

The
Confluence
Collective

फोटो थिएन / There was no photo

Samsher Ali

“फोटो थिएन” by Samsher Ali, translated into English by Prashanti Subba, is part of The Confluence Collective exhibition Bauko Dhuri Chhaina.”

In collaboration



University of
Lancashire





Samsher Ali (born 8 August 1953) is a prominent Nepali-language writer from Sindebung Busty, Kalimpong.

He completed his early education at S,U.M.I. School, Kalimpong, and went on to study at Kalimpong College. He earned a B.Sc. degree in Biology from University of North Bengal.

In 1978, he began his professional career as a teacher in Sikkim and later taught at Pagang Gumba High School in Kalimpong. In 1980, he joined the Government of West Bengal under the Department of Food and Supplies as a Sub-Inspector. After 34 years of dedicated service, he retired in 2016 as Chief Inspector.

Alongside his government service, Samsher Ali remained actively engaged in social work in Kalimpong. He has been associated with several organizations, including the Kalimpong Red Cross Society, Anjuman Islamia Kalimpong, Kalimpong Welfare Society, Kalimpong Consumer Organization, Kalimpong Piranhas Club, Kalimpong Yuva Sahitya Parivar, Kalimpong Sports Association, and Vision Kalimpong, among others.

Deeply interested in Nepali literature from a young age, many of his poems and short stories have been published in various newspapers and literary journals. He has published nine notable works in Nepali literature:

1. Beew Bhaley (बिउ भाले)
2. Soldati Gorkha Molto Byoni (सोल्दाती गोर्खा मोल्तो ब्योनी)
3. Huttityaw (हुट्टी ट्याँउ)
4. Afrin (आफ्रिन)
5. Mama (मामा)
6. Abbui (अबुई)
7. The Last Dance (द लास्ट डान्स)
8. Khanduwa Banduk (खँदुवा बन्दुक)
9. Uvownli (उभौली)

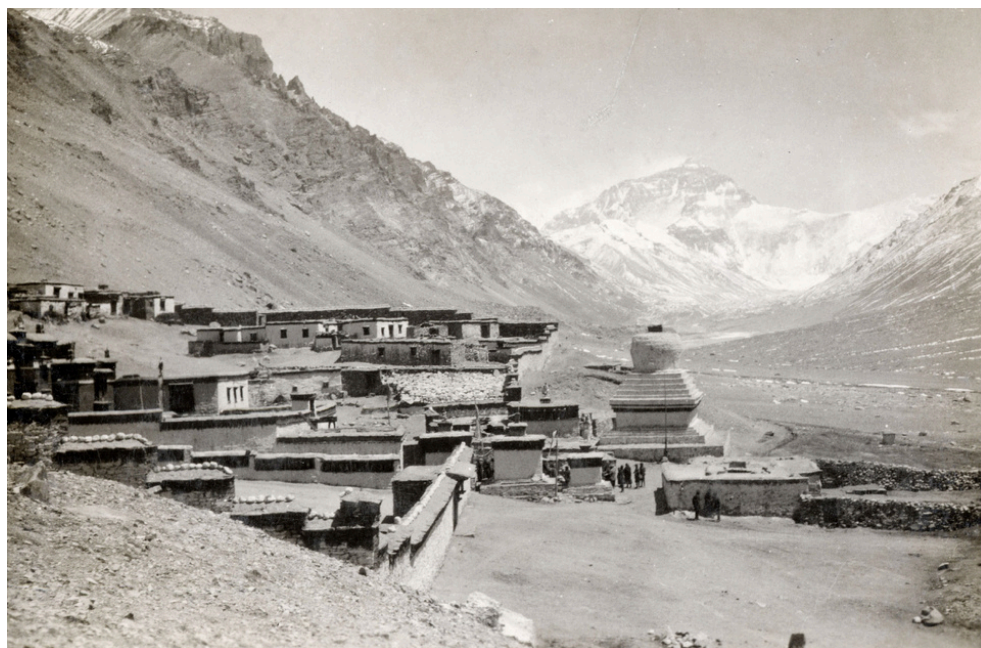
He is a recipient of several prestigious literary honors. In 2015, he was awarded the Purna Rai Smriti Puraskar by Kalimpong Nepali Sahitya Adhyan Samiti. He received the Laina Singh Bangdel Award in Kolkata in 2021, was honored by the Assam Nepali Sahitya Parishad in 2020, and received the Shiva Kumar Rai Puraskar from the Gorkha Territorial Administration in 2026. In 2024, he was also felicitated at the National Short Story Festival in Kolkata.

Today, Samsher Ali remains a respected and widely recognized name in contemporary Nepali literature.

Samsher Ali was inspired to write the story “फोटो थिएन” out of his deep interest in the early Everest expeditions. People from the Darjeeling hills have long been closely associated with Himalayan expeditions. Although many brave and heroic stories about the mountains have been written, very few have been told in Nepali. This story is a humble attempt to fill that gap. Drawing inspiration from various sources, the author has carefully researched and compiled this narrative.

The story is dedicated to the 19 members of the Mount Everest expedition who lost their lives in the avalanche on April 18, 2014.

फोटो थिएन / There was no photo - Samsher Ali



Rongbuk. A. C. Irvine, 3/1/1924.
Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

Flock of birds have flown high and away, solitary of cloud too has gone wandering on and I sit alone with Chingting- peak towering beyond. We never grow tired of each other, the mountain and I. -Jawhar Lal Nehru

Echoing Nehruji's words, human eyes never tire of wandering over the icy white peaks of these majestic mountains. Their towering peaks have a way of calling out to human hearts, which is nothing short of an enticement. Some find peace in just being able to look at it, while some sacrifice their precious lives just to be able to reach those very summits. This is the story of those brave mountaineers whose expedition began from the grounds of Kalebung, sparsely mentioned, as it is.

It was the month of April, year 1924. A group of Englishmen was seen crossing the Teesta River on a suspension bridge made of bamboo and cane, stepping onto the then Kalebung, covered in thick, dense forest. Leading them was the 36-year-old George Leigh Mallory, who was not only a skilled rock climber from Britain, but was also the first person to have reached 24,600 feet of Mount Everest with a group of mountaineers in the year 1920-21.

When Mallory realised that he would need the support of artificial air to climb beyond, he ended his expedition there and returned to Britain. The only objective of his return was to find small, portable oxygen cylinders.

Upon enquiry, he learned that an Oxford University graduate, a 22-year-old man named Andrew Sandy Irvine, could make the said oxygen cylinders. Sandy Irvine would often ride his cycle out to the nearest hills and climb them, his knowledge of rock climbing still at its nascent phase.

Mallory met Irvine and planted the seeds of his adventurous stories of climbing Mount Everest in his adolescent heart. The duo found workshops specialising in making oxygen cylinders and succeeded in making ones that were portable enough to be carried on their backs. At Everest's elevation, their 30-pound cylinders would be able to sustain them for two hours. With that, George Leigh Mallory took this attractive and good-looking young man under his wing for his expedition to Mount Everest.

Situated to the north-west of Kalebung town was Mr McDonald's mansion, which is now known as the Himalayan Hotel and is still run by his grandson, Tim McDonald. At the very mansion, living as his guests were George Leigh Mallory and his group of mountaineers on their way to Mount Everest. Besides Mallory and Irvine, they were accompanied by Captain John, Noel Odell, and Howard Somervell, to name a few.

To prepare for the long journey ahead of them, they had to acclimatise themselves to the cold conditions of the mountains, after which they were set to begin with food, equipment necessary for the climb- ropes, tents, along with a long line of mules. To reach Mount Everest, they chose to travel through the small, independent empire of Tibet, which required their approval from the Tibetan government. Mr McDonald played a pivotal role in obtaining said approval, having been an official of the British government responsible for India-Tibet trade relations

Permission to climb Mount Everest from the Tibetan government was extremely difficult for such mountaineers. There is a belief among Buddhist spiritual leaders that the Himalayan peaks are home to their gods and goddesses, making them sacred places for them. However, McDonald, coincidentally, had given the then 13th Dalai Lama of Tibet shelter during a crisis, which was perhaps the only reason the approval was granted.

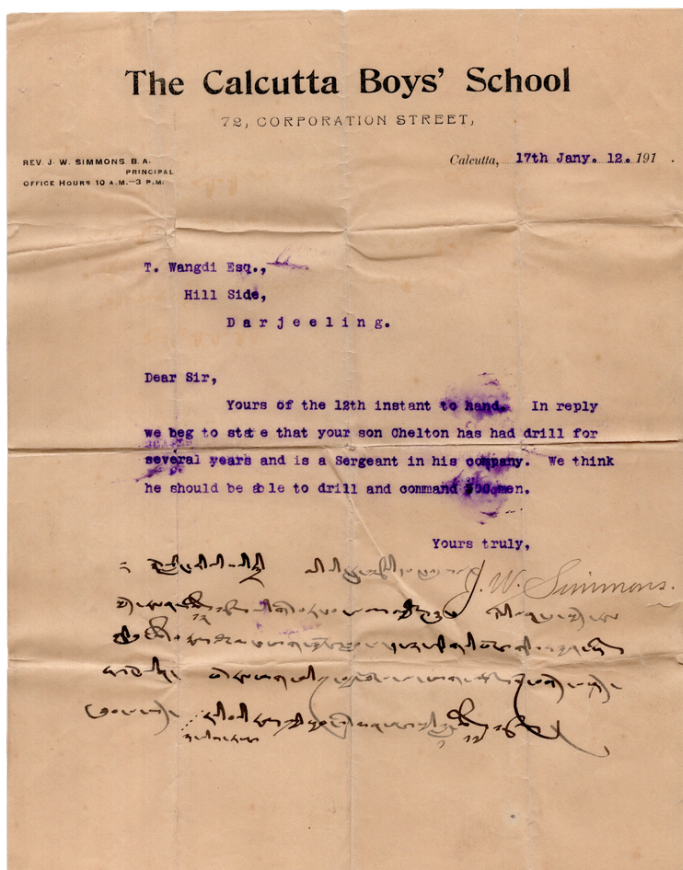
In May 1924, a special prayer service was held at the MacFarlane Memorial Church, situated at the head of Kalebung town. A large gathering of distinguished people from all over the town attended to pray for the well-being and success of the mountaineers. The king and queen of Bhutan, along with their family, greeted and congratulated their group with khadas and garlands outside their then residence at the 11th mile in Kalebung. After a month of travelling through Algarah, Pedong, Reshi, Lampokhari, Rongli, Pithamchen, Kupuk, Sherathang, Jalepla, and Yatung, the mountaineers, along with the group of Sherpas, finally set up their tents at the Everest base camp.

One of the most important members among them was a man called Tseten Habdar Wangdi. Skilled in both English and the local language, he was not only bilingual but also the chief in the group of porters. His house is still there in Kalebung at Pedong Bazaar.

Having studied at the Calcutta Boys' High School from 1903, he passed out of Senior Cambridge in 1912. Skilled in speaking English as well as the Britishers themselves, he held a job under them where he was the only Indian whose salary was at par with theirs. It was the reason he was envied by the rest of his people, who were more qualified than he was. They would resort to petty measures such as snitching on him, to which the British officers would say, "More than his qualification, we evaluate him based on his efficiency. If you don't believe us, show us the same kind of efficiency he has". The ones who stood against him would find themselves speechless at such a retort.

The Khagdiya bazaar, which is close to Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, hosts a huge fair for a span of days to a month during winter. Back then, people from far and wide would travel over to trade their best animals at this fair. In fact, this writer Shamsher Ali's great-grandfather, Laal Muhammad, was a horse trader. He would buy and send good horses to Tibet and earn a good share of the profit from them. He ran a shop at Laal Galli in Kalebung, named after the man himself. It is still famously recognised as so, above the Kalebung Motor Stand.

In the same Khagdiya bazaar, the use of Tibetan currency was still prevalent, and so was the rule requiring businesses to pay business tax to the Tibetan government. A dispute over currency and tax erupted, later escalating and requiring a hearing before the Kolkata High Court. The Tibetan government could not present its argument with clarity due to language differences, which is when they approached Chheten Habdar Wangdi to serve as an interpreter. As a result, the Tibetans won their case. Not only was the case won, but he had won the hearts of the Britishers too, leading him to be chosen as the interpreter of the mountaineering group and a close confidante of George Leigh Mallory.



Letter from the Principal of The Calcutta Boys' School addressed to Tashi Wandgdi (father of Chheten Wandgi).
Chheten Wangdi family - TTC Photo Archive



Tibetan children

Album page featuring Mr. Chheten Wangdi alongside Tibetan children, taken during the 1921 Everest Expedition.

"Presented at the request of Colonel Howard Bury to Chheten Wandgi Mount Everest Expedition 1921

Francis Younghusband, Chairman British Everest Committee"

Chheten Wangdi family - TTC Photo Archive

His son, Wangdi Sir, a former teacher at the Kalimpong Government School, still possesses an album of the early days of their climb to Mount Everest. Their family is very keen on donating the album to interested museums for safekeeping. It could be crucial for researchers studying the early history of mountaineers who have climbed Mount Everest.

Chheten Habdar Wangdi's son, 'Wangdi Sir', recounts –

"According to what my father would say, I wonder if even among the English folks, they had caste-based discrimination? The reason behind it was how they treated Mallory with contempt within their own peer circle when it came to the basics, such as eating or living together; they kept their distance from him. It was also one of the primary reasons why George Leigh Mallory and Chheten Habdar Wangdi developed such a close friendship".

Wangdi Sir further recounts an anecdote, *"One morning, at the base camp of Everest, Mallory and my father were sipping their morning tea inside their tents, talking about their usual, when the sound of Tibetan monks blowing the gyaling, a steady hu...hu...hu... caught their attention. Getting out of the tent, Mallory urged my father to accompany him, to see where the sound was coming from. They had walked quite a distance when they noticed that the source of the sound was a small cave. As the two peered inside, they saw a saint-like person dressed in the thinnest cotton garb, sitting and meditating. It was his throat from where the sound was endlessly originating!"*

When they went closer to this figure, they must have disturbed his meditation because he opened his eyes wide in rage and shouted, What do you need?

The sight of this was enough for Mallory to bolt out of the cave at top speed, after which my father, too, followed him.

My father would reminisce about this episode to us time and again, wondering out loud as to how a person could withstand the cold temperature of the mountains with only a thin cloth and how the sound he was producing from his throat could have reached us through such a great distance."

Numerous other stories about Chheten Habdar Wangdi should be brought to light, as he also played a significant role in helping the Bhutias and the Lepchas achieve tribal status. They say it was possible after representatives of the Bhutia and Lepcha communities handed over the memorandum to the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1947. This is further supported by a photograph hung in Wangdi Sir's living room showing the above-mentioned group of representatives standing alongside Nehruji.

On June 4, 1924, George Leigh Mallory, Andrew Sandy Irvine, their friends, and a group of porters climbed 21,300 feet of Mount Everest and set camp there. Twice, Mallory and Irvine went on to climb even higher, reaching 26,124 feet without oxygen cylinders, and returned safely.

Their objective was to set up a makeshift camp at 26,124 feet, where they would assemble their oxygen cylinders for the final ascent to the summit. When the duo could not climb 28,000 feet without oxygen cylinders, they had to return to the North Col camp at 27,000 feet, where they met other mountaineers.

On the morning of June 6, 1924, after a breakfast of fried sardines, the two lugged their bags and heavy oxygen cylinders and bid farewell to their friends, promising to reach the summit of Mount Everest and return in three days. That was Mallory and Irvine's last goodbye.

Before leaving, Howard Somervell handed his Kodak Vest Model B camera to Mallory, asking him to take pictures when he reached the world's highest summit. To Irvine, he said, "Mallory is very forgetful; make sure he brings this camera back." Irvine smiled and nodded his head.

Peak after peak, Mallory and Irvine climbed with utmost dedication towards the summit of Mount Everest, where the scenic view of the icy mountain tops kissing the clear blue sky followed the two, as seen by Noel Odell.

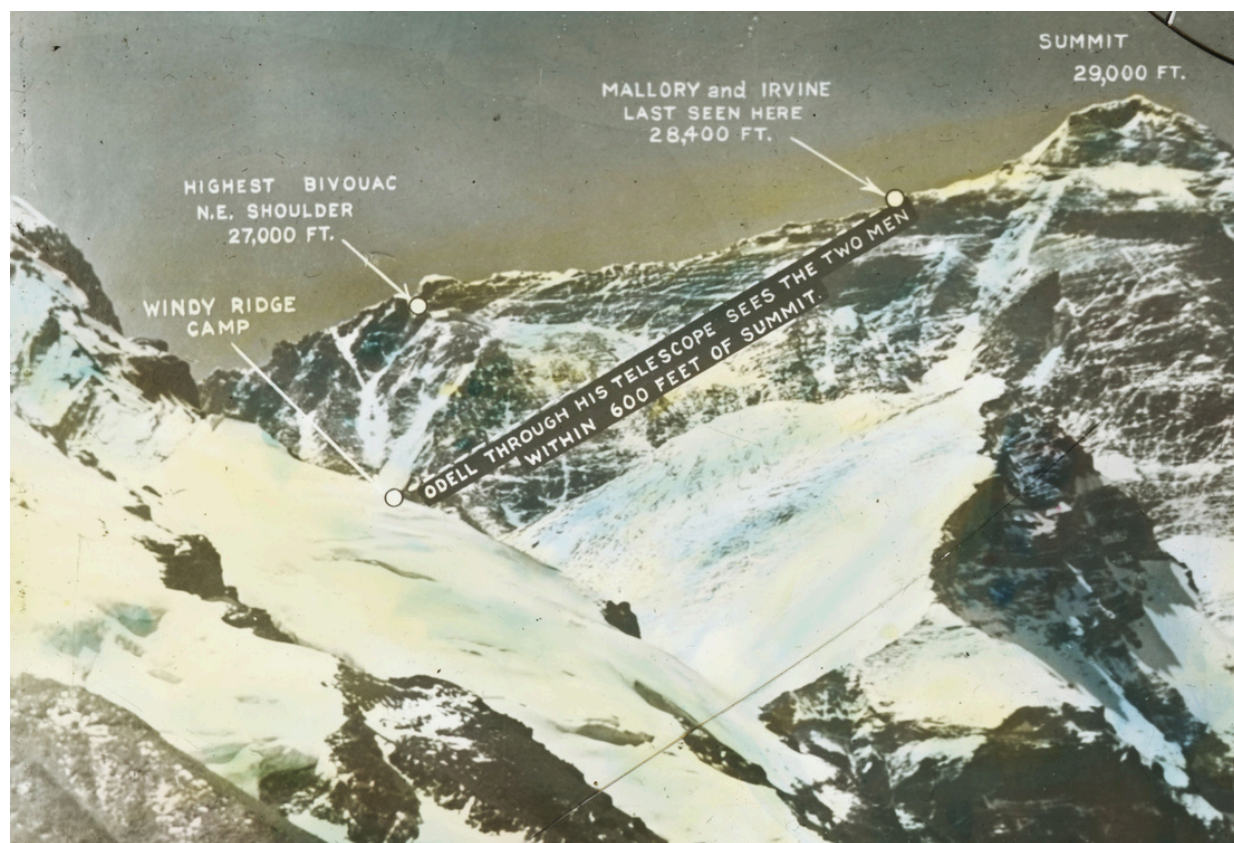
Right before hitting the summit, there are three steps. The first is not difficult; the second is very far and extremely challenging, and the third is not difficult and is known as the 'Hillary Stop'.

In the afternoon of June 7, 1924, around 12:40 p.m., two tiny, human-like figures were seen successfully closing in on the summit. From the looks of it, they could have been nearing the second step. Mallory and Irvine were so close to the summit that Noel Odell had been watching their ascent through his powerful binoculars with keen interest.

In the history of mountaineering, this very scene has been recounted a thousand times over, in various books. It may be the first attempt by this writer to do so in Nepali. Only you can be the judge of how much of it has been justified after you read this story.

Every time I am reminded of the peaks of Mount Everest, my mind always stops at the juncture where Mallory, who loved his wife dearly, carried a picture of her in his pocket to take to the summit. He wanted to plant her image at the highest point on earth and declare his boundless love for her. Mallory's daughter has also written about this in her book.

When Mallory was in Britain, a journalist asked him, "Why do you want to climb Mount Everest?" to which he replied, "Because it is there". It is one of the most quoted answers from mountaineers on expeditions to Everest.



Mallory and Irvine's attempted ascent of Everest, Mount Everest Expedition, 4/7/1924.

J. B. Noel, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

A picture of the twenty-two-year-old Irvine Sandy's youthful face still hangs on the walls of the Darjeeling Mountaineering Institute. It breaks my heart to see him there and know that just like Mount Everest, his adolescent dreams and ambitions, too, are melting away each passing year.

With the help of his powerful binoculars, Noel Odell saw the two figures fast approaching the summit, engulfed in a wave of fog on the afternoon of June 7, 1924. What Noel had seen was the aftermath of a sudden change in weather conditions in the mountains, which led to heavy snowfall. George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Sandy had forever withered within the womb of that mysterious cloud of snow.

Odell made his way down to the North Col Camp, where the rest of his friends were, and explained to them in detail what he had just seen. They were of the idea that at any moment, the two mountaineers would reach the summit and come down to their camp. But the two never returned to the North Col camp.

In the end, Noel Odell mustered the courage to go up to Mallory and Irvine's last camp at 27,000 feet. Within the camp, he found oxygen cylinders and tools scattered about, a clear indication that Irvine had tried his best to assemble makeshift oxygen cylinders. A single oxygen cylinder, despite constant use, would have sustained them for at least two hours, and the duo carried one each. At 27,000 feet, when Noel Odell couldn't find a trace of Mallory and Irvine, he made his descent to the North Col camp with a heavy heart.

He wrote, "Considering their position when last seen, there is a strong probability that Mallory and Irvine succeeded. This meant that, based on the location where Mallory and Irvine were last seen, it cannot be ruled out that they reached the summit of Mount Everest".

In 1933, a group of British mountaineers found Irvine Sandy's ice axe at 27,150 feet. In 1960, there was more evidence that Mallory and Irvine had successfully reached the summit of Everest. That year, when a group of Chinese mountaineers, who had successfully reached the summit, reached the second step, they came across the dead body of a white man whose feet had been facing the peak. They have not been able to retrieve the said body until today.

One hundred fifty feet below where Sandy's ice axe was found, Chinese mountaineers in the year 1975, encountered the dead body of a British mountaineer, preserved by the cold as it is. It was speculated to be Irvine Sandy. The news also appeared in Chinese newspapers, but most people did not believe it. Xiang Xiang, the Chinese mountaineer who had reported the news, lost his life in an avalanche at Mount Everest the next day.

The BBC organised a search expedition for Mallory and Irvine in 1999, cosponsored by PBC. At the site mentioned by the Chinese team, the search party found a dead body frozen rock solid. It had a rope tied to its waist, and its leg was broken at a glance. The worn-out clothes looked intact. The nails of its left hand had dug deep into the ground, and the documents and papers in its pocket remained as it is. However, the Kodak B. Vest camera was not found. The search party examined the dead body carefully. They were stumped when they checked the shirt's collar on the body. It had G. Mallory written on it.

George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Sandy Irvine are the two brave mountaineers whose courageous deeds we remember with reverence whenever we think of the world's highest peak.

For 87 years, Mallory's corpse had been waiting for his friends to tell them of his yesteryears' brave adventures. We resort to layering to shield ourselves from the cold in Darjeeling's winters. It is unimaginable to think about how mountaineers like Mallory and Irvine, back in the day, could have survived wearing clothing thinner than what we wear today at the cold heights of the Himalayas during their expeditions, while also carrying oxygen cylinders weighing up to 30 pounds and relying solely on ordinary ropes. They say a climber like Mallory rarely comes by. It is rumoured that, like the climbers and weeds we see growing in our garden among other vegetation, Mallory could climb the expanse of walls with knees bent so far as they could touch his head. It was as if, out of respect for the death of a great climber like him, even Mount Everest helped preserve his body for 87 years, patiently waiting for his loved ones to find him.

They couldn't find the camera he had taken with him, nor could they find his wife's picture. He would often say that he would plant the image of his wife at the summit. Because the picture couldn't be found with his body, it is estimated that perhaps he must have placed it at the summit, during the return of which the accident took place.

Andrew Sandy Irvine's body remains hidden in the deepest recesses of Mount Everest to this day, and the search for it is ongoing. It is said that the twenty-two-year-old Irvine had many admirers. How could he not, when amongst all the mountaineers up until today, he still happens to be the best-looking youth of them all. He taught science at a university and had taken two months of leave for the expedition. Many women hoped that he would marry on his return.

Their accidental death during the expedition saddened the entirety of England, from the royal family, the kings and queens, the prime minister, to the cabinet members; everyone was grief-stricken. To pray for their everlasting peace, a prayer service was held on October 10, 1924, at St. Paul's Cathedral, attended by all the cabinet members, King George V, and the entire royal family.

Mountaineering experts still speculate that the duo must have reached the summit in the evening, since Noel Odel had spotted the two figures only miles below the peak in the afternoon. They also estimate that by the time they returned and the mishap occurred, it was already dark. This controversy is still unresolved.

The Kodak company has asserted that if the camera Mallory carried with him is found, it could solve the mystery of the matter in an instant. If within the safety of the snow, the pictures in the camera remain intact, they could be developed with caution, and evidence of their reaching the summit or anything useful could be retrieved.

Could the camera have been with Sandy Irvine's dead body? Or has it been found by other mountaineering teams and taken for research purposes? Some speculate that the Chinese, Soviet, or Japanese mountaineers have already found the camera. These facts are still deeply embedded in the crevices of the future but are sure to resurface someday.

I had a friend from Darjeeling named Goleki who taught at the Darjeeling Government College. She had also climbed 27,000 feet on Mount Everest and had to return due to adverse weather conditions. On her return, she had written to me recounting her experiences of climbing the Everest and the dead bodies she had seen there. Lately, many women have been embarking on such expeditions to the Himalayas. A few amongst them have been successful at it. Although Kalebung is not a place surrounded by high peaks, two youths from here, Dawa Dhendup and Manoj Dahal, have successfully climbed Mount Everest. However, this is a modern-day hi-tech expedition that cannot be compared to expeditions of olden days.

The palace of King Topgay in Kalimpong still awaits Mallory and Sandy's return, although the kings and queens are definitely not there today. It stands as it is, the way it did when it stood witness to the duo's farewell. The church that hosted the prayer service for them may have fallen after the 1935 and 2011 earthquakes, but it is still biding its time in anticipation of good news. The top of the church now stands where the Himalayan Hotel once was, still ruminating on whether Mallory and Sandy's successful climb to the summit might be restored from the lost Kodak camera.

For years, Mallory's dead body remained frozen, alone, in the barren area near the peak, but the photograph of his beloved was nowhere to be found in the vicinity.

As I reach the end of this writing, I still search for that photograph at the Everest's pinnacle.

Note: People from the hills have always been associated with the expedition to the Himalayas. Many valiant stories related to the mountains have been written, but none in our language. This story is one such meagre attempt. I have taken inspiration from many other works and put this researched story together.

Dedicated to the 19 members of the Mount Everest expedition who lost their lives in the avalanche on April 18, 2014.

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Memorial cairn

J. B. Noel, Mount Everest Expedition, 3/1/1924.

Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)