Christmas on Chimborazo

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When I was but thirteen or so
I went into a golden land
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
Took me by the hand.

In my case I was twenty-three or so and my journey, unlike the imaginary one of Walter Turner in his *Romance*, was substantial, though hardly less fantastic. It was to the Cordillera Carabaya in Southern Peru that five of us were spirited in 1960 where we were privileged to make seven first ascents in a range that had barely been explored. That was my magic hour, all those years ago – and I hadn't been on a 'real' expedition since.

So when I read in the November 1989 AC circular that a second person was wanted on an expedition to go to Tierra del Fuego, leaving on 1 January for six weeks, I became suddenly excited. There was a telephone number. Then I thought about it. Of course I couldn't go. I couldn't afford it, nor could I get the time off from work. It was quite impossible.

So I rang the number . . . Another man had been found.

That night I toyed with my dinner and my wife asked me what the matter was. So I spilt the beans and she, bless her, suggested I consider somewhere that would take up less time. So I thought of Ecuador. None of my old climbing friends could make it ('if only you'd thought of it earlier'), but nothing was going to stop me – dammit, I would solo Chimborazo if need be – and then I thought of Will Gault. He is 20 years my junior, a City man and, crucially, a bachelor. I rang him at work.

'Doing anything at Christmas?'

'Not really. Anything on?'

'Want to climb a mountain in Ecuador?'

And, after a very short pause, 'Yes, OK.'

We flew out of Heathrow on 18 December and the return date on the ticket was exactly 14 days later. Chimborazo (6300m) was first climbed by Whymper in 1880; by his, the normal, route there are no technical problems. But would we acclimatize in a fortnight? There was much umming and ahing by climbing friends. Diamox was advised, and taken.

We arrived in Quito (2800m) at 7.30am on the 19th, on the first of 14 brilliant mornings, temperature 75F each day, all day. We found a cheap but

adequate hotel in the old, colonial quarter and proceeded to explore the plazas, baroque churches and markets. Was this really happening to me? Classic cliché – could this be a dream?

I walked home with a gold dark boy,
And never a word I'd say,
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
Had taken my speech away.

We climbed a hill behind the hotel and there it was, Cotopaxi, suspended above the city, the perfect volcano, a faultless cone, its glacial tongues hanging from its crater like the frayed edge of a distant, hazy petticoat. Each day we took a bus out of the city and made a four or five-hour walk on the surrounding hills, increasing the height each day by approximately 500m so that on the third day we reached 4200m. We were treated to wonderful views of Cayembe, Antisana (both first climbed by Whymper), as well as Cotopaxi. By 11am, even earlier sometimes, the peaks were obscured by cloud and for the rest of the day their positions were detectable only by the banks of cumulus, bouffant clouds, piled thousands of feet into the sky.

The countryside was full of interest. There were women in traditional, full, black skirts, scarlet shawls and wide-brimmed sombreros tending little herds of tethered pigs and cattle; a man ploughing with a team of oxen. We passed one farmer wearing an industrial hard hat hoeing the steepest field of potatoes I had ever seen. He was pleased to be photographed (this was not always the case), as was a woman weaving baskets outside her mud-walled, tin-roofed hut. Sometimes we passed through eucalyptus groves, and a lasting memory will be the sound of strands of peeling bark, caught by the wind, clattering softly against the trunks of these slender, graceful trees.

Day four was Saturday when we made a trip to the famous Otavalo market and crammed our rucksacks with bargain sweaters as presents for everyone we could think of back home – and so ended the honeymoon period. For the next day we would travel to Chimborazo. I remember saying to Will, for whom this was his first major climb: 'From now on it will be Hell.'

I hadn't enjoyed my day at 4200m and, while lying in the grass at that height and fitfully dozing, I experienced the rather alarming phenomenon of Cheyne-Stokes breathing. We had another 2000m to make up, and only a week to do it in.

On Christmas Eve we staggered to Quito's main bus terminal under enormous rucksacks. Will is well over 6 feet tall and towered above the neat, diminutive Ecuadorians. We looked somewhat ridiculous in all our gear, climbing breeches and enormous boots. At the bus station a shoeshine boy offered to clean mine for me.

We boarded a bus for Ambato and thundered south along the Pan-American Highway, wildly overtaking anything that moved. The windscreen, rent by an enormous crack which threatened to cave in on the driver at any moment, was plastered with crucifixes and images of the Virgin. The conductor, a boy of about 14, fought his way down the bus through the mass of humanity

and eventually reached us where we were being hurled wildly about above the wheel arches. The fare for the two-hour journey was 50p. 'A rip-off,' said Will.

So we reached Ambato, which was destroyed by an earthquake 50 years ago and looked it, and negotiated a price with a taxi-driver to take us on the next leg – a two-hour drive to the Whymper hut at the foot of Chimborazo.

It was then that we remembered about the paraffin. Will had traipsed round several garages in Quito without being able to get any. Our stove ran on it. Rumour had it that there might not be any gas at the hut. I wasn't looking forward to my space-food dinners in any case, but *cold* space food . . . and on Christmas Day?

'*Quiero comprar paraffin*,' I said to the driver. We had stowed our rucksacks into the boot and were all ready to *vamos*.

'Paraffin?' He looked nonplussed.

'Si, paraffin.' Total incomprehension.

Will: 'Try kerosene.'

'Kerosene?'

'Kerosene?'

'Si, kerosene.' I went through a pantomime – lighting a match, pumping a primus, stirring a pot, sipping a hot drink. 'Kerosene.' We had started to drive but suddenly the driver, Luis, stopped.

'Kerex?' he asked hopefully.

Now it was my turn. 'Kerex?'

'Si, kerex, boom, boom,' and he threw his hands in the air in the manner of minor explosions. We drove slowly round the town, Luis muttering 'Kerex' to himself and looking about him, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders. 'Domingo,' he said, and indeed it was Sunday, and lunchtime, and Christmas Eve. An awful lot of shops looked ominously closed. We stopped at several garages. No kerex. Luis was genuinely concerned. Then he looked hopeful.

'In pueblo?' he suggested.

We drove out of town into the parched countryside, past steep little fields of withered corn (for it hadn't rained for months). We stopped frequently at roadside stores and a garage. But always the same answer, 'Kerex no hay.' At one village we drove up a track to stop outside an unprepossessing hovel. By now Will had unpacked his rucksack, the contents of which were strewn all over the back of the taxi – ironmongery, spare clothes, packets of food – in order to get out the primus which he was now using as a visual aid. He was not amused. Luis ushered him into the hut. I remained outside entertaining some children and a drunk old man. Will reappeared in five minutes.

'I've got it,' he said.

'Do you think it's the right stuff?'

'I've no idea.'

The whole episode had made us ridiculously tense.

We drove on, climbing steadily, past the last trees and hamlets into the paramó, a region of sandy soil, cinders and tussock grass. Families tended flocks of sheep, a cow or two and even a few llamas by the roadside. Eventually we crossed a wide, shallow pass and there, ahead of us, crouched the squat bulk of a mountain enveloped in cloud. It was a bleak scene.

'Chimborazo,' said Luis, hoping to cheer us up.

He drove us for several more miles up a dirt-road and dropped us at the hut around 2pm that afternoon. We were at 4700m and at the lower of two huts, the upper being a mere half-mile away and 200m higher up the mountain. We decided to carry half our gear to the top (Whymper) hut and to return and sleep at the lower one. The next morning, Christmas Day, we established ourselves at the higher hut and took stock of our situation.

It was still only our sixth day in the country. Neither of us felt anything like our best. Fully acclimatized parties, those in effect which had previously climbed Cotopaxi or Tungurahua (over 5000m) or both, went as a rule straight to the top hut and climbed the Whymper route, starting at midnight and making a round trip of 8–12 hours. We discounted this plan and decided to sleep two, possibly three, nights at the Whymper hut, spending the intervening days training on the mountain. We would thus acquire, we hoped, at least adequate acclimatization to make a two-day assault on the route, bivouacking the first night at about 5500m.

The Whymper route is technically easy but long. It starts with 300m of scree to the SE of the hut to gain an easy ridge which runs north to the main bulk of the mountain. Then a short steep wall, rent by half-a-dozen gullies, provides a minor obstacle. None of these gullies is difficult, but they nevertheless constitute the steepest part of the climb. We planned to bivvy here. On Christmas Day we got as far as the gully systems (known locally as the *canalettos*) and on Boxing Day we climbed about halfway up the Thielmann glacier. At the end of that day we reckoned we could 'go for it'. Meanwhile, back at the hut, there was Wayne; and Anna.

Wayne and Paul were from California and, like us, were spending several days on the mountain, acclimatizing. They had left a tent and provisions on the ridge leading to the canalettos and were planning to make a two-day ascent, at approximately the same time as us. However, Paul was very out-of-sorts and had decided to pull out. We invited Wayne to join us. Anna was a Venezuelan and a student at Caracas University. Hers was a long story, the gist of which was that she had travelled across Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador by bus to join up with a group from her university climbing club. Somehow wires had got crossed, and here she was on Chimborazo by herself. Umm. She had climbed Cotopaxi the week before and was, we couldn't help noticing, rather beautiful. She spoke English in an attractive Hispanic-American accent, interspersed with the odd delightful malapropism. We were definitely charmed by Anna. Would she like to join us on the climb? She would be delighted.

Next day, 27 December, we left at midday for our respective bivouacs. Wayne and Anna would camp a little below us and we agreed that they would join us at two the next morning. Will and I proceeded up to the canalettos and after scouting around found ourselves a couple of crumbling ledges below the red wall. As the afternoon advanced a magnificent cloud sea developed below us, lit finally by a short, spectacular sunset. Suddenly it was night, the temperature dropped dramatically and within a few moments the glacial stream beside us had frozen. We leapt for our sleeping bags. Then a boulder trundled off the cliff above to land dispiritingly close to our ledges, an inconvenience

which was to continue intermittently all night. At one point during the wee hours I noticed that the clouds below had dispersed, and I enjoyed the sight of the lights of two towns shining thousands of feet below us – Ambato, I supposed, to the north and Guaranda (see Whymper) to the south. They were rather comforting.

Reveille at 1.15am, a forced breakfast of a few dried apricots and orange powder squash, dressing and kitting up by torchlight while balancing on our ledges occupied the next 45 minutes; but at two o'clock Wayne's pinprick of torchlight was still a long way off. We stamped about on our ledge, beating our arms and still shivering. At last, at three, we were joined by Wayne and Anna and we realized why they had been so long. Anna had no torch. She was also complaining of the cold and I could see at a glance that she had lost the will to do the route. Fortunately she realized this herself and, as Will had a spare hand-torch, she was quite happy to walk back down the ridge on her own to Wayne's tent. The three of us now tied on to a single rope and I led two pitches up the gully, belayed by the other two who then moved as a pair to join me. Thereafter we moved together up a wide featureless snow slope.

I was climbing painfully slowly, clearly affected by the altitude; Wayne was not going well either and asked for frequent stops. After 20 minutes he called a halt and suggested he go down. I persuaded him to give me his rucksack – we had left ours at the bivouac – and we continued to plod up, but after another rope-length or so he again called out to me. 'I don't want you to bust your ass for me,' was how he put it. 'I know I'm holding you guys up.' We all felt very disappointed but he insisted on untying and returning down. I'm quite sure we could all have made it to the top.

The route now made a long traverse left beneath some seracs on the summit ridge. Because of these seracs which occasionally fall across the traverse line in the heat of the late morning, the route is climbed at night. Apart from a few small crevasses and ice cliffs, easily avoided, the traverse was uneventful. Dawn was just breaking as we gained the summit ridge. Above stretched a seemingly endless snowfield up which we crept slowly, stopping frequently. We reached the top at 8am. Only it wasn't the top. We knew all about this, for the Whymper summit is half a mile away and a mere 40m higher. Many parties return from the lower summit, for Chimborazo has effectively been climbed. The decision to go on was unspoken. All Will said was: 'I suggest we de-rope here,' and I owe it to him that we reached the true top for, left to myself, I might easily have turned back. We descended into a shallow basin and then up on to the dome-like summit. By now I was coughing frequently and bringing up a lot of nasty-looking phlegm, but Will seemed in good shape. Forty miles or so to the north Cotopaxi thrust up through the sea of cloud. The round trip from summit to summit had taken us an hour. It was 10 days since we had left London. And the kerex *had* turned out to be the right stuff.

During the descent I dropped off to sleep at the frequent rests. I reached the hut at about 1pm, where Will had been for a good hour. He came out to meet me.

'Anna has gone,' he said.

Ah, well . . .

Paul had arranged a lift for us to Riobamba which we reached that evening. Oh, the delights of a hot shower in the – where else – Hotel Whymper (there is even a street in Quito named after the great man). At dinner that night Paul said: 'When I got to my room I looked inside the sleeping bag and there were *sheets* in it!'

Early next morning I went on to the hotel roof to get a last view of the mountain. The view from the south-east across the rooftops of Riobamba was as perfect as I could have wished for. After breakfast I came up again. The clouds were creeping up the sides and only the summit dome was visible. I dashed down to my room to get my camera for a final, final shot but when I returned Chimborazo was no more.

The houses, people, traffic seemed
Thin fading dreams by day,
Chimborazo, Cotopaxi
They had stolen my soul away!