

TOUCHING THE VOID

CHAPTER 1 *Getting ready*

It was early morning. I was lying awake in my sleeping bag. My friend Simon was asleep beside me. We were in a tent in the Cordillera Huayhuash, high in the Peruvian Andes. We were about forty-five kilometres from the nearest village.

I got up. Outside, it was getting lighter. It had snowed in the night and the air was very cold. I walked to our cooking area and passed Richard's small tent on the way. Richard was a traveller who we had met in Lima. We both liked him. He told a lot of funny stories about all the interesting places he had visited around the world. We had asked him to join us and guard our things while we were away climbing.



I lit the gas on the little cooker to make a hot drink. As I waited for the water to heat, I looked at the mountains. I thought about why Simon and I were here. We wanted to climb the West Face of a mountain called Siula Grande. Nobody had climbed it before. We wanted to be the first.

I felt sure we could do it. We had both climbed difficult mountains in other parts of the world. We had sometimes had problems, but we had never had any serious accidents. However, as I looked at the mountains around me I felt a little worried. I knew this climb would be different. Siula Grande is 6344 metres high. It was much higher than any mountain we had climbed before. Our camp was at 4800 metres, which is as high as Mont Blanc in the Alps. The high, thin air would make climbing very tiring. Another danger was the weather. It could change suddenly. Large clouds from the Amazon could bring storms of snow, strong winds and terrible cold.



Later, during breakfast, I told Simon about my fears. He laughed. That was the good thing about Simon. He understood the danger, but it didn't stop him. He was the

perfect climbing partner: optimistic, honest, and much less serious than me. He said the clouds didn't always bring storms and that worrying wouldn't help us. I agreed. I often wanted to be more like Simon.

We talked about the climb. We planned to do a few shorter climbs before Siula Grande for practice. Then we would spend two or three days eating and drinking to get strong for the climb.

We bought our food from a village family that Richard had met. There was Gloria, her sister Norma, and brother, Spinoza. Richard walked more slowly than Simon or myself and had taken longer to reach the mountains. He had met the family on the way up and spent a night with them. Now, they sold us all the food we needed.

During the next eight days we did three practice climbs. We didn't finish any of them because of the weather. While we were climbing, thick clouds would appear suddenly. They hid everything and climbing was dangerous. The snow was a problem, too. Sometimes it was too soft to walk on safely. Our second climb was the most interesting. It was on a mountain opposite our camp. As soon as we reached it, rocks started falling all around us like bombs. For this reason, I called the place 'Bomb Alley'. The rocks landed near a large wet boulder. Water ran over the boulder and there was a small pool below it. It was a good place to drink.

Our practice climbs hadn't been too successful, but we weren't worried. We had only done them to help prepare us for the main climb. Now it was time to eat, drink, and rest before we started our journey up the West Face of Siula Grande. For two days we ate and drank like hungry animals. By the end of the second day we felt strong and ready to go.

That evening I started worrying again. What if something went wrong? We could die. I told Simon. He laughed but I knew he felt the same. I also knew that a little fear was a good thing. It helped to prepare you. 'We can do it,' I told myself. 'We can do it.'

We had to wait another day because of bad weather, but the next morning was clear and sunny. It was time to begin the main climb.



We left camp. Richard was coming with us to the glacier which led to Siula Grande. Simon and I wanted to travel as light as possible so we hadn't brought our small tent. We would dig holes in the snow and sleep inside. That meant we only had to carry our climbing equipment and gas. We needed the gas to melt snow for drinking water. I thought two bottles of gas would be enough.

After an hour we came to an ice cliff. Richard could go no further. He took our photos. 'I could sell them if you don't come back,' he joked. We all laughed. I watched for a few moments as he started walking back to camp. I knew he would feel lonely while we were away.

Simon and I continued up the glacier. We stopped to put on our ropes and the rest of our climbing equipment. The sun shone brightly. The walls and fields of ice all around us shone like mirrors. It was beautiful, but climbing through the glacier was very hot and tiring. Every now and then we looked back. We wanted to remember the way we had come. Neither of us wanted to forget it on the way down. It was important to know if we should go below or above the crevasses when we returned.

By late afternoon we had reached the West Face of Siula Grande. We made a snow hole below the mountain and prepared for the night. 'Can we really do it?' I wondered as I lay in my sleeping bag.

Tomorrow we would know.