

Under the Spell of K2 and Gasherbrum

Kurt Diemberger

Photographs 3—7

It all began with an old book in my library; for many years I accompanied the author again and again through the chapters of what must have been one of the most fantastic adventures in exploration during this century. It was Eric Shipton's *Blank on the Map*. In 1937 his small expedition of four friends (Shipton, Auden, Spender, Tilman) accompanied by seven Sherpas crossed the watershed from Pakistan into the uninhabited Chinese area north of K2, exploring, surveying — a five months' enterprise of discovery — concluded with the return into Pakistan by three entirely different routes (having split the expedition for the way back) over the great Karakoram range between Shimshal and Askole. Reading this book you understand why the eyes of explorers shine when they speak of unknown valleys and mountains to discover, of passes to find and to cross. It is an adventure incomparably greater than climbing even a big mountain on an already well-known route. Still there is a link to mountaineering: to discover the secret side of a mountain, to find out the route and to try to follow it to the summit. . . .

Even then there is an old expedition saying: 'of all of it, exploration is the best part'. It is as if the spirit of the mountain comes to you with the view of the first days. . . .

Shipton must have felt it, when he saw K2 from the north; and I think I adopted this feeling from his words in the book and it turned into a great wish — 'The afternoon was fine, and nothing interrupted my view of the great amphitheatre about me. The cliffs and ridges of K2 rose out of the glacier in one stupendous sweep to the summit of the mountain, 12,000 feet above. The sight was beyond my comprehension, and I sat gazing at it, with a kind of timid fascination, wreaths of mist creep in and out of corries utterly remote. I saw ice avalanches, weighing perhaps hundreds of tons, break off from a hanging glacier, nearly two miles above my head; the ice was ground to a fine powder and drifted away in the breeze long before it reached the foot of the precipice, nor did any sound reach my ears.' — Shipton's words in *Blank on the Map*. He concludes — 'Sitting alone gazing at the cirque forming the head of the K2 glacier was an experience I shall not forget; no mountain scene has impressed me more deeply.'

In 1957, for the first time, I saw K2 with my own eyes from the Baltoro side, and viewed the Shaksgam valley together with Hermann Buhl on the way to the summit of Broad Peak; this fabulous valley, running east-west along the Karakoram range, one of the aims not only of Shipton's expedition, but already of Sir Francis Younghusband, of Filippo de Filippi, of Ardito Desio — long, long ago. Time stood still on the northern side of the Karakoram, while from the south, all of a sudden, there arrived a real explosion of climbing expeditions! In 1979,



3 *Camels below Aghil Pass*

Photo: Julie Tullis & Kurt Diemberger

when I visited the Baltoro again, I felt the enormous difference to the Fifties, when Hermann Buhl's expedition had been the only enterprise of the season in the whole area. And it was now that the wish turned into a need. . . .

4th August 1979: on the top of Gasherbrum II, 8035m. I told my companions not to wait for me, to go down and leave me yet for a while on this summit. I want to be alone with these Karakoram mountains which surround me, under a grey and menacing sky, which seems to tell of an approaching change in the weather.

Over there, so close, is Broad Peak; there soars K2! It seems incredible to me that 22 years have passed since I saw them for the first time. But they have passed: then, in 1957, when we four climbers did the ascent of our mountain, this lonely first ascent of Broad Peak, we felt like explorers too — being surrounded by a mountain world without men, abode of spirits and demons, who are with ridges, glaciers and peaks. . . .

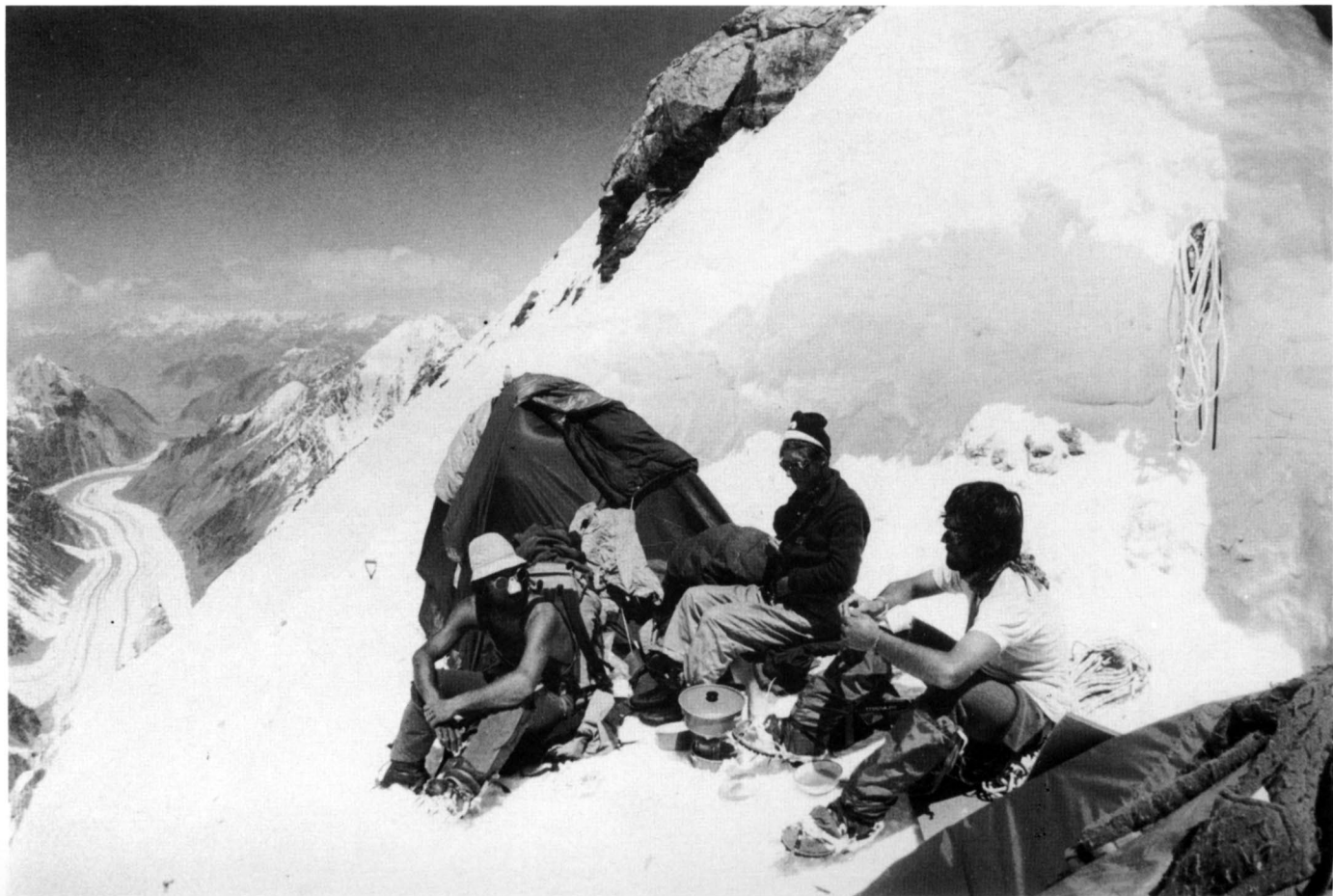
This year, there are about 15 expeditions here around: a basecamp here, a basecamp there — one could shake hands almost from one crew to the next! From a certain point of view, one could say, it is nice, because here on the Baltoro glacier you may meet friends whom, in Europe, you had not met for years! On the other hand . . . I look towards the grey sky, more and more menacing, that extends over the Karakoram mountains — is this yet the place of gods and spirits? With all these many people, have they not gone somewhere else?

Looking towards the north, over the thousands of peaks of Sinkiang, I have the feeling, beyond all beliefs and legends of the mountain-gods, that there is an untouched ocean, so immense, that its limits are out of my eyes' view — where mountains are still to discover and not only to climb.

There is another era — a different time, the time of explorers. It is hard to believe that it is not past but present. Down there is a world with no men, the enormous Shaxsgam valley, the fantastic belts of the unexplored Broad Peak — and Gasherbrum glacier, silent processions of white and blue ice-pinnacles — and nobody has ever touched them.

Standing on the top of Gasherbrum, alone, above one time behind me and another time that extends in front of me — I feel this wish so strongly, so overwhelming: to be down there between these ice-pinnacles, to touch them, and walk and walk through a mountain-desert, where for hundreds of miles you will meet nobody.

May 1982: realisation of dreams has never been easy in my life, but once I have made up my mind, I have usually succeeded. Thus, now I am in the Shaxsgam valley, walking along an immense field of gravel, a river-bed with no river in it — now; at this time of the year, in spring. 'Bubu' is with me (the Italian mountaineer Enzo De Menech) and Su, a Chinese interpreter, at present with no professional activity, as the other two in our group are the two donkeys, who carry the loads. Su has become our very good friend; an incredibly enthusiastic and helpful person, mountain climber, but he has crossed the whole of China on a bicycle. Our first aim will be the Gasherbrum glacier, the place I looked down to from the top of Gasherbrum II three years earlier. Then we will explore K2 for an Italian expedition, which will be organised for 1983 by Francesco Santon from Venice; he



4 Camp 2 on K2

Photo: Julie Tullis & Kurt Diemberger

is the man with whom I decided to put into realisation the other half of this Karakoram-dream: K2 via its most beautiful route, the great spur through the fabulous N face. (At this point it was not yet foreseeable whether the Japanese expedition of Konishi-Shingai '82 would be successful before the Italians; they succeeded, even without oxygen, to the summit via the N face, but avoided the last 550m of Direttissima on the spur itself).

... We have reached this incredible Place of Fantasy in ice! The castles, towers, crystals of the Gasherbrum glacier. A fairy world. It is like a dream that appears, takes shape and colour from grey to blue to green out of the cold mist at over 3600m. Certainly our exploration of K2 was more useful for the 1983 expedition than this Gasherbrum exploration — because the mist never went away as long as we were at the glacier and only Su and I got a miraculous early morning view through the blue shades of slighter haze in the dawn of the whole Gasherbrum range. But that does not matter: I have a reason to come back in 1983 to the same place!

And while the main expedition is on the way to their basecamp close to the K2-glacier, while 120 camels are moving all the gear and food of this big enterprise towards the mountain, while the first loads change from the camels' backs to the shoulders of the mountaineers (as camels do not walk on glaciers) ... I am having my own small film expedition to the Gasherbrum — and Broad Peak glacier. Filming is as important as exploration this time — and we are lucky, really lucky with the weather! We can push forward over these glaciers to points which have never been reached before, we can explore routes for future expeditions through the giant Gasherbrum-Broad Peak wall, we have all the pleasures of the first touch of unknown country!

It is a small group: Gianni Scarpellini, the other cameraman besides me, Julie Tullis — my film assistant, Joska Rakoncaj and Pierangelo Zanga. Five people who will never forget the happiness of discovery like in the old explorers' times.

Later on, during the hard filmwork for K2, when Gianni Scarpellini was already back in Italy, all the stress of filming and a good deal of the carrying was left on Julie Tullis' and my shoulders. We could never have made it, spiritually, to produce a good film under the monotony of a climbing only expedition, if we had not, again and again, explored in between. Because the roots of real mountaineering are there.

Filming the North Face of K2

My camel leans against the current of the rushing river, spume surrounds us and the thunder and the roaring of the high waters. I feel how the animal touches the bottom with its feet to find hidden holes, as the power of the whirling floods dig them into the stony sandy bed of the Kaladjin River. This Valley of Shaksgam in Sinkiang, now in August, is a whole net of water-arms and islands, almost a mile wide, enclosed between the pale faces of the Kuen Lun and the Karakoram mountains; for days we have been searching our way through the enormous valley. ...

I feel how my animal moves forward slowly, it has disappeared now till over its belly in the brown, foaming flood, the prow-wave in front of its throat is carried away by the current — moments like this we have had many times these last days!



5 Julie Tullis on fixed ropes on K2

Photo: Julie Tullis & Kurt Diemberger

And they make me sweat in fear for the 10,000m of film and hours of sound-tapes, which Julie Tullis and I have turned on this expedition. Five movie cameras are also in the play: certainly, our boxes are sealed well, but if a camel feels it is going under, it does everything to get rid of its load — which is understandable. Yesterday we lost four loads in the river, today three — so far nobody has been drowned, but these wild waters can make even the nerves of mountaineers tremble; mountaineers who are used to the most furious of Himalayan storms. Wild waters on the return or approach of expeditions have already claimed many victims!

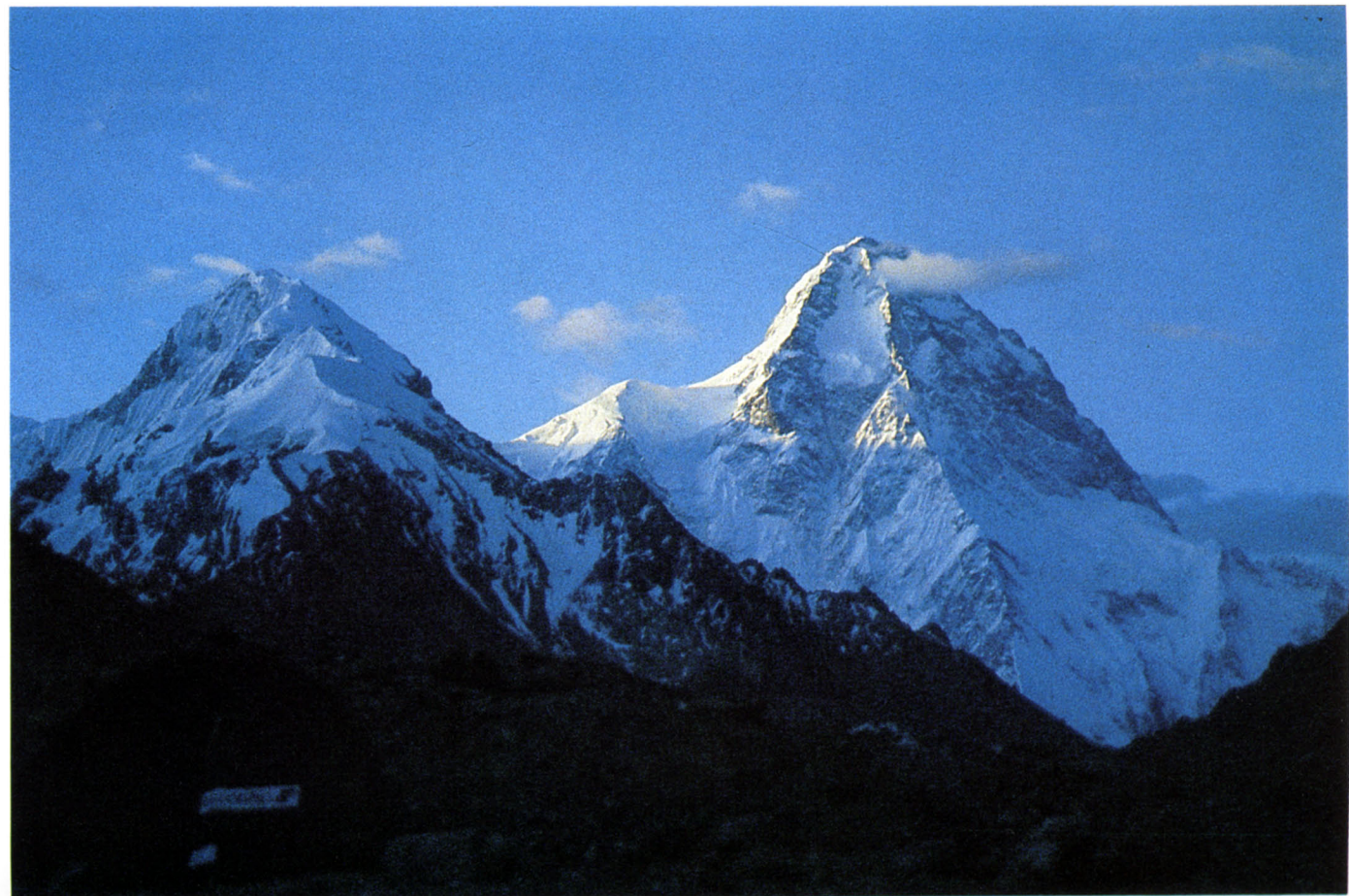
Yes, we are a successful expedition, but at present nobody wants to know about summits — we are a crew of 22 dissipated figures, who feel burning in their mind, after four months in the mountain desert of Sinkiang, only the one desire: home! With this desperate wish we throw ourselves again and again into the brown flood of the river, from water-arm to water-arm, from rock-island to rock-island, from day to day.

The hardship on the mountain and the load carrying up the glacier (there are no porters in Sinkiang) has made some of us lose up to 40lbs of our bodyweight. Our clothes are flapping loosely round our wasted arms and legs, and our faces are rugged and thin. But we are going back in friendship.

Living in a glacier crevasse. 'Don't ruin the icicles, when you snap the clapperboard shut for the film!' I shout to Pierangelo Zanga, the bearded Italian from Bergamo, who was with us on the Gasherbrum exploration. He is so strong that we call him 'Angelo Sherpa.' There is, however, no lack of icicles here around! They grow in this crevasse at 5800m on the N face of K2 like mushrooms: you can always pick them from the wall, for a soup from icicles, tea from icicles. . . . You can even pick them from your beard, if you sit long enough in that cave. So I am filming across icicle curtains, the tents of camp 1 are under icicles and Julie has even hidden the microphone behind a bunch of icicles. Finally: Take number one! And while the action, the camera and the recorder are running, Pierangelo has jumped out of our ice-box into the sunshine (outside the sun burns down relentlessly, whilst inside the crevasse we are below freezing point . . . that's the reason why we have so many icicles).

It certainly needs a strong belief in what you want to achieve when making a film on a difficult mountain. A handicap is that not many mountaineers are very interested in helping you while they are on the climb — it is the summit that counts, not the film. But tomorrow Luca Argentero will carry the big Arriflex up to Camp 2, which is about 900m higher on the ridge — a climb over long steep traverses on ice slabs to the right, then over rocks and snowfields back until close to the spur. Julie and I will carry our personal gear, a lightweight tent, the sound equipment, a summit camera. . . .

Being a film team on an expedition often means moving outside normal climbing strategy, because filming has its own rules. So we were not surprised, for example, that when we got to the crevasse camp for the first time, there was no space in the tents for us; we simply shovelled out a snowhole for ourselves and passed the night in a perlon bivouac bag. Since then we have always preferred to carry our super-lightweight tent with us, which may even give us a chance to be at



6 · K2 N ridge seen from China

Photo: Julie Tullis & Kurt Diemberger

the right day, at the right hour, high enough for the summit. . . .

A gift; a dream that vanishes in a storm. To be so high at 8000m on K2 is like sitting on a cloud and look down to an ocean of peaks: it is fantastic! There are the belts of shimmering glaciers in the depth; there is Nanga Parbat out in the distance; there, as if they were cut out with scissors, are the shapes of far blue giants of the Karakoram on the horizon. It is incredibly beautiful. Even though by now I have only the summit camera with me, I shall fix these unforgettable moments on the celluloid: others down there shall take part in our adventure.

In the meantime four of us have reached the summit: Agostino da Polenza, Joska Rakoncaj, Sergio Martini and Fausto de Stefani — on two different days. Will the weather be graceful to us too? It is a gift to get to 8000m on such a mountain; there is every reason to be thankful to destiny. But once you are so high, so close to the summit, there is this great desire to go up to it! A dream — little more than 550m higher! Yet this is much at such an altitude, and we are moving without oxygen. And have pitched our little tent for the last time, at 8000m. . . . Then: . . . 'First hissing of wind around us! All is grey in grey outside. Snowflakes whirling through the air — hours pass, but time has become unimportant: what counts are the inches of snow which accumulate, and the power of the storm that howls over the ridges! Our tent resists, thanks to its streamline shape and the heavy rocks which I have put on the anchors.

'We feel that it is over for us: this storm will never give us a chance for the summit, and at this altitude nobody can wait very long. Still we are thankful to be here, to have made it up to here together. Our K2 — on a mountain it is not only the summit, that counts —'





7 Julie Tullis and Kurt Diemberger below K2

Photo: Julie Tullis & Kurt Diemberger