Mulkila, Mulkila

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There was a point on the glacier when I thought of white lace, the English countryside and fainting at an open window as I inhaled the spring air. My small feet, though firmly wedged by strong boots, still would not brace themselves against the battering angles and edges of the boulder-field. There was not a thing to see in any direction except boulders – brown ones, pink ones, white ones, grey slaggy ones and icy-blue ones, rising and falling like the peaks and troughs of a giant scarred battlefield.

This was the romance and heroism of the Himalaya. It is impossible to skirt the male-dominated legends that pave the way for female endeavour. Of course, we too can be strong and hearty, bare our bottoms at Base Camp, fart and make rude jokes and declare how ridiculous we all are. But at that moment, alone and exhausted on the boulder-field, all I wanted was to be holding a bag of clothes pegs, a bundle of clean washing and putting the items on a clothes-line blowing in the wind. This was definitely a case of Cinderella and The Three Musketeers. Well, girls will be boys, so let the story begin.

Late one afternoon in June, Bert, in his usual laconic style, was mumbling abstractedly about some plans to go to the Himalaya in July. No one was sure about anything, least of all who was going, where they were going or, indeed, when. But in the inimitable style of the North London Mountaineering Club, somehow, three weeks later, an expedition materialized and met at London Airport complete with team, tickets, equipment and supplies, a name and a destination: North London-Lahoul, Andrew Bankes, Bert Simmonds, Maggie Urmston and Henry Todd.

A few words in passing about the team members, to set the tone for later developments: Andrew and Bert formed a climbing partnership of long standing and considerable alpine expertise. Henry had had one season some years previously in the Alps, and I had never even set eyes upon a glacier, let alone set foot upon a mountain. Henry and I had spent an intense summer rock-climbing together, and had barely met Bert and Andrew when the plan to go to India was conceived. However, although strangers to each other, Andrew and Henry could both lay claim to previous intimate knowledge of the sub-continent – a factor that contributed to much amusement later on as each vied with the other over their authoritative acquaintance with local customs and *mores*.

The intensity of my climbing partnership with Henry reached a climax just before we left England when I had decided to do a crash course in fitness training by walking the 14 peaks with Lyn Allen. I use the word 'intensity' advisedly, since it was the 'intensity' of life at Base Camp that drove Bert into the hermit-like seclusion of his own tent. Henry, generous and willing to a fault, had bowed to my 'indomitable' will and agreed against his own, not only to

climb in Wales the weekend before departure, but to meet Lyn and myself at the finish of our marathon. Lyn and I unfortunately failed to meet our deadline and arrived some two hours overdue to find Henry apoplectic with rage. His retelling of this tale, with his brilliant flair for high comedy, had us all aching with laughter as we stumbled under the weight of endless kilograms of muesli, Trailmix, tents and hardware on to the aeroplane.

The subject of food must have its place on any expedition, and this one had its dubious beginnings with me having been given responsibility for 'catering' (a woman's role?). I have to lay blame, at this point, squarely where it's due. My efforts to consult team members as to their preferences failed dismally but, needless to say, I was later castigated for not having provided everyone with their favourite goodies. (Lyn – I still want words with you about sugar-free diets for mountaineering.) Bert said he didn't care what he ate; Henry said he never ate anyway – except for digestive biscuits which he would provide himself. And Andrew – I must give him his due – said he wanted Trailmix, got it, and did his damnedest to eat the lot, much to Henry's disgust. Bert compensated for his own oversight by buying as much jam and sugar as he could lay his hands on in Simla. The evening before departure there was a touching scene, with myself and Maria up to our elbows in buckets of roasted trail – mixing it (it had been specially prepared for the Himalaya: suitable, apparently, for cold and altitude).

I must acknowledge my debt to Maria without whose untiring encouragement and support I would never have got myself together to step so uncompromisingly into the unknown. A typical sign of my own naïvety, I had amused myself earlier in the season with one of my feeble jokes – 'Hornsey Today, Himalaya Tomorrow'; little had I expected it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. No women's expedition should ever set forth from the NLMC without Maria's guiding hand.

No one can arrive in India from the British Isles without carrying a host of images and assumptions about what the journey will entail. The object of any climbing party is to get through and clear of the heat, dust and disease as quickly as possible. But even with this overriding concern, one can't help but stand aghast at the sheer novelty of being 'in the East'. Whatever particular political prejudices or sympathies one has, there is a Felliniesque visual onslaught of incongruous, colourful and incessant life; at one and the same time idle, chaotic and aimless, and frenetic, busy and purposive.

I am getting to the mountains – and so were we. The further north we travelled, the more bizarre life became. After an overnight journey by bus which could only be likened to 'The Night of the Long Knives' – all of them digging into us and crushing our kidneys to pulp – Bert left his bag containing all his documents on the bus. We had a tense but, fortunately, successful journey by a proverbial veteran Morris Minor with one and a half gears in sporadic pursuit.

Then came the first moment of High Drama. It may seem an oversight at this stage, but the expedition was, in fact, still in search of an 'objective' (women, I fear, will have to find less militaristic language for their 'hits'). To compound this difficulty, Andrew had been struck down with salmonella and was in his bed losing colour from his face and other things from elsewhere.

Obviously well-trained in how to deal with an emergency, Henry jumped into the breach and, over the candle-lit remains of the contaminated rice, he reassuringly laid out his plan before Bert and myself.

'It's all right,' pronounced Henry, with a masterly flick of the hand, the one he must have used in an earlier age to dismiss the waiting servant, 'leave everything to me. I will go ahead with Bert and get the food and porters and have everything ready for when you and Andrew arrive.'

'Well, Henry. This sounds quite admirable. But how will you know when we are going to arrive?'

'It doesn't matter. I will meet all the buses.' Some statements in life are final and brook no disagreement. This was one of them.

'Quite.'

Andrew and I had much laughter at Henry's expense as we bumped our way along the precipitous mountain-pass towards Keylong and the waiting caravanserai. Our giggles broke into hysterical sobs as our eyes fell on two whirling dervishes in shorts and T-shirts making frenzied contorted gestures at us as we tried to descend from the bus. For the next hour or so utter confusion reigned. With just cause, I am happy to say, for no less a personage than Mrs Gandhi herself (God rest her soul) was arriving the next day. I felt as though Henry had some mystical hand in all this. After all, if he hadn't managed to get the porters, he would have needed a jolly good excuse.

So it was that we found ourselves, later that night, huddled in a British Army tent bargaining over the price of horses to carry our equipment (and probably me) up to Base Camp. There is plenty of scope for linguistic confusion generally, but a particular word of warning here. What the visiting climbers have in mind when they say Base Camp and what the locals mean by it are two depressingly different things – as we were shortly to learn to our cost.

Above the mountain pastures there is the glacier – as clearly mentioned in our photocopied sheets of the *Alpine Journal*. But between the mountain pastures and the glacier there lies the boulder-field – as mentioned at the beginning of this report. Base Camp turned out to be what the locals meant by it – and on the wrong side of the boulder-field. Such an error of interpretation cost me several hours of mournful agony and presented me with my first 'encounter of the worst kind' – you know, the kind where you start becoming seriously deranged and, as you sink once more in utter exhaustion to your knees, you start asking metaphysical questions like 'Am I going to get off here alive?' and 'Will they find me before dark?' and 'Will they find me at all?'

Of course, such moments of doubt have no place in the harsh world of climbing, as I soon learnt when, on arriving at Advanced Base Camp several hours behind the others, I was greeted by the warm tones of Bert's 'Ah! Here comes Speedy Gonzales.' As if this wasn't brutality enough, on the walk-out some days later, he followed this up with 'I can't understand why you are so slow.' I was too polite then to reply, having only just been initiated, or (more likely), too short of breath, so now, retrospectively, I will take this opportunity to say 'F . . . off, Bert.'

It comforts me to say that the boulder-field claimed Henry as a victim too. Eager as ever to make an early start, Henry had set off from Base Camp at dawn

the day after our arrival there. When we met up with him the following day we found him clasped around and under a boulder in the dual attempt apparently to avoid being swallowed up by the creaking jaws of the glacier or burnt to a frazzle by the scorching sun. (For those who like a life of extremes, I cannot recommend too highly climbing in the Himalaya).

We eventually made a summit attempt – and, if this article appears a little short on climbing relative to everything else, I assure you that that is what it was like. After a succession of relays and dumps (overall I calculated that we must have crossed that bloody glacier six or seven times, and walked some 30-odd miles up and down the whole dreaded moraine) I think somewhere in all this hideous toil we did manage to do some climbing.

Lagging way behind Andrew and Bert, Henry and I eventually arrived on a snow-slope above the glacier – which we had crossed in our innocence without roping up – no wonder that we experienced delayed shock when, on the descent, this time roped-up, we each in turn sank up to our waists into crevasses through soft snow-bridges.

But we were not quite to make it to Camp 1 that night – which was unfortunate, since Andrew and Bert had the food with them – a pattern which was to be repeated at a later stage. Henry and I bivvied below the bergschrund and felt horrible. I got headaches and what felt like the Maginot Line opening fire on the back of my eyeballs. The next morning we took about three hours to move – I think we were moving – some 300 yards, egged on only by the ever-receding small dots of Bert and Andrew gaining more and more height. To give us our due, we made it to, and up, the first of the ice-walls (itself a respectable route by alpine standards) – after a second bivvy and more headaches and confrontations with ourselves. Confrontations with each other came later, in the climax to this magnificent effort when, just as we had almost reached the top of the wall, we met Andrew and Bert on their way down! Henry, at that point bent double with fatigue, let out an almighty yell and bellowed some very rude things at Andrew, all about food, and waiting, and not getting to the summit which he would have done if he had waited . . .

Well, this was hardly the place for a diplomatic incident over climbing tactics, so the dispute was deferred until we were back at the civilizing influence of Advanced Base.

After this ignominious defeat, it was no small comfort as we abseiled on to a now vertical boulder-field to hear Bert's prophetic voice like some Greek chorus chanting 'Welcome to the most dangerous place on earth.' Predictably, the prophecy was self-fulfilling, and no sooner had we evacuated this stop-over than the boulders began a downward journey all of their own.

This first climb had left everyone a little in need of rest and recuperation; me more than the rest. So, after four days, the Three Musketeers set off again. I gratefully settled into good books and plenty of sleep in my tent. You can imagine my astonishment when the following afternoon I heard the crunch of gravel outside my tent. It was Henry looking like a swarm of locusts after a heavy rainfall.

'Henry! How unexpected. Whatever is happening?'

'I'm going to Delhi.'

Something had obviously gone wrong.

And indeed it had. Andrew and Bert had done their disappearing act again, this time taking Henry's boiled eggs with them, and had left Henry stranded on the glacier. Fortunately, he met a stranded member of the French team and spent the night at their Camp 1.

I myself was beginning to feel a little stronger and more ambitious – after all, there was an inexhaustible supply of Mulkilas to climb. But the memory of Wales hovered like a boxer's bruise on my brow, and I wasn't going to risk upsetting Henry by imposing my will on his generous nature, especially when he was feeling so low. I remained silent while he talked at length about his forthcoming train journey through India. But, as he dozed off to sleep with the tinkle of rolling-stock in his ears, I murmured the relevant mantra gently . . . mulkila . . . mulkila . . . mulkila . . .

The next morning Henry awoke, obviously refreshed from his sleep, and spoke in a determined and enthusiastic tone.

'I think we should go and climb Mulkila 10.'

'Oh, Henry! What an excellent idea.'

And so we did.

EPILOGUE

Andrew Bankes died last year after a long and courageous battle against cancer. But for Andrew my climbing career might have ended as suddenly as it had begun. It was his love of mountaineering that encouraged me to continue what he had given me the chance to begin. It was in the North London Mountaineering Club Hut that he admonished me with the words: 'What's this I hear about you not going to the Alps because you haven't recovered from the Himalaya? Of course you're going to the Alps. You can't stop, now that you've started . . .' This is the spirit of Andrew that will always accompany me on any route.