

CHAPTER I

A FALSE START

We were a ghastly crew

THE ANCIENT MARINER

PROVERBIALY IT IS NOT EASY to blow and swallow at the same time. So also it is not easy to combine mountaineering and sailing. There are, however, one or two places where such a thing can be done. In the Lofoten Islands a man can sail to the foot of his chosen rock face. On the southernmost coast of Chile, where the high Andes begin to dwindle, there are glaciers reaching down to the sea where a mountaineer can step from his boat and begin his climb at sea-level. A region such as this has an irresistible attraction for a mountaineer who, late in life, catches sea fever and aspires to making an ocean voyage in his own boat.

These Chilean glaciers have their origin in the Patagonian ice-cap (Hielo Continental as it is known there). This covers some 400 or 500 miles between 44° and 51° S., and varies in width from twenty to fifty miles and in height from 6000 to 10,000 ft. I first heard of its attractions in 1945, just after the war, from a friend who had learnt of it while a prisoner in Germany. For the most part the ice-cap was unexplored. No one yet had crossed it, and its glaciers, besides coming so conveniently down to the sea, had other strangely attractive features. Trees grew upon them—one felt this must be an exaggeration. Humming birds and parrots nestled in their branches and penguins paced the ice beneath. On the Argentine side of the range—the accepted way of approach—there were great lakes and forests, and beyond those to the east there were the rolling pampas where millions of sheep roamed, attended by gaucho shepherds, wild characters who lived on meat and maté tea, and rode down ostriches with whirling bolas. The more prosaic details of this glowing account were confirmed by the best map then available, the 1 to 1,000,000 sheets of the American

Geographical Society. This showed two white, blank spaces bearing the magic word *inesplorado*. On these two blank spaces, the northern and southern parts of the ice-cap divided by the Rio Baker, were shown numerous glaciers descending to the Patagonia channels on the west, and to the great lakes of Argentino, Viedma, San Martin, and Buenos Aires on the east.

This dazzling picture of a new field for mountain exploration had its blemishes and the chief of these was the weather. Indeed, without some such factor, there seemed little reason why such a large and comparatively accessible region should remain not only unmapped but also unvisited. A little had been done from the Argentine side, for the most part by those interested in its geology and glaciology, and since the lakes offered the readiest access most of the glaciers descending to them had been named. As the prevailing wind and weather are from the west, the Argentine side is more sheltered and therefore drier and less windy than the Pacific side. Even so, of the numerous attempts to reach the summit of the ice-cap or to cross it (the first was in 1914) all except the most recent (1954) had been repulsed by bad weather. The Pacific side, where the weather is worse and where there is nothing but rock, ice, and tangled rain-forest, is for nearly a thousand miles uninhabited and inaccessible except by boat. This had scarcely been touched.

Neither my friend nor the fellow prisoners with whom he had discussed this exciting region were able to follow their ideas up, so that I had to act alone. I must lose no time in getting to Buenos Aires whence I could travel south and west by rail and bus; for there are roads or dirt tracks across the Patagonian pampas serving the numerous estancias some of which lie within fifty miles of the glaciers. At that time I had no notion of crossing to South America in anything but the orthodox way, but a round of the shipping companies soon showed me that there was no getting there at all; or at any rate within the next two or three years, by which time, perhaps, the claims of a multitude of would-be travellers, all with prior or more urgent reasons, might have been met. I forgot Patagonia and went back to the Himalaya.

In the decade after the war, thanks to the opening up of the Nepal Himalaya, to the successful use of oxygen, and to the consequent scramble to be the first upon one of the giants, the tempo of

Himalayan climbing became fast and furious. In this decade the year 1949 was almost as noteworthy as 1953, the year in which Everest was climbed, for 1949 marked the throwing open of the Nepal Himalaya. That year one small and not particularly successful party went to the Langtang Himal. The next year saw a similar party in the field as well as the first big post-war expedition, the French party which climbed Annapurna I, the first twenty-six thousander to be climbed. In the autumn of the same year a party of four Americans* and the writer were the first outsiders to visit Namche Bazaar, the home of the Sherpas, and to traverse the Khumbu glacier at the foot of Everest. As if this was the ringing of the bell for the last lap the pace then quickened. With little or no encouragement from our account of what we had seen of Everest, European climbers, or rather nations, began to file their applications to attempt the ascent from the Nepal side; and at the same time numerous private parties set out for this wonderful new field. By 1953 the second applicant on the list (fortunately the British party) had climbed Everest. By 1956 not only had it been climbed again but the six next highest peaks had been, in the classic phrase, 'knocked off', and there were some forty expeditions afoot, eleven of them, employing 5000 porters, in Nepal.

The Himalaya are extensive, no less than 1500 miles in length, but a quiet man might well shrink from going, say, to Katmandu, the starting place for the Nepal Himalaya, if he thought he was likely to meet there eleven other parties with their 5000 porters. Moreover, if he had the misfortune to find himself travelling in the wake of one of these parties he would find food hard to come by, and local transport either unobtainable or at a premium. Such inhabitants as did remain would all be wearing climbing boots and wrist-watches and would drive uncommonly hard bargains. Added to these considerations is the undoubted fact that the Himalaya are high, too high for those who are not 'in the vaward of youth', and though the ageing mountaineer will assuredly find rich solace in its valleys and upon its glaciers he is not likely to resort to them when he knows there are peaks in other parts of the world still within his feeble grasp. So I began

* Dr Charles Houston of K2 fame, his father Mr Oscar Houston, Anderson Bakewell and Mrs E. S. Gowles.

thinking again of those two white blanks on the map, of penguins and humming birds, of the pampas and of gauchos, in short, of Patagonia, a place where, one was told, the natives' heads steam when they eat marmalade.

Before this line of thought had led me anywhere I had acquired a stout 14ft. dinghy as a first step to venturing upon the sea. There are a number of mountaineers whose devotion to mountains is not entire, who own and sail boats; but there are few sailors who also climb. Of these, the best known was the late Conor O'Brien. He was a celebrated yachtsman who had designed his own yacht *Saoirse*. Having been invited to join a climbing party in the New Zealand alps for Christmas in 1923 he thought a voyage there an excellent opportunity for trying her out. Going by the Cape and running his easting down in the Roaring Forties he reached New Zealand. He arrived too late for any climbing so he sailed home by way of the Pacific and Cape Horn. One feels that his devotion to the sea came first and that in his eyes the loss of a climbing season was nothing to the accomplishment of such a tremendous voyage.

There is something in common between the arts of sailing and of climbing. Each is intimately concerned with elemental things, which from time to time demand from men who practise those arts whatever self-reliance, prudence, and endurance they may have. The sea and the hills offer challenges to those who venture upon them and in the acceptance of these and in the meeting of them as best he can lies the sailor's or mountaineer's reward. An essential difference is, perhaps, that the mountaineer usually accepts the challenge on his own terms, whereas once at sea the sailor has no say in the matter and in consequence may suffer more often the salutary and humbling emotion of fear.

The sea's most powerful spell is romance; that romance which, in the course of time, has gathered round the ships and men who from the beginning have sailed upon it—the strange coasts and their discoveries, the storms and the hardships, the fighting and trading, and all the strange things which have happened and still do happen to those who venture upon it. For the professional sailor this romantic veil has no doubt become threadbare, but for the amateur there is endless fascination. As Belloc says of the amateur sailor 'In venturing in sail upon

strange coasts we are seeking those first experiences and trying to feel as felt the earlier man in a happier time, to see the world as they saw it'. With the mountains there is no romance. Man's association with them is relatively recent and perhaps artificial. With the sea it is as old as himself, natural and inescapable.

From the dinghy I graduated to a friend's four-tonner. In this we twice crossed the Irish Sea and these crossings had given us nearly as much satisfaction as if we had crossed an ocean. Even on those short passages we learnt a lot. We made unexpected landfalls; we lost a dinghy, we were sucked into and finally flung out of the Devil's Tail race near Bardsey Island—a chastening experience—and once in a thick mist we discovered in Cardigan Bay a buoy which no one else had ever seen before or has seen since. My apprenticeship was interrupted for eighteen months while I was in Burma but on my return I was lucky enough to be able to sail from Portsmouth to the Mediterranean in the 17-ton cutter *Iolaire* which then belonged to one whom, in seafaring matters, I have always thought of as the maestro*. Upper Burma is 500 miles from the sea and except near the Tibet border has no real mountains, so that on quitting it my unsatisfied longing was equally poised between mountains and sea. Naturally, therefore, it occurred to me to marry the two by sailing a boat to South America and landing on one of those remarkable glaciers to astonish the penguins and humming birds. Of course, I should miss the long and no doubt enjoyable approach over the pampas in the company of gauchos, ostriches, and whirling bolas, but one can't have everything.

This far-reaching decision was easier to make than even to begin to carry out. I had no boat and not much idea of what sort of a boat I would need. On that, no doubt, advice could be had, but had I a boat I had not the essential experience to handle it. The more I read, the more discouraging was the prospect. There were the gales in the South Atlantic and fierce tides in the Magellan Straits. The channels of Patagonia were beset with strong currents and stronger winds accompanied by incessant rain, sleet, or snow. The shores were uninhabited, inhospitable, iron-bound, and with more or less bottomless anchorages. It seemed wiser to buy a steamer ticket than a yacht.

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