

THE ASCENT OF F

C. L. INKER.

"You may remember—" bellowed a tanned and weather-beaten voice from the most comfortable armchair.

We gathered round obediently, filled our briars, and prepared to listen. The speaker brooked no inattention from his fellow-members of the Senior Morons Club. Nor, indeed, would we willingly have missed one of his tales of peril on the heights, for the name of P. Cator, the great mountaineer, is known from Pole to Pole. His mother was one, of course, which explains his Polish first name—Prevàri.

"You may remember," continued Cator more quietly, when we were all settled and attentive, "the expedition of '36, when F #, the most pointed peak in the Himalayas, bowed its hitherto inviolate summit beneath the conquering boots of more than superhuman endeavour."

We recognised this as a phrase from his latest book and nodded reverently. The great man leaned forward impressively.

"That summit, gentlemen, has in reality never been trodden by the foot of man."

His voice was calm and cool, but there was an undeniable tension in the atmosphere. In the brief silence that followed his amazing revelation a waistcoat button, which flew off under some emotional stress, sounded loud as a gunshot as it landed in a remote corner of the smoking-room.

"To-night," Cator went on, "You shall hear the true facts — facts never before related."

He took a *piton* from his pocket and threw it with non-chalant accuracy at a surreptitiously-dozing member before proceeding with his narrative.

"As you all know, my trusted companion Major R. O. Adahead and I started to traverse the foothills of the Himalaya in Spring. We reached the Pushbar Toopen, and in those barren hills recruited our little force of 700 porters from the hardy Gaitas, toughest of Himalayan tribes. Then we travelled on, Adahead riding on a *yak* and myself on a *hak* which I had purchased for a couple of *laks*.

"After a journey fraught with mosquitoes and indigestion—the latter owing to a native food suggestively called *Bhang*—we passed Nsil, the last outpost of civilisation, and saw before

us our goal. High into the firmament rose the giant spire of F#, or to give it its native name, Chomo-bungho-ma, which signifies 'the Goddess-Mother-With-No-Room-on-Top.' And here it was that disaster overtook us. The porters deserted. Although we had reduced each man's load to 300 pounds, and promised them a wage of 2d. per day as soon as our Post-War Credits were paid, they evinced dissatisfaction and disappeared in the night.

"Adahead and I were left alone. We had reached the terminus of a glacier, but it was moving in the opposite direction to that in which we wished to go. Had there been a monastery handy we might have ridden further on *lamas*; but the monastery had been taken away as a souvenir by an American expedition in 1935. I got out the map and Adahead produced his Wolf Cub Compass, Not A Toy. With their aid we ascertained that we were on the Rhong Glacier."

He paused as though expecting comment, but none came—if one excepts a resounding snore from a well-dined member. The mountaineer prodded him awake with the gnarled ice-axe which never left his side and resumed his enthralling tale.

"I will not weary you with an account of our many trials and mishaps. How we lived by shooting the agile *seracs* as they leaped from pinnacle to pinnacle; how I nursed Adahead through a bad attack of chilblains; how we were stung by Abominable Snow-men; how, in the face of literally incredible difficulties, we succeeded at last in pitching our series of camps on the mountain, calling our first one Camp A and so rendering obsolete the old system of numerical nomenclature—all these things you may read in my book *Summit Up*, now reprinted at 45/-. On these things, then, I shall not dwell, but take you at once to a morning in June at our highest camp, Camp T.

"All the gale-racked night I had lain awake listening to Adahead talking in his sleep. The primitive rigour of our life had evidently set his subconscious mind running on the softer delights of civilisation, and he muttered endlessly of the fair women and draughts of nectar to be found at some British luxury hotel whose name sounded like Glandena. But in spite of a troubled night we were up early that morning, ready and keen to make a dash for the summit. We could see it plainly only 500 feet above us, a needle-like pinnacle of dazzling white."

He paused, a far-away look, both reminiscent and regretful, in his eyes. Either it was the Club port or the memory of that challenging summit. We decided it was probably the latter.

“ The air
Up there
Is rare ? ”

The temerarious breaker of that pregnant silence was young Meeter, the poet. Cator glaciated him with a glance and continued.

“ The atmosphere at 28,000 feet is so rare as to be infrequent. We had to take 65 breaths at every step. This made it difficult for Adahead, who had failed his School Certificate in Maths. and kept losing count. To make matters worse, the delays of our journey had brought us perilously close to the Monsoon. It might break at any moment. It was this knowledge that urged us onward into the frightful wind which had now risen. It was almost noon when we reached the foot of the final pyramid—or rather spike.

“ Well indeed had our peak been named. The summit-cone was nothing but a thin spire of ice a hundred feet high. Such a problem had never been faced by mountaineers before. Adahead was in no condition to deal with this problem, for we were now taking 96 breaths to every step, and the poor fellow was entirely preoccupied with his counting. On me fell the burden of decision, and I take full responsibility for what followed.

“ It was the very thinness of that slender pinnacle that gave me the solution. With Adahead paying out our 120-foot rope I rapidly cut steps completely round the foot of the cone. You see my plan ? It was to walk up that spire as a South Sea islander walks up a coconut palm, shifting the now complete circle of rope as I mounted. But it was not to be. As I rejoined Adahead he pointed with trembling finger to southward. The Monsoon was bending its way across the heavens—it was visibly about to break. What was to be done ? ”

He paused. The suspense was telling upon us, and we mopped our sweating brows. A few weaklings called for double brandies.

“ Nearer and nearer came the Monsoon,” Cator went on tensely. “ Its hot breath fanned our cheeks. All, it seemed, was lost. Then, with a tremendous report, it broke. Like an echo came a loud crack from the mountain on which we stood. The summit-pinnacle was toppling—yes, it was breaking clean off, weakened by the circle of steps I had cut in its base. Quicker than thought I whipped out my knife and cut the rope. Ada-

head did the same. We were not a second too soon. With a sickening plunge the whole summit of F # slid off the mountain to career down for 10,000 feet to the Wright Glacier on the east. Adahead and I, at the same instant, were blown off the mountain and slid with a plunge scarcely less emetic down to the Rhong Glacier on the west.

“By some miracle we slid into Camp A unhurt save for a fractured whisky-flask. But our hopes were shattered. The Monsoon was breaking into a thousand pieces all around us. Within the week we were heading for the foothills. Our supplies of nourishment were so nearly exhausted that we had to take water with it, and you may judge of our joy when at last we reached the first sign of civilisation—a finger post bearing the simple legend TO NSIL.

“And that, gentlemen, is the true story of that ill-fated expedition. That is why the summit of F #, that queen of virgin peaks, remains untrodden. For though we searched the Wright Glacier for the fallen summit, in order to set foot upon it, it was—naturally—inaccessible.”

“Why?” we all asked.

“The Monsoon,” replied Cator sadly, “had melted it.”

*The Rope, say certain schools of thought,
Is Moral Only in support;
But should the Climber fall, the Rope
Affords him some (immoral) Hope.
So, at the risk of Doing Wrong,
See that your rope is Very Strong.*

—from *THE CLIMBER'S VADE RETRO.*
