ISAAC ASIMOV

EVEREST

In 1952 they were about ready to give up trying to climb Mount Everest. It was the photographs that kept them going.

As photographs go, they weren't much; fuzzy, streaked, and with just dark blobs against the white to be interested in. But those dark blobs were living creatures. The men swore to it.

I said, “What the hell, they've been talking about creatures skidding along the Everest glaciers for forty years. It's about time we did something about it.”

Jimmy Robbons (pardon me, James Abram Robbons) was the one who pushed me into that position. He was always nuts on mountain climbing, you see. He was the one who knew all about how the Tibetans wouldn't go near Everest because it was the mountain of the gods. He could quote me every mysterious manlike footprint ever reported in the ice twenty-five thousand feet up; he knew by heart every tall story about the spindly white creatures, speeding along the crags just over the last heart-breaking camp which the climbers had managed to establish.

It's good to have one enthusiastic creature of the sort at Planetary Survey headquarters.

The last photographs put bite into his words, though. After all, you might just barely think they were men.

Jimmy said, “Look, boss, the point isn't that they're there, the point is that they move fast. Look at that figure. It's blurred.”

“The camera might have moved.”

“The crag here is sharp enough. And the men swear it was running. Imagine the metabolism it must have to run at that oxygen pressure. Look, boss, would you have believed in deep-sea fish if you'd never heard of them? You have fish which are looking for new niches in environment which they can exploit, so they go deeper and deeper into the abyss until one day they find they can't return.

They've adapted so thoroughly they can live only under tons of pressure.”

“Well-”

“Damn it, can't you reverse the picture? Creatures can be forced up a mountain, can't they? They can learn to stick it out in thinner air and colder temperatures. They can live on moss or on occasional birds, just as the deep-sea fish in the last analysis live on the upper fauna that slowly go filtering down. Then, someday, they find they can't go down again. I don't even say they're men. They can be chamois or mountain goats or badgers or anything.”

I said stubbornly, “The witnesses said they were vaguely manlike, and the reported footprints are certainly manlike.”

“Or bearlike,” said Jimmy. “You can't tell.”

So that's when I said, “It's about time we did something about it.”

Jimmy shrugged and said, “They've been trying to climb Mount Everest for forty years.” And he shook his head.

“For gossake,” I said. “ All you mountain climbers are nuts. That's for sure. You're not interested in getting to the top. You're just interested in getting to the top in a certain way. It's about time we stopped fooling around with picks, ropes, camps, and all the paraphernalia of the Gentlemen's Club that sends suckers up the slopes every five years or so.”

“What are you getting at?”

“They invented the airplane in 1903, you know?”

“You mean fly over Mount Everest!” He said it the way an English lord would say, “Shoot a fox!” or an angler would say, “Use worms!”

“Yes,” I said, “fly over Mount Everest and let someone down on the top. Why not?”

“He won't live long. The fellow you let down, I mean.”

“Why not?” I asked again. “You drop supplies and oxygen tanks, and the fellow wears a spacesuit. Naturally.”

It took time to get the Air Force to listen and to agree to send a plane and by that time Jimmy Robbons had swiveled his mind to the point where he volunteered to be the one to land on Everest's peak. “After all,” he said in a half whisper, “I'd be the first man ever to stand there.”

That's the beginning of the story. The story itself can be told very simply, and in far

fewer words.

The plane waited two weeks during the best part of the year (as far as Everest was concerned, that is) for a siege of only moderately nasty flying weather, then took off. They made it. The pilot reported by radio to a listening group exactly what the top of Mount Everest looked like when seen from above and then he described exactly how Jimmy Robbons looked as his parachute got smaller and smaller.

Then another blizzard broke and the plane barely made it back to base and it was another two weeks before the weather was bearable again.

And all that time Jimmy was on the roof of the world by himself and I hated myself for a murderer.

The plane went back up two weeks later to see if they could spot his body. I don't know what good it would have done if they had, but that's the human race for you. How many dead in the last war? Who can count that high? But money or anything else is no object to the saving of one life, or even the recovering of one body.

They didn't find his body, but they did find a smoke signal; curling up in the thin air and whipping away in the gusts. They let down a grapple and Jimmy came up, still in his spacesuit, looking like hell, but definitely alive.

The p.s. to the story involves my visit to the hospital last week to see him. He was recovering very slowly. The doctors said shock, they said exhaustion, but Jimmy's eyes said a lot more.

I said, “How about it, Jimmy, you haven't talked to the reporters, you haven't talked to the government. All right How about talking to me?”

“I've got nothing to say,” he whispered. “Sure you have,” I said. “You lived on top of Mount Everest during a two-week blizzard. You didn't do that by yourself, not with all the supplies we dumped along with you. Who helped you, Jimmy boy?”

I guess he knew there was no use trying to bluff. Or maybe he was anxious to get it off his mind.

He said, “They're intelligent, boss. They compressed air for me. They set up a little power pack to keep me warm. They set up the smoke signal when they spotted the airplane coming back.”

“I see.” I didn't want to rush him. “It's like we thought. They've adapted to Everest life. They can't come down the slopes.”

“No, they can't. And we can't go up the slopes. Even if the weather didn't stop us, they would!”

“They sound like kindly creatures, so why should they object? They helped you.”

“They have nothing against us. They spoke to me, you know. Telepathy.”

I frowned. “Well, then.”

“But they don't intend to be interfered with. They're watching us, boss. They've got to. We've got atomic power. We're about to have rocket ships. They're worried about us. And Everest is the only place they can watch us from!”

I frowned deeper. He was sweating and his hands were shaking.

I said, “Easy, boy. Take it easy. What on Earth are these creatures?”

And he said, “What do you suppose would be so adapted to thin air and subzero cold that Everest would be the only livable place on earth to them. That's the whole point. They're nothing at all on Earth. They're Martians.”

And that's it.