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The Scapegoat

(*Plate 77*)

John de Vars Hazard, a member of the 1924 Everest expedition, died in June 1968. In an uncharacteristically mean-minded obituary notice – which did not even take the trouble to render his name correctly – the *Alpine Journal* observed how 'his marked individuality' had made him something of a misfit on that trip, and that he was best remembered for marooning four porters on the North Col.[1] For good measure, the report added that Hazard's unsanctioned journey to the Tsang Po river after the climb was largely responsible for the ban on mountaineering parties to Tibet during the years between 1924 and 1933. This widely accepted version of events is at best economical with the truth.

His natural reserve may well have made it difficult for Hazard to break into the clique of old-timers on Everest, but Mallory, for one, found him 'a nice and reasonable being', and Somervell commented on his lively interest in Tibetan travel. He had not been plucked from the blue, as is often supposed, but came highly recommended from surveyor/explorer Henry Morshead, veteran of the two previous expeditions and with whom Hazard had served in the Great War. He was also known to Odell. In 1920 Hazard had been invited by Kellas to join his Kamet trip and, even before that, his name was on file at the Royal Geographical Society as a 'possible' if expeditions were ever allowed through Tibet to Everest.

Hazard served his Alpine apprenticeship in France, which was his home for much of his boyhood. As a student in England – he attended Bedford School before studying engineering at Leeds University – he took part in pioneering ascents in the Lake District, largely in the company of Fred Botterill and E E Roberts. He partnered Botterill for the first ascent of Gable's Abbey Buttress over Easter in 1909.

During the Great War, Hazard found himself fighting on the Somme as Morshead's second in command. The pair remained good friends and clearly hoped to go to Everest together in 1921, or indeed 1922. But in 1924, when Hazard's invitation finally came through, Morshead could not be spared from his work with the Indian Survey and was in any case probably too badly frostbitten from the last show to be seriously considered again as a climber. How we remember the 1924 Everest story, and especially the reputation of Hazard himself, could well have been very different had Morshead been along.

The affair with the porters on the North Col was unfortunate, sapping morale and physical reserves at a critical time and placing the whole enterprise in jeopardy when a high-risk rescue had to be initiated. But it is unfair to foist the blame entirely upon Hazard. Expedition leader Lt Col E F Norton had sent him with a party of porters to establish Camp 4 on the col, there to be relieved the following day. Even as they breasted the col, the weather deteriorated, and throughout that night and the following morning high winds and swirling snow persisted, so that nobody moved up or down all that second day. The next morning, however, broke fine and – as Hazard described later in a letter to Eric Shipton –

> ... sometime in the late forenoon, a large party of 18 to 20 members was seen moving between Camp 3 and the base of the North Col. This was assumed to be the relief party which, as previously arranged, was to take over at Camp 4 and proceed to establish Camp 5.[2]

Since there would be scant room for both groups at Camp 4 that night without great discomfort and depletion of stores, Hazard decided to evacuate his men. Two porters only would remain to prepare a meal against the arrival of the relieving party.

As the only sahib, Hazard went ahead to fix a rope handrail to safeguard his men down the perilously-slumped slopes of the col. The descent would be made in a series of long traverses. Sometime at the beginning of the second stage of what he described as 'this centipede progression' two more men decided to return to the comparative safety of Camp 4. This Hazard learned only when the rest assembled for the start of the third traverse, by which time the two were observed to have regained the col without mishap. Seeing little cause for concern, the main party thus continued down.

By the time they collected at the base of the ice chimney, which represented the major barrier of the route, mist had enveloped them and the light was bad once more. Worse still, they were dismayed, in a brief clearing, to see the relieving party had turned back. No amount of shouting could catch their attention. Next day, the four porters at Camp 4 were 'rescued' and escorted down by Norton, Mallory and Somervell – very much to their surprise, Hazard would afterwards maintain. Nonetheless it was a long and tricky operation on slopes pregnant with new snow, and nearly brought disaster when two men slid out of control. The press later reported this relief mission as 'pulling the whiskers of Death'.

'Teddy' Norton, who was normally the fairest of men, made no secret of his exasperation with Hazard over the incident. There was probably an element of self-criticism in this, for Norton hated muddle, and this undeniable and potentially lethal muddle had arisen basically through insufficient direction. In days before radio could provide a link between camps, those sent on uncertain enterprises needed clear contingency plans. Hazard had been obliged, in this case, to rely on his own interpretation of events.



Left

76. Angtharkay
(*Eric Shipton, 1951*)
(p182)

Below

77. John de Vars Hazard
surveying,
Everest 1924.
(*Salkeld collection*)
(p224)



After the loss of Mallory and Irvine, the dispirited expedition was anxious to get away. Hazard volunteered to stay behind to complete the required survey of the West Rongbuk glacier, carrying it all the way to the Nup La on the Nepalese border. But he then stepped beyond the area of the expedition's passport by making an exploratory journey to the Tsang Po. Morshead had mapped lower reaches of this river in an illicit journey with F M Bailey some years before, and this may well have been Hazard's inspiration, but he reckoned without the same Bailey. Having pulled off a sensational escape from Bolshevik captivity in Central Asia, Bailey was now the grand and influential Political Officer in Sikkim, adviser to the Tibetan authorities and an ardent player in the Great Game.

Hazard's jaunt was just one of a number of misdemeanors to upset the Tibetans, who had never been happy with the seeming military nature of the Everest expeditions. But their biggest complaint was that a group of Tibetan 'lamas' had been induced to travel home with the party to publicise the expedition's film. Bailey was approached to help smooth over the differences, thus paving the way for future expeditions; but he is widely believed to have settled some scores of his own in the process, having no love of the Everest Committee.

In any event, there were no more expeditions until after his retirement. At home, the dancing lama furore was carefully swept under the carpet because of its potential embarrassment to the Everest Committee; for, although the offending film was made by an 'independent' production company, Explorer Films was chaired by Sir Francis Younghusband who also steered the Everest Committee. It is unbelievable that he was not aware, or even involved, in the plan to bring the Tibetan lamas to Britain.

Fifty years were to pass before the story broke surface.[3] On the record, in the meantime, it was more convenient to attribute the Tibetan ban solely to Hazard's wayward excursion.

REFERENCES

1 *AJ74*, 350, 1969.

2 Letter written to Eric Shipton by John de Vars Hazard, 8 May, 1953. (Copy in the RGS Archives.)

3 Walt Unsworth, 'The Affair of the Dancing Lamas', Chapter 6 in *Everest*, first published by Allen Lane, 1981.