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# INTO THE CLOUDS

THE RACE TO CLIMB THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS MOUNTAIN

TOD OLSON

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## THE RACE TO CLIMB THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS MOUNTAIN

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To the Children of the Belay

K2, the second-highest mountain on Earth, rises more than 5 miles above sea level.

# Prologue

**Camp VIII, K2, August 6, 1953**

All they needed were three good days. Three days without winds strong enough to blow them off the mountainside. Three days without those tiny ice crystals that filled the air so thoroughly they had to cover their mouths with a mitten to breathe. Three days of weather clear enough to see the route between their lonely tents and the top of the second-highest mountain on Earth.

On the afternoon of August 6, 1953, Charlie Houston knew those three days might not come soon enough. He was a doctor in his other life, 7,000 miles away in New Hampshire. Now, in the relative shelter of their tents, he examined his climbing partners one by one. When he made George Bell take his boots off, he could see that two toes were starting to blacken from frostbite. Bob Craig didn't look much better. There were nasty spots on his heels, the first sign that ice crystals were forming in the flesh. Dee Molenaar was struggling, too. He had lost at least 30 pounds

since leaving home three months ago. He had a painful sore throat, and his right foot had turned blue and itchy in places.

Outside the tents, the wind howled. Snow blew sideways through the air. Fresh white powder piled up on the mountainside. Some slopes held tons of the stuff, ready to avalanche thousands of feet to the valley with one misplaced boot. Climbing was out of the question. During the worst of the storm, just walking from tent to tent felt like too big a risk.

It was maddening, really. Twice before, Houston had been within a day's climb of one of Earth's highest summits. And still he hadn't made it.

Now he was within reach again. For six days the team had been camped on a shoulder of the mountain known as K2. They were eight men packed into three tents, 25,000 feet above the Asian nation of Pakistan.

Three thousand feet above them stood the summit. No one on Earth had ever set foot there. Seven weeks of painstaking work had gotten them to this nearly level sliver of ground. But once they arrived, the sky had closed in on them.

Day after day, blizzard conditions hid both the summit above and the valley below. They still had radio contact with Base Camp. But that weak voice scratching through their speaker was the only sign of the world below.

Camp VIII, high above the highway-like tracks of two glaciers.

Otherwise, it felt to Houston like they were the only people in existence.

Some days had been so brutal they'd barely left their sleeping bags. But even then, the cold stalked them. It forced its way through the tent walls, through the insulated down bags, through layers of wool and cotton and nylon. No matter how deep they burrowed, they never got warm.

They did what they could to keep from going crazy with boredom. Sometimes, Houston's longtime friend and climbing partner, Bob Bates, read to the rest of them. Sometimes they just lay there while the wind-whipped tent walls slapped at their shoulders and heads.

Mostly, they planned their push to the summit.

The day before, on August 5, they had picked the summit teams by secret vote—two pairs of climbers who would set out as soon as the weather broke. Both teams were prepared never to reveal that they had been to the top of the

The team, with the flag they hoped to place on the summit. Left to right: Bob Bates, Tony Streather, Charlie Houston, Dee Molenaar, George Bell, Bob Craig.

world. If they succeeded, the expedition's official announcement would say only, "Two men reached the top." Houston wanted the entire team to get credit.

It was the way he had planned it from the start. To Houston, climbing was teamwork—"the fellowship of the rope," he called it. On the mountain, they climbed tied together at the waist, bound in a partnership. If one climber fell, the other could be swept a mile down a mountainside to his death. Or he could save his partner's life with an ice axe, jammed into the snow at the last possible moment. The climbers held each other's lives in hand. They succeeded together or failed together.

Too often it didn't happen that way. Fourteen years earlier, just a few hundred feet below Houston's high camp, an American climber named Dudley Wolfe lay in a tent, alone and dying. His expedition had fallen apart. Most of the party sat at Base Camp, recovering from exhaustion and altitude sickness. In the chaos, Wolfe had been left behind. Three climbers from Nepal struggled back up the mountain and tried to reach him in a howling storm. The four men were never seen again.

By 1953, all trace of Wolfe's final camp had been swept from the mountain. But no one in Houston's expedition had forgotten his story.

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When Houston's team began to poke their heads outside the tents on August 7, the weather looked promising. The wind had calmed a bit. Skies were overcast, but the clouds hung high. Visibility was good enough for climbing. The mountain, it seemed, had finally given them a break.

In the morning light, the men began to stumble around in the snow. To Houston they looked like castaways from a shipwreck just reaching shore.

Bob Craig emerged from his tent. If the weather held, it looked like he and Pete Schoening, the youngest of them all, might make a dash for the summit.

Craig was standing outside his tent, fumbling with his camera, when he saw Art Gilkey come out into the light. More than anyone else on the team, Gilkey had his heart set on reaching the top of K2. He'd been complaining of leg cramps for a couple of days, but he'd proven himself strong enough to be voted onto the second summit team.

Craig was about to snap a photo when Gilkey stumbled and collapsed in the snow.

The climbers made their way to their fallen teammate as fast as they could. It looked like Gilkey had passed out for a moment, but he lifted his head and said, "I'm all right. It's just my leg, that's all."

In fact, he was far from all right.

They pulled Gilkey up and half dragged him back into his tent. Houston helped him peel off a couple of layers

of clothing and did not like what he saw. Gilkey's left ankle was red, swollen, and painful to the touch. The skin felt warm.

Gilkey looked at Houston hopefully. "It's sure to clear up in another day, isn't it?"

Houston could hear the doubt in his climbing partner's voice. There may have been a hint of desperation, too. Mumbling some words of reassurance, Houston wrapped both of Gilkey's calves tightly. Then he excused himself and went back to the others to report the bad news.

Gilkey, Houston said, had developed clots in the veins of his left calf, blocking his circulation. Even with perfect blood flow, the extreme cold put limbs at risk. Without it, Gilkey's leg was in dire trouble. "What's more," Houston went on, "sometimes bits of clot break off and are carried to the lungs. At sea level, it's often fatal. Up here . . ." Houston trailed off, not wanting to finish the thought.

It was every climber's nightmare, becoming disabled near the top of a mountain. And the moment it became apparent was full of unasked questions. If Gilkey truly couldn't climb, there was only one way for him to get down: Houston, Bates, and the others would have to carry him. That was a task that would put each of them near the edge of death.

No humans had ever spent this much time this high above sea level and survived. For a week now, they had

been on the edge of what climbers call the Death Zone. As a doctor, Houston knew exactly what that meant. For seven days they had been breathing air without enough oxygen in it. Their bodies and their brains were slowly dying. Every step took extreme effort. The simplest decisions required intense concentration.

Each climber barely had the strength to be responsible for himself. How could they possibly get Art Gilkey down alive?

PART ONE

# 1938
# The Dirty Work

**The First American Karakoram Expedition**
Standing from second to left: Bill House, Charlie Houston (pronounced *how-ston*), Norman Streatfeild, Paul Petzoldt, Bob Bates, Dick Burdsall. Seated: Ang Pemba, Phinsoo, Pasang Kikuli, Pemba Kitar, Tse Tendrup, Sonam.

# 1

# Because It's There

The mountain that held Charlie Houston and his team of climbers high on its slopes was born millions of years ago in a collision that reshaped the face of the Earth. The landmass we call India lay far off the southern coast of Asia. As the Earth's crust shifted beneath it, the Indian continent edged northward through the ocean. While it traveled, dinosaurs went extinct, an ice age came and went, apes began walking on two legs and evolved into humans.

This massive continent plowed into the rest of Asia 50 million years before Houston's expedition. It slowed but didn't stop. One giant landmass ground into another. Over millions of years, the land thrust toward the sky and created the highest mountains on Earth.

They're known as the Himalaya—"abode of snow" in the Sanskrit language of India—and there is nothing on the globe that compares to them. The mountains range along China's border with Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Thirty-seven of them tower more than 25,000 feet above sea level. Twelve rise more than five miles into the sky. The tallest mountain outside of Asia is the 22,841-foot-high Aconcagua in Argentina. Move it to the Himalaya and it wouldn't rank in the top 200. "Most mountains are of the Earth," wrote John Kenneth Galbraith, an American ambassador to India. "The Himalayas belong to the heavens."

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A few thousand years ago—just a sliver in the timeline of a mountain's life—humans began to build homes in the shadow of the Himalayan summits. These villagers hunted in the foothills of the mountains. They used frigid river water to coax barley and wheat out of the soil. They carried heavy loads through low mountain passes to trade in other lands. They learned to call the mountains home.

Never, as far as we know, did they try to climb to the top.

Who, after all, would want to? On the high slopes of the Himalaya, there is no such thing as summer. Snow and ice smother massive slabs of rock all year round. Winds whip the summits at speeds over 100 miles an hour. Nothing grows. And nothing survives for long.

Like Galbraith, the people of the Himalaya were convinced that the high peaks didn't belong to humans. The mountains were the home of the gods. And the gods did not want visitors. In 1830, a British official named G. W.

## INTO THE CLOUDS

Traill stumbled out of the Himalaya after one of the earliest Western expeditions there. The glare from the snow had turned his eyes swollen and raw. The locals who greeted him decided that the mountain goddess had struck him blind for trespassing. Legend has it she took pity on Traill and restored his sight—after he made a cash offering at a nearby temple.

Wanderers in the mountains—traders, warriors, and religious missionaries—warned about other dangers lurking in the snow and ice. Some people told stories of a giant, two-legged snowman known as a Yeti. In the 600s, the Buddhist missionary Xuanzang returned to China from a Himalayan journey with this advice: "Travelers are often attacked by fierce dragons so they should neither wear red

The Himalaya, from the top of a peak in India.

garments nor carry gourds with them, nor shout loudly," he warned. "Even the slightest violation of these rules will invite disaster."

But gods and mythological creatures weren't the only forces keeping people off the high peaks. Travelers also noticed a more earthbound hazard: People who climbed too high on the slopes got sick. "Men's bodies become feverish, they lose color, and are attacked with headache and vomiting; the asses and cattle being all in like condition," warned a Chinese general in AD 20. In fact, the peaks had been named for their hazards. There was "Mount Greater Headache," "Mount Lesser Headache," and "Fever Hill."

Almost 2,000 years after the general's observation, science solved the mystery of Mount Greater Headache. The

problem at the very top of the world is that breathing no longer does the body much good. As the mountain slopes rise, gravity fades and releases its pressure. The molecules that make up air—mostly nitrogen and oxygen—float farther and farther apart. Every breath taken at the top of the Himalaya has one-third the oxygen of a breath taken on the shore of the ocean. That's not enough to keep a human alive for long.

In 1953, a Swiss doctor named Edward Wyss-Dunant drew an imaginary line at 25,500 feet above sea level. "Life there is impossible," he wrote, "and it requires the whole of a man's will to maintain himself there for a few days." He called this region the "death zone."

The Earth has plenty of unwelcoming places. But humans have learned to live in most of them. Nomadic people inhabit the desert, moving from watering hole to watering hole. A research station sits atop the South Pole, and scientists huddle there through the winter. The high peaks of the Himalaya may be the only land area on the globe where humans simply can't survive.

It might as well be another planet.

▲

Humans started exploring the Himalayan summits for the same reason they learned to blast themselves into space. They didn't want their enemies to get there first.

In the 1700s, the British came to India to make money.

Merchants from the British East India Company traded for spices, tea, and textiles in the Himalayan foothills. Before long, they had an army supporting them. British governors took over India from Calcutta to Kashmir—2,000 miles along the southwestern border of the highest mountains in the world.

Right behind the merchants and the soldiers and the governors came the surveyors, eager to stake out the boundaries of the empire. They hired local porters to lug their equipment up the mountainsides. From there they mapped the valleys and measured the peaks. They even recruited Indian spies, known as pundits, to explore the hidden passes of the Himalaya. Their job was to watch for Russians making their way across the spine of the mountains from the north.

In the late 1800s, a new kind of climber arrived in the Himalaya. These men (they were nearly all men) came from Europe and sometimes the United States. On some expeditions, they had surveyors or soldiers with them. But they went to the mountains not to make maps or extend empires. They climbed for the sheer challenge of setting foot on one of the most inaccessible places on Earth.

"If I am asked what is the use of climbing," said Francis Younghusband, who was both a soldier and a mountaineer, "I reply, No use at all: no more use than kicking a football about, or dancing, or playing the piano, or writing a poem, or

painting a picture." Climbing to the top of the world would "elevate the human spirit," he believed. It would prove that humans were "getting the upper hand on the earth [and] acquiring a true mastery of their surroundings."

But more often than not, it was the mountains that got the upper hand. That became clear right at the start. In 1895, a British mountaineer named Albert Frederick Mummery set out to climb Nanga Parbat, at the western edge of the Himalaya. Mummery had mastered the rock and ice walls of the Swiss Alps, and when he first saw Nanga Parbat, he was convinced it wouldn't be much harder.

He was wrong.

Nanga Parbat's summit stood 26,600 feet above the sea, more than 10,000 feet higher than any peak in the Alps. Mummery and his climbing partners spent a month trying various routes until the mountain left them one final chance to reach the top—a steep, icy wall called the Rakhiot Face. Mummery's climbing partners opted for a safe but roundabout route to the base of the wall. But Mummery was impatient with the mountain. On August 24, he took two Indian porters on a shortcut through a high mountain pass. The three men were never seen again.

▲

The deaths of Mummery and his Indian companions didn't stop the new breed of mountaineers. Fourteen peaks in the Himalaya stood higher than 8,000 meters (26,247 feet),

and they became the coveted prizes in a race to the top of the world. Climbers paid for their expeditions in part by selling their stories to newspapers and magazines. Back home, Europeans and Americans devoured the tales of adventure. The names of the mountains rang with mystery: Cho Oyu, Dhaulagiri, Makalu, and Gasherbrum. The public was fascinated by the danger.

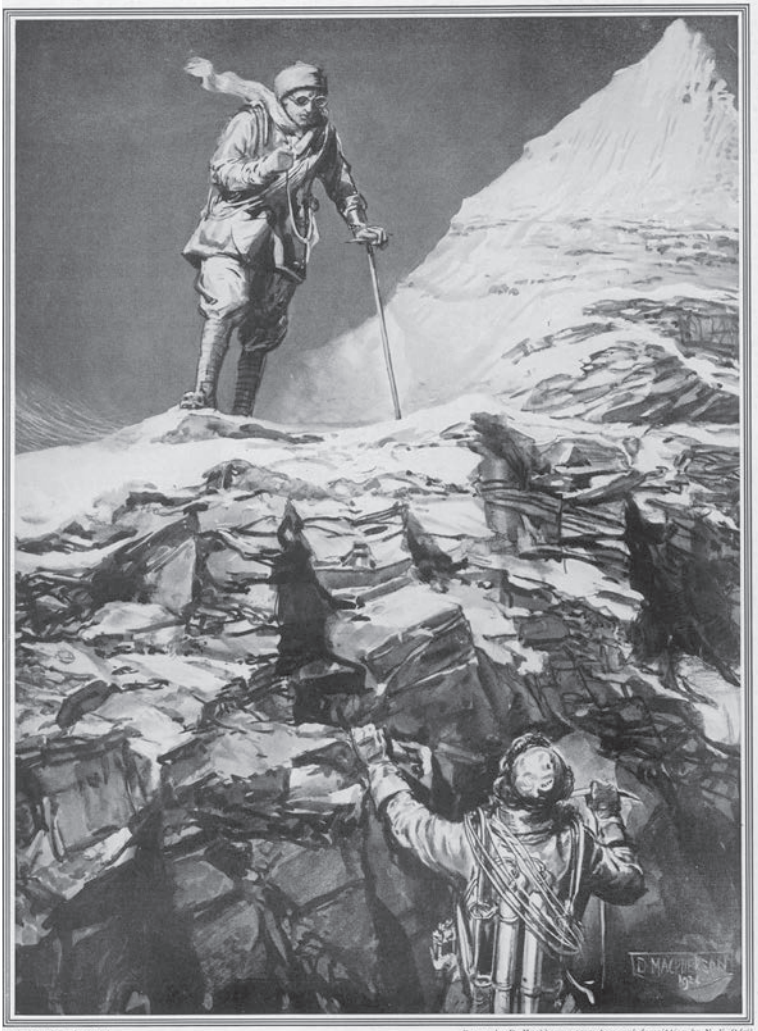
In 1921, the magazine *Lady's Pictorial* published a breathless article about one of the first attempts on Everest, the tallest mountain of all. "Who first faces and triumphs over the intense cold, avalanches, terrific winds, blinding snowstorms, loneliness, and unknown other perils of this mountain of mystery and magic will be forever famous. What an adventure! What a thrilling story to tell!" Before running out of exclamation points, the writer added, "But, alas! What certain sacrifice of life must be made in the effort."

Everest had become the great challenge in the Himalaya, and in 1924, a British climber named George Mallory nearly fought his way to the top. But he and his climbing partner vanished 800 feet below the summit. Before his final expedition, Mallory had given a cryptic answer to the question every climber had to field. When a reporter asked him why he wanted to climb Everest, he replied, "Because it's there."

By 1938, none of the 8,000-meter peaks had been

# WAS THE SUMMIT OF EVEREST REACHED?

*Mr. Odell's Story, which is Now Being Told from the Lecture Platform*



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THE LAST PHASE OF THE EXPEDITION—IRVINE AND MALLORY SCALING THE FINAL HEIGHTS TOWARDS "THE CITADEL," WHICH, INDEED, THEY MAY ACTUALLY HAVE REACHED

A magazine article from 1924 wondering if Mallory and his climbing partner, Andrew Irvine, made it to the summit of Everest before they vanished.

climbed. Seven expeditions had attempted Everest and seven had failed. Twelve people had died trying. In 1934, a German expedition to Nanga Parbat had fallen apart in a devastating storm. Nine climbers died trying to make it back down the mountain. Just two years later, an avalanche tumbled from the heights of the same peak, smothering 16 climbers in their camp.

An article appeared in the *New York Times* in April of 1938, once again wondering why climbers seemed to be so obsessed with such a dangerous pursuit. "[Mankind] has the notion that he can't rightly claim title to his planet till he has walked over all of its surface that will bear his weight. He has put his heel on the poles, the continental ice caps, the lonely jungles and deserts and the loftiest peaks of Europe, the Americas and Africa. The last great unknowns left for him on earth are the still untrodden mountain tops in the heart of Asia."

That article also announced a new expedition, not to Everest but to the second-highest mountain in the world. This peak was about as unknown as any place on Earth. It stood tucked away in the far northern reaches of the Himalaya. It was so hard to get to that only two expeditions had even attempted to climb it.

The mountain was K2, and the leader of the expedition was a 24-year-old medical student named Charlie Houston.

Houston had been keeping a journal since he started

planning the expedition, and he'd been thinking about his own reasons for climbing. "Is it not better to take risks . . . than die within from rot? Is it not better to change one's life completely than to wait for the brain to set firmly and irreversibly in one way of life and one environment? I think it is . . . taking risks, not for the sake of danger alone, but for the sake of growth, is more important than any security one can buy or inherit."

It would be another 15 years before Houston attempted one of the riskiest operations in the history of mountaineering: getting Art Gilkey down from 25,000 feet. But that story begins here, in 1938, as Charlie Houston prepared to lead his first K2 expedition across the Atlantic Ocean into the heart of the Himalaya.

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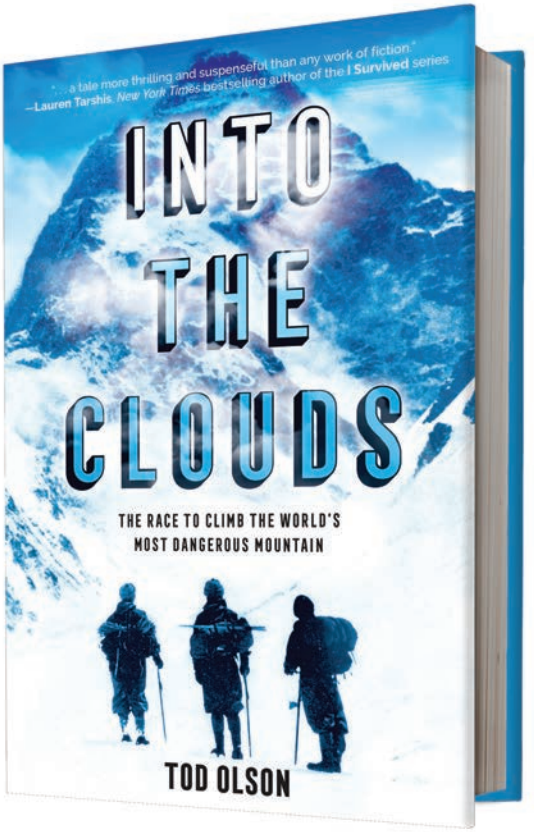


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