

Chapter 2: The Harvard Boys

So, they turned the wastepaper basket over and propped Vittorio Sella's photographs around the edge. Then they walked around it, two Harvard boys and a Yale, looking for a way up the world's second highest mountain.

The north side? No. The south? No. East? West? No and no again, there was no obvious route. Give up now? Hell no – in a few months they'd be on their way to Pakistan, hoping to prove Abruzzi wrong, and Nansen right. It was March 1938 and the American Alpine Club was on its way to the world's second highest mountain and nothing was going to stop them now.

In the twenty-nine years since Abruzzi came back empty-handed, there had been no further expeditions to K2 but there had been plenty of activity in the Himalayas. Between 1921 and 1937 there had been six Everest expeditions, three attempts on Kangchenjunga,ⁱ and three on Nanga Parbat, the world's third and ninth highest mountains respectively. None of them had been successful, but two British teams had got within 1000 ft of the summit of Everest, smashing Abruzzi's altitude record by over 3000 ft.

In Europe, mountaineering was big news but in spite of all its natural riches, the sport had been slow to take off in the United States. In the 1930s all that began to change, albeit slowly. Climbing clubs appeared at several of the Ivy League colleges on the East Coast including Yale and Dartmouth. The biggest and most influential club was founded at Harvard in 1924, and that's where our two Harvard boys, Charlie Houston and Bob Bates, come into the story.

Charles Houston, or Charlie as he was universally known, was born in 1913 in New York. His father was a successful lawyer who specialised in maritime law, his mother the daughter of an ancient Scottish family that had settled in the American South several generations earlier. Charlie grew up on Long Island and went on to the prestigious Hotchkiss School. He got his first taste of climbing at the age of twelve when his father took the Houstons for a family holiday in the Alps. After enrolling at Harvard in 1931, he joined the mountaineering club and was soon spending his weekends scaling the walls of local rock quarries.

Bob Bates came from the academic side of America's middle classes. His father, a professor of classical archaeology at Pennsylvania University, was a keen outdoorsman, and his mother, a teacher turned housewife, shared that passion. The Bates spent their summers in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and let their children roam free in the woods. Bob met Charlie at Harvard in the early 1930s. After their first major expedition to Mount Crillon in Alaska 1933, they formed an enduring friendship that would last a lifetime. For both of them, Alaska was their training ground and a showcase for their ambition and skill. Charlie Houston led the first ascent of Mount Foraker and Bob Bates partnered fellow Harvard alumnus Brad Washburn on the gruelling ascent of Mount Lucania in the Canadian Yukon.

Bob had never climbed outside of America, but by 1938 Charlie was already a Himalayan veteran. In 1936 he and two other Harvard chums, Farnie Loomis and H.

Adams Carter, had the temerity, first to apply to the British authorities to make an attempt on Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world, and then, when their request was turned down, to seek a permit for Nanda Devi. Ringed by an almost impenetrable barrier of mountains up to 21,000 ft, Nanda Devi was one of India's highest and holiest mountains and considered one of the great prizes in world of mountaineering. Just to get to the foot of Nanda Devi was an epic in itself, and here they were setting off to climb it and enlisting two of the most famous figures in mountaineering to help them: Britain's Bill Tilman and Noel Odell. These Harvard boys might have lacked experience, but they had no shortage of confidence.

Though it was the British climbers Odell and Tilman who ultimately reached the summit of Nanda Devi, Charlie Houston returned to the US at the tender age of twenty-three hailed as one of the United States' leading mountaineers. In 1937 he was the star turn at the American Alpine Club's annual dinner in Boston, along with German émigré Fritz Wiessner. Charlie gave a speech about his adventures in the Himalayas while Fritz recounted his dramatic first ascent of Mount Waddington in Canada. Neither man knew it at the time, but over the next decades their destinies would be closely entwined and revolve around K2.

In character and style they were utterly different. Charlie was short and stocky, with tight curly hair, an intense gaze and a serious air. Fritz was thirteen years older, with a prominent bald head and a broad chest. Charlie was an Anglophile, his mountaineering heroes British through and through. Fritz was unmistakably German in his accent and his manner. Charlie was old money, Fritz was an immigrant hoping to make his millions in the New World.

Both were very talented, but there was no question that Fritz was the more gifted technical climber. Already well known in Germany, in the early 1930s he had taken the American climbing world by storm, bringing in new techniques and introducing American climbers to some great but ignored mountains in their own backyard. Fritz was an organiser and an enthusiast. Throughout his life he loved to inspire and encourage young climbers and put climbing parties together. In 1932, three years after arriving in the US, he helped organise the first German expedition to Nanga Parbat, the 26,600 ft mountain that would become known as Germany's 'mountain of destiny'. Fritz brought two Americans along too: Elizabeth Knowlton, a journalist and one of America's foremost female climbers, and Rand Herron, a scion of a very wealthy family who had recently become interested in mountaineering. The expedition did not go particularly well, but it introduced Fritz to the vagaries of Himalayan weather and gave him his first experience of high altitude climbing.

Four years later, in 1936, he tried to organise an American Alpine Club expedition to Nanga Parbat, but was refused permission by the British authorities who controlled access to the region. Another German-Austrian expedition had been approved and they didn't want a second team on the mountain. So Fritz set his sights higher and put in an application, again via the American Alpine Club, to make an attempt on K2. This time the British authorities eventually gave their approval, but they took so long to make up their minds that when the permit came through, Fritz was no longer available.

For almost a decade he had been trying to get a business off the ground and 1938 looked like it was going to be very busy. A chemist by training, he had run a small chain of pharmacies in Germany and was now trying to set up a factory in America to manufacture ski wax. Having lobbied for the K2 permit long and hard, the American Alpine Club didn't want to give it up, so they came up with a compromise plan. In 1938 they would send out a reconnaissance party, tasked with finding a route up the mountain and in the following year Fritz would return with the main team. The best man to lead that reconnaissance, as everyone agreed, was Charlie Houston.

Charlie leapt at the chance. He had been thrilled by his visit to Nanda Devi and was ambitious for more. He knew from his British friends that no American team would ever get access to Everest while the Empire still reigned in the East, so for everyone else, K2 was still mountaineering's biggest challenge. Now all he needed was a team.

His first call was to Bob Bates. Even though Bob had just started a new teaching job and was hard at work on a PhD, he said yes straight away. For a while they talked about bringing some British climbers on board – perhaps Bill Tillman again or Freddy Spencer Chapman, the well-known Greenland explorer. Neither was available, so Charlie and Bob turned to two Americans whom Fritz had already approached: Dick Burdsall, who had been part of the American team that climbed Minya Konka in China in 1932, and Tony Cromwell, a stalwart of the American Alpine Club. Family reasons prevented Cromwell from going but Dick Burdsall signed up.

Charlie tried to get Farnie Loomis, another Harvard boy and a member of his 1936 Nanda Devi team. Initially he said yes but a few weeks later Loomis discovered that he couldn't make it, so he suggested Paul Petzoldt, a well-known mountain guide who ran a guiding company in the Teton National Park. A self-proclaimed 'Wyoming cowboy', his background was very different from everyone else's, but Loomis was so confident in Petzoldt's climbing abilities that he offered to cover his costs.

Securing the final member of the team was the trickiest part. With the 1938 and the 1939 expeditions both recruiting, Charlie and Fritz were competing for the best climbers – in particular they were both after Bill House, a very strong twenty-five-year-old and the former president of the Yale mountaineering club. Bill had been Fritz's partner on the first ascent of Mount Waddington but Charlie wanted him for his reconnaissance expedition. Though it would have made sense for the reconnaissance and the main expedition to share members, because of the high cost in time and money, it was very unlikely that House, or any other climber, would be available for two years in a row, so who would get him?

In spite of their mutual respect as mountaineers, Charlie and Fritz had never really been that comfortable with each other and the tussle over Bill House only made things worse. Back in 1936 when Charlie got his permit for Nanda Devi, officials at the American Alpine Club had encouraged him to invite Fritz onto the team. But Charlie had refused, on the grounds that a German would not fit into an Anglo-American party.ⁱⁱ Fritz for his part blew hot and cold about Charlie – he had climbed and skied with him and considered him a friend but they were never very close.

In the end, Bill House signed up for Charlie's 1938 reconnaissance, but even though he had won that particular battle, Charlie and his deputy Bob Bates increasingly started to feel that Fritz was using them. They would go out in 1938, do all the hard work and then he would return in the following year, follow their route to the summit and come back with all the glory. The only way to stop that happening was to get to the top themselves.

Once Charlie had his team, the next hurdle was finance. Though the 1938 reconnaissance was an 'official' American Alpine Club expedition, the participants had to cover the costs themselves. In Britain, there was so much interest in mountaineering that Everest expeditions were largely funded by selling newspaper rights to *The Times* of London. In the United States, there simply wasn't the same level of interest, so prospective climbers had to be well off or well connected if they wanted to test themselves against the high mountains of the Himalayas or the Karakoram.

Charlie came from a privileged background but he was still a student and depended on his parents for support. Fortunately for Charlie, his father Oscar was very interested in mountaineering; fortunately for Oscar, Charlie's natural instincts were toward frugality. He set the budget at \$9000, and asked each man to contribute what he could. The majority would have to be made up at the end through newspaper articles, lecture fees and private donations. Unlike the Duke of Abruzzi who employed a host of transport managers and minions, Charlie and Bob had to do most of the preparatory work themselves.

Ever the Anglophile, he ordered most of their clothing and equipment from Britain: boots from Robert Lawrie and Co. of Marble Arch in London, Shetland wool underwear and windproof outer clothing made from specially treated Grenfell cloth from a factory in Burnley in the north of England.

Bob Bates looked after expedition food. His tastes were more eclectic: heat resistant chocolate called Javatex, dried vegetables made from a secret recipe by a Massachusetts firm and 50 lbs of pemmican from Denmark. A mixture of fat, dried beef and raisins, pemmican had for many years been the staple food of Arctic expeditions. It was ideal for K2, but Bob was worried that there might be problems crossing Hindu India with large quantities of tinned beef, so he removed the labels and passed the tins off as spinach and pumpkin.

Bob's method of choosing expedition biscuits would have made Salem's witch-hunters proud: he dropped them from a second floor window to judge their crackability and then left them out overnight in the rain to see how quickly they became soggy. In the end he ordered 100 lbs of the same brand, which was water resistant yet easy to break. For special moments, Bob's treats box was small but luxurious: four plum puddings, two tins of caviar, a batch of kippered herrings and two bottles of rum.

After five very busy months of preparations, the whole team finally came together in New York for a farewell meal with their friends and family on 14 April 1938.ⁱⁱⁱ Fritz Wiessner was invited but he couldn't make it. Then at midnight they embarked on the SS *Europa* for France where they would connect with a second ship to India. Though dinner was paid for by his father Oscar, Charlie did not accompany the others. With his

medical exams coming up, he was planning to fly out a few weeks later to meet them at Rawalpindi in northern India.

The voyage to Europe was a good opportunity for team bonding. Bob Bates quickly became firm friends with Bill House and Dick Burdsall, but though everyone tried hard to make Paul Petzoldt feel welcome, the self-styled 'Wyoming cowboy' was very conscious of being an outsider. Tall and square-jawed, Petzoldt both looked the part and lived it. He had grown up in rural Idaho, the son of a poor farmer who died when he was just a toddler leaving his mother to bring up nine children alone. While Charie and Bob, 'Eastern Nabobs' according to Petzoldt, were being educated in the best schools and colleges in the US, he had worked variously as a mortuary attendant, gambler, ranch hand and hotel dishwasher.^{iv} In between odd jobs, he climbed his first mountain, the Grand Teton, in 1922 and instantly found his niche and his passion.

When Petzoldt got the invitation from Charlie Houston to join his K2 team, he said yes straight away but it rankled that he was so much poorer than the other guys. This feeling wasn't helped when, just before leaving, he found an unsigned memo at the American Alpine Club amongst the expedition papers which questioned whether a 'Wyoming packer and guide' would have the social skills for planned meetings with members of the British and French Alpine Clubs.

In fact, when a week later in Paris they met Pierre Allain, the president of the French Alpine Club, Petzoldt easily held his own. Behind his rough exterior, he was a much more intelligent character than most people realised and was not easily intimidated – not by Harvard boys, big mountains or club presidents.

The French Alpine Club had been responsible for the last big expedition to the Karakoram, a well-funded attempt on Hidden Peak, one of K2's neighbours, in 1936 by a team of highly experienced climbers. It had failed utterly after a huge storm trapped the climbers in their tents for two weeks. When club members had heard about the forthcoming K2 expedition by what they considered a bunch of American greenhorns, they were very sceptical and joked that they were bringing far too much food because they would not last long.

The young Americans didn't take the bait but after a little good-humoured mockery, they did visit a French climbing shop to purchase a fistful of climbing pitons, then considered essential by most Continental climbers. After that, Bates and the others took a train to Marseille where they embarked on the SS *Comorin* for the voyage to India.

In Bombay they made time for a little last-minute shopping – for climbing rope. There was plenty on offer in the bazaar, but nothing was graded for strength. The only way to test a rope was to tie one end of a sample to something solid, throw the other end over a beam and then for everyone to hang off it. The first couple of batches didn't survive the combined bulk of three well-fed Americans, but eventually Bob Bates found one type of rope that did and bought several hundred feet.

After a brief unexpected meeting with two members of the latest German team on their way to Nanga Parbat, they took the *Frontier Mail* to Rawalpindi. On 9 May they were reunited with Charlie Houston, not quite so fresh from his medical school exams and the

journey out to India. During the course of a hectic two weeks, he had crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary*, made a multi-stop flight from London to Karachi and embarked on a twelve-hour train journey through the burning heat of the Sindh Desert. No one could doubt his dedication to K2.

At Rawalpindi, they also met the final members of the team: Norman Streatfield, the British transport officer assigned to their expedition by the colonial authorities, and six Sherpas. Streatfield was a tall, cheerful Scot. He had played the same role on the 1936 French expedition to Hidden Peak, K2's smaller neighbour, and made it clear from the start that he wanted to be a full member of the climbing team. In return, Streatfield's contribution to expedition stores included a large Stilton cheese and a portable rubber bath.

The Sherpas hailed from Darjeeling, many miles away in the north east of British India. This was the first time that they had been employed on K2 but by the mid-1930s they had become a vital part of any Himalayan expedition. Originally from Tibet, the Sherpas, or 'People from the East', had migrated across the Himalayas into Nepal over the last 300 years. Many had then made a second migration to Darjeeling in search of work. Very strong and tough, over the last two decades Sherpas had established themselves first as general porters and then as a kind of elite high altitude porter, whose role was to carry equipment when the main body of local 'coolies' had been dismissed. Two of the six who turned up at Rawalpindi had been on Charlie's Nanda Devi expedition in 1936 and one, Pasang Kikuli, had been his 'personal' Sherpa.

Houston planned to follow the same route as Abruzzi and Eckenstein, going from Rawalpindi to Srinigar, the capital of Kashmir, then across Baltistan to Askole, before heading up the Baltoro glacier to K2. This time round, rather than cramming into ekkas or carriages, they hired two large cars and a lorry for the 180-mile journey to Srinigar. Many bumpy hours later, they arrived at Nedou's Hotel, a few miles from the famously beautiful Dal Lake. It was surrounded by pine trees and flower meadows but there was no time to enjoy the view or go sightseeing. Task number one was to unload their supplies and equipment. Unlike Abruzzi, who had sent his stores from Europe in pre-packaged bundles, they had to break down 4 tons of supplies into 55 lb porter loads and assemble a set of flatpack wooden boxes.

To their relief, almost everything was intact, apart from a few casualties. A 5 lb tin of jam had burst and decorated everything in its path and Charlie Houston's fur-trimmed wind-suit was soaked in sticky honey from another burst container. He was not pleased.

Three days later, they left Srinigar in two large lorries and set off along the last 18 miles of usable road. After that, everything would have to be carried by pony or porter for the final 330 miles to K2. Even with a pukka British transport officer accompanying them for the whole journey they still had a lot of problems with local porters. At Woyyil bridge, the end of the road, they were greeted with a huge scrum of pony men all offering up their nags while street sellers tried to flog trinkets. All around, petty thieves eyed up any thing that might be spirited away unnoticed.

After a brief but intense burst of filming and photography, they left in a cloud of dust with twenty-five ponies, each carrying three loads. In addition to a newly hired Shikari,

or guide, the aptly named Ghaffar Sheikh, they now also had both an expedition cook, Ahdoo, and that cook's own personal cook. As Bob Bates wryly noted in the expedition book, *Five Miles High*, 'In India every servant has his own servant.'^v For Bates and Houston, who had grown up reading Rudyard Kipling, the great story-teller of British India, the whole trip had a magical quality. They were the stars of their very own *Boys Own Adventure*, travelling through a land that didn't seem to have changed for centuries.

On the first march they made 17 miles, a good start. Each member of the team was allocated their own 'personal' Sherpa, or camp assistant. Initially the young Americans were a little embarrassed about this, but over the first week, one by one they fell into the role of 'sahib'. After a long day hiking it was hard to say no to a smiling face, who offered to put up your tent, unpack your sleeping bag, make you a cup of tea and even help to take your boots off.

On 16 May, after three days on the trail, they reached the fabled and much anticipated Zoji La, the 11, 230 ft pass across the Western Himalayas that connects Kashmir to Baltistan and was for centuries an important stage on Oriental trade routes. During the winter and spring it was impassable, and even in May caravans had been known to wait for weeks before they crossed.

Fortunately, the Zoji La looked safe enough but there was a high risk of avalanches during the day. So they waited until just after midnight to make their way up a steep path flanked by tall black cliffs, illuminated by burning torches and uncertain moonlight. As Bob Bates crunched through the snow and stared at long caravans on their way to India from Tibet, laden with tea and precious rugs, he felt himself being transported back in history. The feeling continued on the following day when, in the Drass valley, they passed a boulder where almost eighty years earlier the British surveyor Henry Haversham Godwin-Austen had carved his initials, 'H.H.G.-A. 1861-2-3'.

Like his predecessors on Eckenstein's and Abruzzi's expeditions, Bob Bates was very struck at how different the landscape of Baltistan was from that of Kashmir. Instead of lush valleys and picturesque lakes, they found themselves hiking through claustrophobic valleys above which loomed huge peaks. The monotony was only broken by occasional Balti villages clinging to the hillsides, invariably surrounded by apricot groves. Bob was fascinated by their irrigation systems, formed of hundreds of yards of ditches and channels, dug by hand into the rock. The paths between villages were equally spectacular feats of manual engineering, zig-zagging their way along the same rock walls, sometimes at river level, sometimes hundreds of feet above the fast flowing water.

As the days rolled on, Charlie Houston, the expedition doctor as well as its leader, had to cope with a litany of blisters, pulled tendons and bruises, but the only serious incident occurred when a pony fell in the river and its load floated off downstream. Their cook Ahdoo made such a scene that for a few panicky moments Bob Bates thought that they might have lost all their precious stoves, but, as it turned out, the box contained his personal bedding – a big loss for the cook but not such a trauma for the other members of the expedition. They breathed a sigh of relief, and carefully checked that the vital pieces of equipment were packaged in different loads from now on.

Balti villages invariably looked much more charming from a distance than close up, where the smells usually made a stronger impression than the sights. In spite of their subsistence lifestyle, villagers were usually very welcoming and generous, and curious to see the strange foreigners in their midst. Charlie Houston was frequently called upon to open up his medicine chest and run an impromptu clinic. Eye infections were commonplace and there was a shocking number of people with huge goiters on their necks, a common ailment in mountain regions caused by lack of iodine.

After almost two weeks Houston's party finally reached Skardu, the capital of Baltistan. It was the halfway point of their journey and the last town connected to the outside world by telegraph, so they took a few days off. Bob Bates filed an article for the *London Times*, and Charlie Houston busied himself writing letters. Their transport officer, Norman Streatfield, shopped for tea and flour and collected a huge chest, filled with 75 lbs of coins to pay the large number of porters they would need for the next stage. Bob Bates was amused to be offered castoffs from the French Hidden Peak expedition in the bazaar, but disappointed that there was no local beer on offer.

Forty-eight restful hours later, Houston's caravan rode and marched out of Skardu to begin the final approach march to K2. There would be little luxury ahead. Task number one was to get themselves and their horses across the roaring Indus, the vast river at places 12 miles wide, which originates in Tibet and then flows all the way down through Kashmir to Karachi before draining into the Arabian Sea. The only option was to float across on a large rickety-looking barge, which was said to have been first used in the era of Alexander the Great. Their Balti steersman paused to pray before they set off at a furious pace across the racing current. When it reached the opposite bank, the barge was half a mile below its starting point.

At Yuno, the second village, they said goodbye to their ponies. From now on all their gear would have to be carried by human porters alone so they would need many more. The only problem was that the Yuno men who they tried to hire refused to accept the official rate and demanded their wages be doubled. Eckenstein and Abruzzi had got on very well with their Balti porters, but thirty years later there was a more defiant mood in the air. The British Empire, on which the sun was never supposed to set, was looking a little shaky. Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns might not have reached directly into Baltistan, but as Houston quickly found out, the local men were simply unwilling to 'kowtow' to Westerners, whether or not they were accompanied by a British liaison officer.

What started as a trade dispute quickly developed into a tense, if slightly comical confrontation, with sixty unhappy Baltis advancing on the American camp to demand higher wages while Pasang Kikuli and his Sherpas unsheathed their ice-axes and a kukri, one of the famous crescent-shaped Nepalese knives, and begged to be allowed to take the locals on. When a stray stone hit one of the American tents, Paul Petzoldt threw it back and the Yuno men ran off, threatening to return fully armed.

Charlie Houston was not convinced that it would end in bloodshed but he didn't want their equipment to be damaged, or to find his expedition plagued by delays for the rest of the journey. Streatfield was willing to raise the porters' wages a little but, as an official transport officer, he did not want to set a bad precedent by giving in completely.

So rather than face another confrontation, he and Bob Bates offered to return to Skardu, to get help from local officials. The only way to get back quickly was to brave the torrid waters of the Shigar river on an even more primitive-looking raft than the ferry across the Indus. Luckily, Bates had done plenty of backwoods rafting in Alaska, and was completely unfazed. Captain Streatfield was equally game so together they set off, accompanied by cheers from their fellow climbers.

Back in Skardu, Bates and Streatfield were offered omelettes and sympathy. More importantly, they left the following morning accompanied by a policeman with orders to compel the Yuno men to work for the sahibs and arrest the ringleaders of the strike. Two days later, they rode back into camp, just in time to celebrate Bill House's twenty-fifth birthday with plates of rice and small mugs of rum. Next morning Charlie tried to get everyone off early, but in spite of the presence of the policeman, who as Charlie noted carried 'an impressive paper and an even more impressive club', Streatfield could only muster forty-four porters. They were forced to leave twenty-four loads behind, to be carried up as soon as willing shoulders were located.

The march to the next village, Folio, entailed a total climb of 6000 ft, along paths flanked by soaring peaks. The headman greeted them as the first white men to pass through in twenty-five years. Charlie Houston was taken to a village elder with a very severe case of the eye infection trachoma who begged to have his swollen eyelids cut off. He advised the old man against such a drastic course of action but there was little else that he could do but trim his eyelashes and offer him some painkillers. There was illness in their own ranks too, with Paul Petzoldt running a high fever, brought on, or so Charlie thought, by carrying a heavy load during the day.

By the time they reached Askole, the final village before K2, Petzoldt's temperature had risen to 40 degrees C and he was unable to walk. Charlie prescribed aspirin and stayed up all night tending to him, but the fever refused to break. Petzoldt could not possibly carry on to K2 and there was no certainty how long he would take to recover – if at all. Later in America, after talking to specialists, Charlie concluded that Petzoldt was probably suffering from Dengue fever, but right now the third-year medical student was stumped.

There was no alternative: he and Charlie would have to stay behind while Bob Bates and the others continued onto K2. If Petzoldt recovered quickly, they would try to catch up. If he didn't – that didn't bear thinking about. Charlie took the decision with good grace, but he felt desperately low. After spending so many months organising the expedition, he might never even see K2. To keep his mind off the issue, Charlie busied himself with an endless stream of patients, whose ailments ranged from stomach pains that had afflicted them for fifteen years to the biggest goiters he had seen so far.

On the morning of 6 June Bob and the others left Askole with fifty newly recruited porters. Over the last three weeks they had covered almost 270 miles, but the final 60 miles to K2 base camp would take them over the toughest terrain yet and require them to ascend a further 7000 ft. The landscape wasn't the only problem: barely a day's march from Askole, for the second time in fewer weeks, they were faced with a porter strike and demands for more money. Not wanting a re-run of their extra trip down to Skardu, Streatfield refused their demands and, fortunately for him, the resolve of the

Askole men was weaker than that of the Yuno porters. After securing a modest pay rise, they got back on the trail.

Three days out of Askole, Bob Bates finally caught sight of the Baltoro glacier. Their 39-mile 'highway to K2' looked anything but comfortable – riven by freezing cold streams, covered in broken rocks of all sizes, there was no easy way to travel up it. The Baltoro, as Bob later wrote, reminded him of a huge reptile, looming down on them. Their porters were so intimidated that they huddled together and prayed before climbing up the steep moraines that lead up to the top surface. Apart from the skeletons of three dead ibexes, there was no sign of life and, initially, no vegetation. The only sound was the rattle of rockfalls from the nearby slopes, and the rumble of huge boulders, which for no apparent reason seemed to detach themselves from the glacier and the slopes of the surrounding mountains and hurtle down toward them. Just like Filippo de Filippi in 1909, the young Americans were amazed to see the strange 'ice ships' that rose up in the middle of the glacier looking like a cross between a giant fang and a sail.

Halfway up the Baltoro, they camped at Urdukas, the green oasis opposite the Trango towers, a spectacular group of peaks that seem to rise vertically above the glacier. At 13,200 ft, it was a shock and welcome relief to find slopes peppered with small alpine flowers.

They spent the afternoon lazing on the grass until Pasang Kikuli spotted something on the glacier below. All day they had been looking out for ibex and the even more elusive snow leopard, but the creatures below appeared to have two legs rather than four. Dick Burdsall dug out his binoculars and zeroed in on them: to his amazement, it was Charlie Houston and Paul Petzoldt, resplendent in a red plaid shirt. His 6 ft frame looked distinctly undernourished, but when he reached them he insisted that he was now on the road to recovery, and to prove it quickly downed several mugs of tea and a fistful of crackers and cheese before enquiring what was for dinner that night.

That year the only other large expedition in the Karakoram was a British party attempting Masherbrum, the 25,659 ft peak further down the glacier. The climbers included T. Graham Brown, a veteran climber who Charlie Houston had first met in the Alps as a teenager, eleven years earlier. As they headed down the glacier, Charlie looked forward to seeing Masherbrum, but thankfully he had no plans to drop in on base camp. The British were having a torrid time, tormented by atrocious weather and frostbite. It would not have been a morale-boosting visit.

After six days of hard trekking, on 11 June they finally arrived at Concordia, the amazing natural amphitheatre where the Baltoro glacier collided with the Godwin-Austen and Vigne glaciers. All around them rose the giant mountains that had so impressed Aleister Crowley – Mitre Peak, Chogolisa, Golden Throne, the four Gasherbrums, Broad Peak... The only trouble was it was such a cloudy day that they could see none of their summits.

Their first encounter with K2 was brief. As they marched up the Godwin-Austen glacier, suddenly for a few fleeting minutes the high clouds parted revealing the summit. As Bob Bates later wrote, his first impression was sheer wonder:

It was like something from another world, something ethereal seen in a dream ^{vi}

Bates' reverie was short-lived. Before long the clouds rolled in and their altitude-induced headaches started.

They were now higher than any peak in Europe, and most of Alaska's giants, and they hadn't even set foot on K2. Their base camp at 16,600 ft was a small cluster of tents in a hollow, a few hundred feet up the Godwin-Austen glacier. It was not exactly a luxurious spot, but at least it was protected from the wind and appeared to be safe from the huge avalanches that poured down the adjacent mountains, scattering tons of rock and snow with reckless abandon.

Not surprisingly, the Askole porters were very keen to get away, but equally predictably, they found it impossible not to haggle for a little extra baksheesh. Bob Bates ensured that a few 'faithfuls' received generous tips, but he was parsimonious with anyone who had caused trouble. Just before they left, Streatfield arranged for the porters to return in forty-five days. To ensure punctuality, he handed their headman the same number of stones and told him to throw one away each day and come back when they were finished. Then at around 5.00 p.m. the Askole men departed, leaving the Americans and their Sherpas feeling 'very much alone'.^{vii}

As Charlie took stock, he was pleased with how the first half of the expedition had gone. They had travelled almost halfway around the world, without any major mishap. His team seemed to have bonded well, and though Petzoldt's mystery illness remained a cause for concern, he seemed to have recovered and everyone else looked fit and healthy.

They now had just over six weeks to make a thorough reconnaissance of the mountain and, if possible, climb it. Having familiarised themselves with the narrative of the Abruzzi expedition and Sella's photographs, Charlie and Bob had concluded that there were five ridges worth inspecting. None of them looked like easy climbs, but there was no question of attempting any of K2's huge faces: like Abruzzi and Eckenstein, they judged these far too avalanche prone even to attempt.

Of those options, they decided that the north west ridge was the best option. Abruzzi had been pessimistic, but a detailed examination of Sella's photographs showed that the rock strata sloped upwards, making it easier to find handholds and therefore climb. To add to its attractions, the north west ridge started at 22,000 ft so there was only 6000 ft of climbing to the summit. Getting to the start, however, required a 3000 ft ascent up a steep pass christened the Savoia Saddle by the Abruzzi party, in honour of the Duke's family, the Royal House of Savoy. As the Italians had accomplished this twice in 1909, Bates and Houston didn't think it would be too much of a problem.

On 14 June the whole team set off en masse toward their first target. They carried light packs to take things gently, but it still wasn't easy. The Savoia glacier, which ran along the western flank of K2, was heavily crevassed and it was very easy to break through the thin snow bridges that provided the way across. The only flat ground big enough to take their tents was in the middle of a labyrinth of cracks and chasms, making for a distinctly unsafe camp site. After helping to put up their shelters and snatching a quick lunch, Bob Bates and Norman Streatfield said their goodbyes and headed back to base

camp on the other side of the mountain with all the Sherpas, leaving the others to begin the reconnaissance proper.

It did not go well. Petzoldt's fever returned, confining him to his tent. Charlie and the others ventured out onto the glacier, but within thirty minutes it began to snow. Impatient to get some momentum going, they carried on for another two hours before they were forced to turn back in the face of a blizzard.

The next day was better. The weather cleared and Petzoldt declared himself recovered and raring to go, so they moved camp to a safer site, higher up the glacier. Ahead, perhaps just a few hours away, lay the Savoia Saddle, their staircase to the north west ridge. That night, the temperature plummeted to -17 degrees C, but snug inside their tents with their primus stoves purring and endless cups of tea flowing, no one felt too bad.

Bill House hoped that if the next few days were successful, they might be able to set up an advance base camp at the top of the saddle. However, his optimism was misplaced. On the following morning, he ventured up toward the pass, only to find the slopes that had looked climbable at a distance included sections inclined at 55-60 degrees, making them virtually impossible to ascend.^{viii} To make things worse, underneath a thin covering of snow, there was solid green ice, which could only be climbed by chopping hundreds of steps. Even if they could get up the saddle, it was obvious that this route would never be safe for their Sherpa porters, especially when they hadn't brought any crampons for them.

When they reconvened a day later at base camp no one had any good news. Petzoldt had taken a look at the west ridge but it didn't look climbable. Likewise, according to Bates, the south east ridge looked very steep. He and Streatfield had also hiked further up the Godwin-Austen glacier to take a look at the final option - the north east ridge - but by the time they reached it the weather had deteriorated so much that it was not even visible.

Their first week had given them a harsh reality check. The mountain was steeper, the ice harder, the nights colder and the weather worse than anyone had expected. But though down, they were far from out. If the north west side of the mountain wouldn't go, they would turn their full attention to the eastern flank. And so on 21 June they headed for the foot of the south east ridge, in search of a tent that Bates had cached a few days earlier. In honour of the Duke and his 1909 expedition they christened it 'the Abruzzi ridge'. By early afternoon they were safely installed in the tent, and happy enough to send their Sherpas back.

Throughout the expedition, everyone was amazed by Paul Petzoldt's prodigious appetite and that night was no exception. The mainstay of their rations were Bob's tins of cunningly disguised Danish pemmican. Usually it was mixed with water and eaten as a kind of thick soup. The trouble was that pemmican soup rarely left diners feeling satisfied so it had to be bulked out with copious crackers. Bob Bates, their parsimonious quartermaster, reckoned on three and a half ounces per man but Petzoldt disagreed, and to prove his point, he and Bill House ate a whole pound between them - on top of their regular portion. Bates took their competitive eating display with good grace, and

rounded off the meal by regaling everyone with his favourite Alaskan ballads and a long reading from Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*.

Fuelled by their night of gastronomic excess, on the following morning Petzoldt and House climbed up a spur on the other side of the glacier to get a better view of the south east ridge. From what they could see, its first 7000 ft was really a series of rock buttresses interrupted by steep ice couloirs. At around 25,000 ft, it ended in a long flatter shoulder. Above that lay the summit cone, so high that for much of the time it was hidden by cloud.

It didn't look easy but the only way to find out properly was to take a much closer look. Bill and Charlie Houston went on up. After about 1000 ft, they stopped at the first flat area and found some old pieces of wood, the last remains of packing cases carried up by Abruzzi's porters in 1909. Charlie's delight at finding these relics was tempered by the knowledge that Abruzzi's crack team of Alpine guides had declared the remainder of the ridge unclimbable. He soon discovered why: the ground was relentlessly steep and they could not see any possible sites for further camps.

In the thirty years since the Abruzzi expedition, a new approach to climbing big mountains had emerged during the repeated British expeditions to Everest. No one, apart from the odd crank (or visionary) such as Aleister Crowley, still believed that it was possible to rush a big mountain; instead the idea was to 'lay siege to a mountain' and ascend in stages, gradually acclimatising to the altitude.^{ix} Charlie Houston anticipated having at least nine camps on K2 and probably ten, each roughly 1000 ft or a half-day's climbing apart. If there were no reasonably flat areas available, the alternative was to hack ledges into the ice, or build tent platforms of loose rocks. This, however, was a tiring prospect at high altitude.

On the night of 23 June the mood at base camp was subdued. Paul Petzoldt's fever had returned yet again and Charlie Houston was worried that he would not be able to continue. Earlier in the day, Petzoldt had suffered a partial collapse on the way down to base camp after negotiating a difficult ice cliff. Everyone was so depressed that they raided the expedition's prized bottle of Demerara rum and even the invariably cheerful Sherpas caught the mood.

Next day, instead of trying the Abruzzi route again, Charlie split the party, sending Bob Bates back round to the west side of the mountain to take a second look at the north west ridge, while he attempted to reach the north east ridge that had frustrated the Eckenstein party in 1902. Both teams returned to base camp empty handed and despondent. When Charlie wrote to his parents on 27 June, he had nothing but bad news:

I must tell you that this is a bigger, harder mountain than any of us realized before – and it will take a better party than ours a much longer time than we have left, in order to get anywhere at all.^x

On 28 June they held a council of war. Everyone agreed that there was no point in trying to ascend the Savoia Saddle again. It was embarrassing to give up on the pass that Abruzzi's team had climbed twice, but it was possible that in the intervening two

decades the glacier had shifted making the slope leading up to it steeper. Theoretically they could go all the way round the mountain to take a look at its northern side, but they had promised Indian government officials that they wouldn't cross the border into Chinese territory, and anyway, Francis Younghusband's description of an 'inconceivably high mountain... clothed in fourteen to sixteen thousand feet of solid ice' hardly sounded like a better bet.

So the debate returned to the eastern options. Charlie Houston wanted to take another crack at the north east ridge but Bill House maintained they should try the south east, 'Abruzzi' ridge, again. It still looked like the most obvious route to the summit and, even if they couldn't find any flat areas to place their camps, there was still a month left, enough time to hack out a whole series of tent platforms if needed. Bob Bates and Streatfield didn't hold out much hope for either option.

Finally a plan was agreed: first they would stock a camp at the foot of the Abruzzi ridge and then try their damndest to force a way up. If they got nowhere, they would then move en masse to the north east ridge, and if they got nowhere on that... they would accept that this year at least K2 would not be climbed.

As if to endorse their plans, or perhaps to mess with their heads a little bit more, they were gifted with several days of perfect weather, which allowed them to ferry countless loads up the glacier and set up advance base at the foot of the Abruzzi. Then just when everything seemed to be going well, on 1 July disaster struck – in an unexpected manner. They had left a four-gallon tin of gasoline under a large rock to keep it out of the sun. True to their intention, the tin stayed nice and cool. The rock, however, didn't. After a few hours, the ice holding it in place melted and the rock fell over, crushing the tin and spilling their precious fuel into the snow.

Three weeks into the reconnaissance, this was a major problem. The only way to get more fuel would be to go all the way back to Skardu and that was out of the question. They had just enough to get by, as long as they eked out their gasoline, but there was now no margin for error. Mountaineers, like armies, march on their stomachs, and without fuel they would neither be able to cook nor melt water to drink, an even more serious problem.

There was just one possibility. Remembering the 1936 expedition to nearby Hidden Peak, Captain Streatfield told them that, before leaving, the French had cached some gasoline at their former base camp. Probably any supply dumps would have been looted, but there was a slim chance that it might still be there. If not, Streatfield suggested sending some Sherpas down to Askole to get firewood. It would be no use on the mountain itself, but it would keep the home fires burning at base camp.

Streatfield set off with a small party of porters leaving Bill House and Paul Petzoldt to take a last stab at the Abruzzi ridge. Neither held out much hope, but this time they struck lucky when Petzoldt noticed a small flat area of snow on the other side of a rocky crest at around 19,300 ft. It wasn't huge, but there was enough space for three tents.

That night the mood at advance base was totally different. For the first time in almost three weeks they had made progress. There was still plenty of work to do, but having

found their first site on an impossible-looking ridge, there were probably going to be others. Even if they couldn't get all the way to the summit, it would be achievement enough to make a thorough reconnaissance of the Abruzzi ridge, and maybe even reach the Shoulder.

The next few days seemed to justify their new-found optimism. On 3 July Bates and Houston carried up over a week's worth of supplies, and House and Petzoldt continued climbing to find a site for their third camp. Over the next week they gradually worked their way up the Abruzzi ridge, consolidating each camp and fixing permanent ropes on the most difficult sections.

Not that it was ever easy. The Abruzzi ridge's unremitting steepness made life distinctly unpleasant for both the lead climbers and those following in their wake. With so much loose rock on the mountain, it was impossible to prevent rockslides so everyone below the main climbers had to be constantly on their guard. And if that wasn't uncomfortable enough, the weather was beginning to turn.

On 6 July Petzoldt and House retreated to advance base when they sensed a storm brewing. It was a wise move: that night they were hit by the worst storm so far. The wind tore at their tents in violent gusts, making sleep impossible. By the morning it had abated, but they were all so exhausted that they decided to take a rest day – for everyone apart from the ever industrious Charlie Houston, who insisted on going down to base camp to haul up yet more supplies. As if to prove his fitness, he made the round trip in a record three and a half hours.

On the following day, Streatfield returned with the bad news that he had not found any gasoline and the good news that he had found some perfectly edible French delicacies to add to their larder. Though the storm confined them to camp, as Charlie Houston's diary revealed, their tails were up.

On July 8, a furious wind that shook the tent canvas with the sound of gunfire kept us from getting higher... In the afternoon we mended clothes, read the Oxford Book of English Verse, and planned what food we should have when we met at our reunion next winter.^{xi}

Two days later they were back on the Abruzzi ridge; this time Houston partnered up with Petzoldt to take the lead. If the first 4000 ft had been difficult, now it became even trickier. At around 21,000 ft the ridge was blocked by an 80 ft pinnacle of rock, or gendarme, which took a lot of skill from Petzoldt to surmount. He brought Houston up and they continued on until they were stopped for a second time by the reddish coloured cliff just visible from the glacier below.

Petzoldt and Houston looked for a way around but they could not find a safe alternative so they carefully retraced their steps. After two weeks on the mountain Charlie had learned not to give in too quickly. The rock wall might look impassible at first glance, but rather than bang their head against it or give up, they got on with establishing another camp and then went back down to hand over the challenge to the next pair, Bob Bates and Bill House.

They were happy to accept it and spent an afternoon examining the rock wall before returning on the morning of 14 July, armed with 400 ft of rope and a bag full of pitons. It was too cold to make an early start but by 10.00 a.m. they were at the foot of the cliff preparing to climb it. House took the lead, while Bates firmly anchored himself to a spike of rock close to the bottom and gradually paid out the rope.

The only way up was a via a crack in the middle of the cliff; at the bottom it was narrow enough to find hand- and footholds on either side, but after around 20 ft the crack grew wider. As Bill House realised, there was no alternative but to wedge himself in, with his back to one side and his feet pressed against the other. Then slowly, painstakingly, he wormed his way up. After 40 ft of wiggling, wriggling and panting, he found a small ledge where he was able to rest, but when he tried to hammer a piton in for protection he found the rock too hard and the metal too soft. The piton simply crumpled.

As House wrote laconically in the expedition book, he was now 'pretty close' to his margin of safety. Bob Bates was holding him on what looked like a secure belay below, but no one was holding him from above. If he fell he would undoubtedly break his legs, or worse. Bob Bates called to him, worried that it was taking too long and warning him that he should come back down, but, as Bill realised, he had now reached a point where it was safer to continue than to turn around.

Fortunately, he made the right call. After another 15 ft the crack narrowed, and he was once again able to find footholds big enough to gain a good purchase. Roughly an hour and a half after starting, he finally hauled himself up onto a tiny ledge and was able to look down on Bob Bates below. This was a key moment in the expedition. In years to come, the crack would become known as 'House's Chimney', K2's equivalent of the 'Hillary Step' on Everest. Future generations of climbers would marvel at the skill, and guts, of the man who first climbed it. For now, though, Bill's most pressing issue was to bring Bates up. Even though he had the security of a rope above him, Bob cursed and complained and was only too glad to reach the top and congratulate his smiling partner.

They were now at 21,900 ft, around 1400 ft above the Duke of Abruzzi's high point and about 6500 ft from the summit. Down below they could see the dirty boulder-strewn surface of the Godwin-Austen glacier, snaking away into the distance. Above them they could see the next major problem – a long section of steep broken rock that they christened 'the Black Pyramid'. After identifying a site for their fifth camp and anchoring a rope to the top of the Chimney, they headed back down to the damp comforts of their tents below.

Over the next few days the endless relays up and down the mountain continued. Bob and Bill rigged an improvised rope-way and began hauling food up the Chimney leaving Charlie Houston and Paul Petzoldt to take back the lead and press on upwards. An unexpected highlight was the arrival of a large bundle of mail, which had come with the porters carrying wood from Askole. No one had ever expected to be reading letters from home in the middle of the Abruzzi ridge.

Bill House's first contact with America in three months prompted a bout of soul searching. Like everyone, he treasured letters from his friends and family and read them over and over again, but being reminded of home was a mixed blessing. Think too

much about warm beds, hot food and, above all, the security of your familiar environment and you were liable to get depressed with your current lot.

Balancing that, Bill found news from the outside world an important corrective. It was easy to become obsessed with all the immediate problems at hand. On an expedition to a big mountain like K2, with all its challenges and hazards, a climber could forget that there was a bigger world out there, where other people were struggling with other sorts of problems, which in their own way could be just as daunting, or indeed far more daunting, than the question of how to get up a sheer rock face. And if other people could conquer seemingly insurmountable difficulties in their lives, then perhaps so could he.

It was a good moment to be having such positive thoughts for, as they all realised, the higher up they went, the harder the climbing was and the more they felt the altitude. Though there was no single feature quite so taxing as House's Chimney, the Black Pyramid was a semi-vertical labyrinth of broken rock, icy gullies and tall rock buttresses. And to add urgency to their work, the weather was becoming increasingly volatile.

On 17 July there was such a severe storm that Houston and Petzoldt were forced to turn back just a few hundred feet after their tent. When they arrived back in camp, their beards were iced up and their hands and toes were chilled to the bone. Their head Sherpa, Pasang Kikuli, had warm drinks for them and not quite so welcome words. This storm, he said, reminded him of one that he had experienced on Nanga Parbat in 1934, the most disastrous expedition in Himalayan history thus far.

On their way down from a failed attempt on Nanga Parbat, the world's ninth highest mountain, an Austro-German team had been hit by terrible weather. Badly unprepared, three Europeans and six Sherpas had died, several of them starving to death in camps that had not been stocked with sufficient food. More recently the 1936 French attempt on nearby Hidden Peak had been called off after relentless blizzards kept a French team trapped in their tents for two weeks.

The bad weather on K2 didn't last, but Charlie Houston was becoming more and more anxious. At some point, he was convinced, they too were bound to experience a prolonged period of storm and snow – but would they have enough food and fuel to tough it out when it came?

In spite of all his worries, Charlie pressed on. Two days later, he shook hands with Paul Petzoldt at 24,500 ft, the top of the Black Pyramid, and gazed in wonder at the other Karakoram giants arranged around them. Then, chancing their luck, they pressed their advantage and climbed on up through a tricky section of broken ice, until they finally stopped 300 ft below the Shoulder, the climax of the Abruzzi ridge and one of the few points on K2 where the angle eased off a little.

In front of them lay what looked like a relatively easy snow slope leading to the final 2000 ft of the rocky summit cone. It was late in the day, so rather than pressing on and having to descend in failing light, they turned back early, thrilled at a magnificent day's climbing.

Down at Camp 6, Bill House and Bob Bates were excited to hear what they had achieved but the mood remained tense. It was 19 July, just over five weeks into the expedition, and there were just ten days before their porters were due to arrive at base camp to begin the long trip back to Skardu.

They had enough food to survive one prolonged storm but hardly any margin for error. Back in New York, the American Alpine Club had given him a directive:

To complete the reconnaissance of the mountain's ridges, and weather permitting, to make an attack on the summit. ^{xii}

In private, Fritz Wiessner had asked Henry Hall, the president of the club, to emphasise to Houston 'the importance of coming through without loss of life rather than a brilliant success through being reckless'.^{xiii}

By Charlie Houston's calculation they needed at least two more camps before a summit bid. Each of those camps would require reserves of food and fuel, in case of bad weather. So far, in comparison to the Eckenstein expedition's experience in 1902, the weather had been comparatively good, but it did seem to be becoming increasingly unstable. Even if the clear skies continued for long enough to make a summit bid, Charlie Houston was worried that they might be hit by storms on the way down. They had managed to conquer what had seemed like impossible obstacles on the ascent, but the idea of having to climb down House's Chimney or the steep slopes of the Black Pyramid in a blizzard filled Charlie with dread.

If their objective was to make a thorough reconnaissance of K2, they had done their job admirably. Over the last month they had examined all the obvious ways up the mountain and discovered that the Abruzzi ridge was a viable route. Armed with their photographs, maps and detailed descriptions, Fritz Wiessner would be able to come out with the main American Alpine Club party and surely go all the way to the top. But were they happy simply to be Fritz Wiessner's reconnaissance party? Having put in so much hard work, could they give up now and let him take all the glory?

Charlie's solution was a compromise: there was not enough food and fuel to fully stock two more camps, but there was enough for one more. With three days' worth of food, two men could take a proper look at the summit pyramid and there was a slim chance that they might even get to the top. However, if there was any sign that bad weather was coming, they would be under strict orders to head straight back down.

It was a neat if cautious plan. The only problem was choosing which pair would make the summit attempt. Dick Burdsall was down below at Camp 1 with Norman Streatfield, but Bill House and Bob Bates were in good condition and as keen to go on as Charlie and Paul Petzoldt. So far on the expedition they had shared out the lead climbing but there would only be room in Camp 7 for two men. So who would they be? In the end Bill House and Bob Bates stepped aside, acknowledging that Petzoldt and Houston had reconnoitered the route up to the Shoulder and were marginally better acclimatised. House and Bates would help them carry their gear up through the Black Pyramid, and then return to Camp 6. None of the Sherpas looked strong enough to go any higher, but

Pasang Kikuli pleaded with them to let him help with the load carrying and eventually Charlie agreed.

On 20 July, the five men set out early but it took them until mid-afternoon to reach the top of the Black Pyramid. Ahead lay a steep ice slope leading up to the snows beneath the Shoulder. A day earlier Paul Petzoldt had chopped steps in the ice and put up a rope for security but the sun was so intense that it had melted the ice, leaving the pitons anchoring the rope to hang free. It would take a few hours to put everything back in place, so, rather than carry on and have to climb back down to Camp 6 in the dark, Bob Bates, Bill House and Pasang Kikuli put down their loads and said goodbye, leaving Charlie and Paul Petzoldt to continue alone.

A few hours later, they stopped and put up their seventh and final camp at 24,700 ft. It was a little lower than they had hoped but close enough to the summit cone to be optimistic about the following day. In the intense cold they assembled their stove, looking forward to hot food and drinks and a good night's sleep before their big day. And then something very odd happened.

As they searched through their packs, Paul and Charlie realised that somehow they had left their matches below. They had enough food, they had enough fuel, but without a flame they could cook nothing and nor could they melt water.

Two years earlier in 1936, Charlie Houston had been high on Nanda Devi with the British climber Noel Odell, poised for an attempt on the summit when he ate a spoon of rancid corned beef and almost immediately began to vomit. He was so ill that Bill Tilman had to take his place on the summit team. Now for want of a match, would K2 also be lost?

Charlie and Paul emptied their rucksacks and rifled their pockets in desperation. Petzoldt could find nothing, but after a frantic search Charlie dug out nine pocket-worn, miserable-looking matches. Four were Kashmiri safety matches, and five 'strike anywhere' phosphorous tips.

The first match fizzled and died. The second broke off at the head. But against the odds, the third ignited.

They immediately began to melt as much snow as they could to have enough for the following morning. In order to stop their precious water refreezing, they wrapped the pot in spare clothing and tried to keep it warm with their feet. Charlie wondered if forgetting the matches was a sign that the altitude was getting to him, but, whatever the reason, all he could do was pray for good weather and that at least one of the remaining matches would light on the following morning.

He was in luck – just. Once again it took three matches to get their stove alight. Outside the air was still but even though they were sporting four Shetland wool jumpers underneath their wind-suits, as soon as they left the tent they felt very cold. Up above, the slopes alternated between hard icy crust and deep powder snow. The higher they climbed, the deeper the drifts they had to wade through, slowing their progress. Paul

Petzoldt didn't seem to be suffering too much, but for the first time on the expedition Charlie really began to feel the altitude.

By 1.00 p.m. the rocky slopes of the summit cone at 26,000 ft were tantalisingly close, just a few hundred yards of snow and ice slope separating them from K2's final obstacle. From what they could see, the main hazard was a huge hanging glacier just below the top, which periodically disgorged enormous lumps of ice onto the snowfield below.

The last stage was not going to be easy but it looked as if there was a possible route upwards. First they had to cross the gently angled snow slope in front of them but, as Charlie soon discovered, it was much more taxing than he had hoped. The air was so thin that every five steps he had to stop to regain his breath. He pushed himself as hard as he could and made it all the way over to the rocks but by then he had reached the limit of his physical endurance. After a few brief minutes of rest, Charlie turned round and hauled himself back down the slope to the point where he had stopped just half an hour earlier.

A year later when he came to write his account of the climb, he tried to capture his almost religious feelings at this moment.

I felt that all my previous life had reached a climax in these hours of intense struggle against nature... in those minutes at 26,000 feet on K2, I reached depths of feeling which I can never reach again.

While Charlie was enjoying his moment of epiphany, Paul Petzoldt had started work on the summit cone. After checking out a possible camp site at the foot, he climbed a further 150 ft up a narrow gully edged with rocks until he too stopped, feeling very tired and conscious that it was too risky to carry on alone. Pausing only to take a quick self-portrait, using the tip of his ice-axe to depress the shutter of his camera, he then descended and climbed back down to Charlie, who was still prostrate in the snow.

It was 4.00 p.m. and the 1938 American Alpine Club expedition to K2 had just reached its climax at around 26,150 ft, just over 2100 ft short of the summit. With no time to lose, they descended carefully to their tent, while all around them the surrounding mountains glowed warm in the evening light.

Next morning, out of matches, they forced down an early breakfast of crackers, jam and cold water before descending to Bates, House and Pasang Kikuli, who were waiting for them at Camp 6. Charlie and Paul didn't pause too long to tell their story. With an ominous-looking dark ring around the sun and cirrus clouds on the horizon, everyone was in a hurry to get down. They did not stop until they reached Camp 4 underneath House's Chimney. Finally they could relax and celebrate with a long forgotten expedition luxury – a tin of kippered herrings.

On the following afternoon just before they said goodbye to K2, it gave them one last frisson. As they were climbing down an icy gully below their third camp, a huge boulder suddenly came hurtling toward them. Fortunately, Pasang Kikuli spotted it in time to warn everyone to take cover as it smashed into another rock and splintered. He later said that a Yeti had warned him to duck.

After a welcome reunion with Streatfield and Burdsall at base camp, they took their first baths for several weeks in their portable rubber bath. Then without any more ado, at dawn on 26 July, forty-four days after their arrival, they left the Godwin-Austen glacier and made a rapid march down to Askole before crunching on to Skardu. It had been an exhilarating experience and though they hadn't reached the summit, as a reconnaissance it could not have been more successful. When Bob Bates sent his latest dispatch back to *The Times*, it appeared under the headline: 'A Conquest on K2'.

Back home Charlie wrote a long article for the *American Alpine Journal* and took stock of the expedition. Early on, he had come under fire for taking such a small party but their experience seemed to have proved him correct. He was equally pleased with Pasang Kikuli and the Sherpas, who had shown their value on a mountain hundreds of miles away from their usual stomping ground. As for the decision not to make an all-out attack on the summit, he maintained that it was the correct one:

The risk would have been unjustifiable and very poor mountaineering^{xiv}

It was a moment, however, that would haunt him and which he would chew over many times in years to come. A full fifty years later he came back to the events, in an article in which he compared contemporary standards to those of the 1930s:

Could we have gone further? In today's world, certainly. Should we have tried again? Bound by the standards and practices of that time, facing bad weather (it did storm), and very tired from five weeks of exploration and load carrying we were right to turn back. Others, years later, pushed the envelope further; some did great and heroic deeds, others died, needlessly, victims to ambition and the mind numbing effects of great altitude. We lived to climb again, for many years... in true mountaineering, the summit is not everything, it is only part.

Bill House and Bob Bates agreed that Houston was to pull back right at the end and maintained this position for the rest of their lives. Paul Petzoldt wasn't so sure, but it took him another fifty years to speak out in public. At the Telluride Mountain Film Festival in the late 1990s, Petzoldt appeared on a K2 panel with Charlie Houston. When asked about their decision not to go all out for the top, Paul blamed poor organisation, arguing that they should have taken more supplies and been better prepared for the summit attack. Charlie Houston did not rebut him directly but he was clearly hurt and angry.^{xv}

The concept of 'acceptable risk' was, of course, at the heart of the argument. Could they and should they have tried just a little bit harder? Or would it have been reckless to continue? In the article quoted above, Charlie Houston framed the question as a comparison between the climbing ethics of the 1930s and the 1980s, but at the time there was another, much more contemporary context into which the argument sat: the debate between young European climbers and the old guard of the British Alpine Club.

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In the summer of 1938 the most important event in world mountaineering was not the latest expedition to K2 or Everest or Nanga Parbat – the really important story was the

attempt on the north face of the Eiger in Switzerland by a young Austro-German team. To many in the mountaineering community in Britain and the United States, their approach was almost heretical and went against the codes of behaviour that had been built up over the years.

When mountaineering emerged as a sport in the 1850s in the European Alps, the first generation of climbers believed that the faces of great mountains were too avalanche prone to be climbed safely. Instead they tried for the summit via the sharp ridges that lay between them.

This remained common practice until the late 1920s when a new generation of European climbers emerged who were hungry for new challenges. All the main ridges had been climbed many times over, so they they began to tackle the freezing cold, so-called 'unclimbable' north faces of the big Alpine peaks. The north face of the Matterhorn was climbed in 1931 by two German brothers, Tony and Franz Schmid, and was followed by attempts on the Cima Grande and several other peaks, the most famous of which was the Eiger, in Switzerland's Bernese Oberland.

The 5,900 ft north face of the Eiger, known as the 'Nordwand', was and still is considered one of the greatest climbing challenges in the Alps. In 1935 and 1936, over the course of two attempts, six young climbers from Austria and Germany died in awful circumstances. Three froze to death, three were killed in an avalanche. This prompted a lot of soul searching and controversy in the mountaineering world. Colonel Strutt, the august president of Britain's Alpine Club, denounced the fascination with north faces as 'an obsession for the mentally deranged', while others dismissed the young Europeans as 'suicide climbers'.

On 24 July 1938, while Houston's team was retreating down K2 after failing to reach the summit, Heinrich Harrer and three young German and Austrian friends finally managed to climb the 'Nordwand', the north face of the Eiger. This time round there were no casualties. It was a watershed moment in the history of mountaineering. The debates would go on but a new standard had been set and inevitably the same questions were soon being applied to K2. If the threshold of acceptable risk had now gone up in the Alps, should it also go up in the Himalayas and the Karakoram? More particularly, should Houston's party have tried harder in 1938? Some German mountaineers thought so, but Charlie and his friends in New York and London maintained that they had taken the best course. For the moment the debate was retrospective but would the next team from the American Alpine Club behave any differently?

Houston's 1938 team had done their job and prepared the way for an all-out attack. As Charlie Houston wrote in the *American Alpine Journal*:

Our purpose, reconnaissance, was completely accomplished and a way was found by which, with the smile of fortune, a second party may reach the summit.^{xvi}

The stage was now set for that party to pit their wits, and their lives, against K2. To add grist to the mill, they would be led by the most well-known German émigré in American mountaineering: Fritz Wiessner. Would he too play it safe and risk coming back empty handed? Or would he raise the stakes and risk the consequences?

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- ⁱ This does not include the abortive solo expedition by the American E.F. Farmer
- ⁱⁱ Undated letter Charlie Houston to Henry Hall, 1936
- ⁱⁱⁱ 12 April in *Five Miles High*, Bates and Houston
- ^{iv} Nabob is an Anglo-Indian word for a very rich person, their wealth usually made in the East
- ^v Charles Houston and Bob Bates *Five Miles High*, The Lyon Press, New York 1939
- ^{vi} Nabob is an Anglo-Indian term for a conspicuously wealthy person
- ^{vii} Charles Houston, *A Reconnaissance of K2*, The Himalayan Journal 1939
- ^{viii} Today's climbers equipped with front pointing crampons and specialised axes for ice-climbing would not be daunted by sixty degree slopes, but in 1938 they would have been considered unclimbable.
- ^{ix} Crowley had by then given up climbing
- ^x Letter Charles Houston to parents, as quoted in Bernadette McDonald *The Brotherhood of the Rope*, **The Mountaineers, Seattle 2007, p61.**
- ^{xi} Yankee magazine May 1997, *One last mountain to Climb*
- ^{xii} Various notes, AAJ, 1938, vol 3. P.225
- ^{xiii} FW to Henry Hall 1938, Kauffman Papers, The American Alpine Club
- ^{xiv} Charles Houston, *A reconnaissance of K2*, *The Himalayan Journal*, 1939
- ^{xv} See *The Brotherhood of the Rope*, Bernadette McDonald, p 63.
- ^{xvi} Charlie Houston, *The American Alpine Journal*, 1939