip testified to the difficulties which even a skilled pilot had in trying to make a safe landing.

The grassy field has since been paved with tarmac and concrete, but bringing a plane safely in to land at Lukla remains a hazardous undertaking. The runway is still short, and once the pilot has committed himself to touch down there is no going back. A few hundred yards away, straight ahead of the aircraft as its wheels first make contact with the runway, is a steep, wooded mountainside. There is no realistic possibility of aborting the landing and making a second attempt. The pilot has to get it right first time.

From Lukla the Japanese girl and her companions had set out on their long trek, travelling along Sherpa trails which ran through the deep valleys carved out by the fast-flowing, milky-white waters of the Dudh Khosi. This river collected the melt-waters from Everest and the Khumbu Glacier. If all went well their route, following the river upstream and then trekking up the glacier, would eventually bring them to Everest Base Camp at almost eighteen thousand feet.

Within seven days of leaving Lukla they had reached the tiny settlement of Lobuje at sixteen thousand feet. For a couple of days the Japanese girl had been struggling with increasingly severe headaches and shortness of breath but she didn't want to let her boyfriend and companions down. She had tried to carry on.

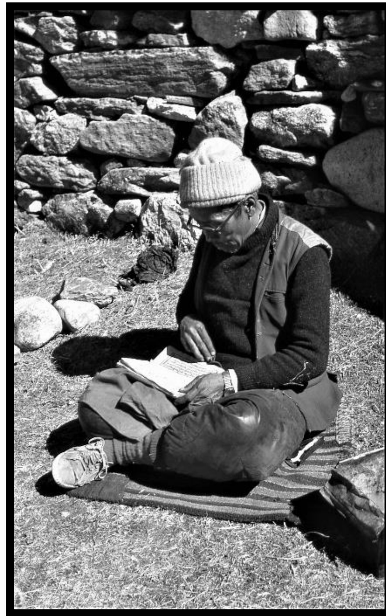
On the morning of their eighth day in the mountains she had been forced to admit defeat. Her headache and breathing had become dramatically worse overnight. She had woken feeling very dizzy and she was unsteady on her feet. It was clear she could go no further.

Three hours later she was propped up in a small, dark Sherpa hut, clutching a mask to her face as she inhaled life-giving oxygen from the cylinder I had placed beside her. She had been carried down by two of her fellow trekkers to what was a very rudimentary, medical aid-post run by the Himalayan Rescue Association. The local Sherpas made use of the pastures at Pheriche, situated at fourteen thousand feet, to graze their yaks outside the monsoon season. A few basic, dry-stone huts provided shelter from the almost constant, cold winds and the aid-post had been set up in one of those huts. A fast-acting diuretic which I had injected into the young girl's veins, along with some powerful steroids, would hopefully start to clear some of the deadly fluid which had collected inside her lungs and around her brain.

She was suffering from high altitude pulmonary and cerebral oedema, two of the most serious and life-threatening forms of acute altitude sickness. I was now the doctor caring for her.

Satellite phones still lay many years in the future so I had sent a runner down to Namche Bazaar, six hours away, from where a radio message would be sent to Kathmandu requesting the helicopter which was now evacuating her. The Bell Jet Ranger belonged to the King of Nepal, and the emergency flight would cost her, or her insurers, at least two thousand U.S. dollars – equivalent to about fourteen thousand today. It was an expensive way to learn about the hidden medical dangers of high altitude, but the rapid evacuation to hospital in Kathmandu would hopefully save her life.

In the autumn trekking season of 1974 I spent several months at Pheriche, assisted by my first wife, Jane, and a very experienced local man called Tashi who had been one of the lead Sherpas on a number of the post-war expeditions to major Himalayan peaks.



Tashi was a devout Buddhist, and when not engaged in looking after us he would sit cross-legged reading the very ancient, religious tablets which his forebears, who had been religious leaders in Tibet, had brought with them when they had been forced to leave their homes and cross the high mountain passes into Nepal.

Like the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who had been obliged to make a similar journey in 1959, from the Potala Palace in Lhasa to Dharamsala in India, Tashi's family had been finding it impossible to practice their religion freely. Their formerly independent country had been declared an autonomous region of China, and Tibetan Buddhism, which had previously unified the country, was seen as a subversive influence by the Communist rulers in Beijing. Adherents to the Buddhist religion were increasingly being hounded and persecuted.

Our role at the Pheriche aid-post was to offer treatment to trekkers, and to make ourselves available as a sort of GP practice for the local Sherpa villagers. We were also carrying out research into altitude sickness which at that time was still a relatively poorly-understood problem.

Altitude sickness tends to creep up on people when they trek to high altitudes. Even though Everest Base Camp is situated at almost eighteen thousand feet, surrounded by several of the highest mountains in the world, getting there involves no technical climbing at all. It is essentially just a very, very long walk. This makes it particularly dangerous. Trekkers can very easily forget, as the Sherpa trails take them above Pheriche, that many of the highest summits in the Alps, the Rockies and the Sierras already lie beneath their feet.

Back in 1974 no more than a few hundred people attempted the arduous trek to Everest Base Camp, and attempts on the mountain itself were made by just a few, very experienced climbers. In recent years, though, trekkers to Base Camp have been numbered in the tens of thousands, and other tourists, some of whom have had relatively little climbing experience, pay a small fortune* to attach themselves to the climbing ropes and lightweight aluminium ladders which have been fixed by Sherpas on the treacherous ice-fall and up the steep slopes of the world's highest mountain. They then join long, snaking queues to try and reach the summit.

You have probably seen the pictures online or in newspapers.

Many experts think that encouraging novices to go higher on Everest than Base Camp is madness. And to be honest it is difficult to understand what the attraction is, other than bragging rights if they get home safely.

Sadly, a few of them don't.

There are many ways to die when trying to reach the summit of a mountain such as Everest. Death can arrive as a result of illness, or from the altitude, or from exposure to the extreme cold, or from a fall, or from getting caught in an avalanche or a rock-fall, or from a sudden and unexpected deterioration in the high mountain weather.

Over the past fifty years a small number of experienced and very fit climbers have reached the top of Everest without using supplementary oxygen, but for most people the amount of oxygen in the thin air high up on Everest is insufficient for survival. A few of the inexperienced climbers have sadly died as a result of their oxygen supply running out while they were standing in the queue, waiting to take their quick selfie on the summit.

In the early nineteen seventies the fatality rate among those who chose to attempt the most challenging of the Himalayan peaks was around one in eight. This was sometimes as a result of accidents, but the adverse physiological effects of the extreme cold and high altitude also played a big part. Even the long walk to Everest Base Camp, on which climbing accidents almost never happen, would result in the death of two or three trekkers in every hundred from cerebral or pulmonary oedema, the most serious forms of altitude sickness, which can be fatal in less than twenty four hours.

Fortunately this illness, which can affect even the fittest and healthiest of people, is now much better understood. A slow rate of ascent - ideally no more than about eight hundred feet per day when above nine thousand feet - is seen as the key to minimising the risk of such problems. More effective treatments are now also available to the minority of trekkers who are still unlucky enough to fall sick despite ascending at a sensible rate. As a result of these improvements, fatalities are now very much less frequent.

**The quoted cost (February 2022) for an inexperienced tourist to be guided on an attempt to reach the summit of Everest was from 50,000 to 160,000 US dollars, depending upon the experience of the Sherpa guides and the provision of other extras such as helicopter transfers.*

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While we were based at Pheriche a team of climbers from Poland were at Everest Base Camp. They were making an attempt upon Lhotse (27,940 feet), fourth highest mountain in the world, which lies just to the south of Mount Everest. The traditional climbing route up both mountains involves tackling the treacherous Khumbu Ice-fall which lies just above the site of Base Camp.

About four weeks after our arrival at Pheriche two members of the Polish team turned up at the medical aid-post. One of them had fallen ill. He was getting chest pains and experiencing difficulty in breathing. He had worked out that it was either altitude sickness or a bad chest infection and he wanted me, as a doctor, to come up with a definite diagnosis and recommend appropriate treatment. Neither of the climbers spoke much English but I soon established that the problem was an infection. I explained that a few days at lower altitude, along with a course of strong antibiotics, should quite quickly sort him out.

His companion stayed at Pheriche with him, and once he had recovered it was suggested, as a sort of thank you, that my wife and I might like to make a visit to Base Camp as their guests. The trek from Pheriche to Everest Base Camp, making our way up the Khumbu Glacier, would take about twelve hours. An overnight stay at the Base Camp would therefore be needed. Having been at Pheriche for several weeks we were well acclimatised, so ascending to almost eighteen thousand feet in a single day would not be a problem.

I recalled the excitement I had felt as a small child in May 1953, on the eve of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Second, when the news reached Britain that the highest mountain on the planet had been climbed for the first time. We had now been offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit the very place from which Tenzing Norgay, from Darjeeling in India, close to the border with Nepal, and the New Zealand mountaineer and bee-keeper Edmund Hillary, had set off on their historic ascent.

At the same time I was aware that a trip to Everest Base Camp would not be entirely free of danger. A French team who were attempting to climb Everest had been almost completely wiped out just a few weeks earlier. Severe storms had created a build-up of snow on the steep slopes directly above Base Camp and late one afternoon a huge avalanche had swept down the mountain. It had completely destroyed the French camp, burying the tents beneath hundreds of tons of frozen ice and snow. Several of the French climbers and Sherpas lost their lives, and their expedition had to be abandoned.

In recent weeks, however, the weather had settled into a much quieter pattern and there had been no more heavy snowfalls. We would probably never get the chance again, so we decided to risk it.

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We approached Everest Base Camp across the surface of the Khumbu Glacier after what had been a very long and arduous, journey on foot. A hand-written notice, in both English and Urdu, greeted us. It was fixed to a wooden pole, and the words of welcome had been scrawled upon what had once been the side of a cardboard box filled with provisions.

Everything at the camp looked normal. The Polish team seemed to be relaxed and the weather was good. All evidence of the great tragedy which had struck the French expedition had completely disappeared.

Our brief stay at Base Camp was very enjoyable. Hot drinks were constantly brought to us from the large cook tent as we sat around and chatted, in rudimentary English, with those members of the team who were taking a break from their exertions higher on the mountain.

The fierce, high-altitude sun, the strength of which was amplified as it bounced off the glacier and the surrounding snow-covered mountains, kept the temperature at Base Camp in the seventies during the daytime but at dusk the temperature dropped precipitously. At nearly eighteen thousand feet the air was too thin to retain any of the daytime warmth. Within an hour of sunset the thermometer showed that it was minus thirty degrees. A blazing fire alongside the cook tent provided some very welcome warmth while we were eating, but as soon as the meal was over it was time to retreat to the comfort of a cosy sleeping bag.

Before crawling into one of the two, small tents which had been loaned to us for the night I stood outside and looked up. Countless millions of stars shone from a crystal-clear, coal-black sky while the Milky Way shimmered like a bright ribbon as it weaved its way across the heavens.

At such an altitude the stars look different. The Earth's atmosphere does not distort their light so there is little or none of the 'twinkling' effect which is so obvious at sea level. The nursery rhyme *'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star'* could never have been composed by someone who had spent their whole life in the high Himalayas.

As I had already discovered at Pheriche, getting into my sleeping bag simply involved removing my boots. All other warm clothing was left on, while the sleeping bag provided a very necessary further layer of insulation against the bitter, overnight cold.

Next morning the sky was a clear, deep blue and the air was still. As the sun rose above the surrounding high peaks and bathed the camp in its warmth we sat and ate our breakfast. The long trek back down to Pheriche would be very pleasant. We would be walking downhill most of the way and the route down the glacier, avoiding crevasses, was well signposted with stone cairns. We were confident that the return journey would not be a problem.

We were about to set off when I heard the sound of people shouting. It was coming from the direction of the Khumbu Ice-fall, the constantly moving river of ice which dropped two thousand feet from the Western Cwm, the hidden valley beneath a huge curved ridge running between the summits of Everest, Lhotse, and a third peak called Nuptse (25,801 feet).

This valley had been named the Western Cwm back in the 1921 by George Mallory who was a member of an early British Reconnaissance Expedition searching for possible routes up Everest. These British explorers had done much of their early climbing in Snowdonia and the use of the word 'cwm', which is Welsh for 'bowl-shaped valley', was a recognition of the debt which they owed to those much smaller Welsh mountains.

Three years later, in 1924, George Mallory disappeared high on the north-east ridge of Everest with his younger climbing partner, Andrew Irvine. They were last seen just 800 feet below the summit. Mallory's body was not found until May 1999, seventy-five years after his disappearance. The whereabouts of Irvine's remains are still unknown. The question of whether the two men managed to reach the summit of Everest in 1924, twenty-eight years before Hillary and Tenzing, is unlikely ever to be resolved.

As soon as the ice-fall was first suggested as a possible route to the upper slopes of Everest it was recognised that climbing it would be a very hazardous undertaking. There was a constant risk of vast blocks of ice, each weighing thousands of tons, shifting and falling without warning as the glacier moved slowly downhill. Any climbers who happened to be nearby would stand no chance. They would be crushed to death instantly - like flies.

Had there been such an accident?

The shouts got louder and I could see two or three men approaching the camp from the direction of the ice-fall. They were waving their arms excitedly.

"Yeti! Yeti! There are Yeti tracks on the ice-fall!"

The Yeti, more popularly known as the 'Abominable Snowman', is the very stuff of Himalayan legend. No photograph of a Yeti has ever been taken and, like the Loch Ness Monster, there is no proof that such a creature truly exists, but various Sherpas in Pheriche had told me how they had been chased by one of these huge creatures and barely escaped with their lives. They were in no doubt that the Yeti was real.

"The female Yeti is much more dangerous than the male," they would tell me. "But there is one thing always to remember. The female has very large breasts. If you are being chased you should always run down the hill. Female Yeti does not like to run down the hill. It trips over its breasts and you get away."

It was good advice. I would remember it. Just in case!

The Yeti tracks had appeared overnight, when nobody from the expedition was up on the ice-fall. The two tracks of very large, bear-like footprints had definitely not been there the previous day. No animals live permanently at such a high altitude and very few make even brief visits as there is no food for them. Snow leopards have occasionally been spotted high in the Himalayas, but never bears.

I climbed up the ice-fall with some other members of the Polish expedition to take a look at the footprints. It was immediately obvious that they were much larger than those which would have been left by a snow leopard.

Yeti footprints had been seen in the Everest region on several occasions over the previous fifty years, most famously by Eric Shipton during the 1951 Everest Expedition, but the tracks we were looking at on the ice-fall were unusually clear. They extended for several hundred yards, and led across the ice-fall to where it merged with the lowest slopes of Nuptse.

Numerous pictures were taken, some with ice axes laid alongside them exactly as the mountaineer Eric Shipton had done almost twenty-five years earlier, to give an idea of the unusual size of the prints.

Being a little more fluent in English than the Polish climbers I was given the task of putting together a report about the discovery. It was telegraphed via Namche Bazaar to Reuters and to The Times in London. Within a short time my brief report was appearing in newspapers across the world.

Six months later, when we were in Australia, a letter arrived from a member of my family back in England. With it was a cutting from The Times and a brief note:

'Did you by any chance hear that some Yeti tracks were seen on Everest while you were up there?'

Well, yes, I wrote back. We did actually.

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After completing our work at Pheriche we visited the revered Buddhist Lama, Ngawang Tenzin Jangpo Rinpoche, abbot of the nearby Tengboche Monastery. The abbot had been in charge of the monastery since 1956 when he was recognised as being as the *tulku*, or reincarnation, of Lama Gulu, the Buddhist Lama who founded Tengboche Monastery in 1916.

The reason for our visit was that we had been told that a scalp and a hand, believed to be those of a Yeti, were kept at Tengboche.

Like the relics which can be found in Roman Catholic churches they were regarded as sacred objects. Because they were so important they were kept locked away in a wooden box, from which they were almost never removed. The abbot very generously agreed to show them to us and also permitted my wife to hold them so I could take photographs.

Sadly these rare and irreplaceable objects have since disappeared. Nobody seems to know whether they have been mislaid, or whether they have been stolen.

Ngawang Tenzin Jangpo Rinpoche died in October 2020 at the age of eighty five. Efforts are being made to identify his reincarnation who, as I write this piece in 2022, will still be an infant. When he is eventually found, which may not be for several years, the boy will enter into training to become a Buddhist monk. Then he will be ordained as the new abbot of Tengboche Monastery.

The 'Yeti Scalp' at Tengboche Monastery

The 'Yeti Hand' at Tengboche Monastery

Were those tracks which I photographed on the Khumbu Ice-fall all those years ago made by a Yeti?

It is impossible to know.

What is certain, however, is that the 'Yeti Scalp' and the 'Yeti Hand', which were kept so carefully at Tengboche and used in various of their Buddhist ceremonies, were unfortunately not genuine. Laboratory tests on a small sample, organised by Sir Edmund Hillary, established that the scalp was fashioned from the hide of a goat-antelope native to the Himalayan region. And the hand is quite obviously a set of mammalian bones to which a claw has been clumsily attached.

Neither of these venerated objects were what they were believed to be. But Khumjo Chumbi, the Buddhist monk who was given the task of looking after the 'Yeti Scalp' while it was being tested, had an interesting take on such beliefs.

"We don't believe in giraffes and lions in Nepal," he once said, "because there aren't any there. Likewise, you don't believe in Yetis because you have none in your country."

It's a fair comment.

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Sadly the Polish expedition was not successful in making what would have been the first-ever ascent of Lhotse in the winter season. Towards the end of December, several weeks after our visit to Base Camp, the weather started to deteriorate rapidly. Hurricane-force winds and heavy snowfalls made climbing at high altitude impossible. Frequent avalanches thundered down the icy slopes of Lhotse while the powerful winds threatened to sweep the climbers off the steep rocks.

One member of the team froze to death overnight when he was caught in a sudden storm and was unable to find his way back to camp. His body was found the following day, still attached to a climbing rope, a few hundred feet above the camp. His fellow climbers laid him to rest in a nearby crevasse.

The Nepalese winter had truly arrived.

Despite having climbed to within a couple of hundred feet of the summit before the weather changed, the Polish team were forced to abandon the expedition and admit defeat.