

The Rise Of Sir Edmund

By Pete Malicki

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Cast

Edmund Percival Hilary – a Kiwi mountain climber.

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May second, 1953. The grandeur of this place is impossible to put into words. As I gaze out at the impenetrable whiteness of the mountains beyond our day's camp I reflect upon life's fragility, how easy it is for the candle of our life... no, I just said life. The candle of our *being* to be snuffed out. These crags are so vast and the white... um... ivory! The ivory snow blinds the eye as it struggles to distinguish the sun's glare from the cool, white... ivory... uh...

Bugger. (*calling out – this becomes a thing*) Tenzing! Bring my thesaurus, will you? (*quieter*) Bloody mountains. How many bloody synonyms can I find for 'white' before this starts getting old? (*calling*) Come on now! How long does it take to fetch my Roget? I packed the largest edition the store had so it would be easy to find. (*pause*) Well I told you not to tether it to a damned yak. You're supposed to carry it in your day pack so I can access it when I work on my diary, not strap it to our bloody dinner. Thank you.

Right: white, white. Here! Alabaster, ashen, blanched. "Blanched snow"? Hmm, no. Frosted, hoary, pearly. Yes, pearly. The eye struggles to distinguish the glare of the sun from the cool, pearly. No, "pearly" doesn't work without "snow". Bugger.

(*to someone*) Say, John, let's finish up that conversation we were having about bees. (*pause*) Why? Because I'm an apiarist. (*pause*) Oh, you knew that but you'd rather jump into a crevasse. That sounds almost suicidal. Really not a smart move for an expedition leader. Charles! Over here man. (*pause*) It's *Edmund*, actually. I'm a munder, not a warder. Look Charlie, you know what's going on around here. So we're going around this damned mountain, right? (*pause*) What do you mean *up* it. How are we going to get all the yaks up the ice walls? (*pause*) Just to the summit and not to the other side? What's the bloody point of that? (*pause*) Well I'm going to have words with that wretched Sherpa. (*calling*) Tenzing!

Tenzing Jamling Norgay, why is Charles saying we're going up this mountain and not around it? (*pause*) There and back? Why would we want to go there and back? Is this a shopping trip? Am I going to pick up vegemite and a new Teflon frypan up there? (*pause*) Well maybe you need to work on your accent buddy because that is *not* what I signed up for!

Edmund sits, to denote that time has passed and it's a new day.

May eighth, 1953. Our yaks have been disappearing. I noticed the one carrying my complete Britannica had been lagging behind so I spent some time walking with him and, well, we bonded. I gave him a name and decided I'd adopt him after the journey. The next day he was nowhere to be seen, but my encyclopaedias were strapped to a different yak. I tried to find out what was going on over dinner but these locals have appalling English. The food was fantastic though. I wonder what it was. (*calling*) Tenzing! Tenzing, what was in that stew? (*pause*) What?! Mr Yakkles.

Edmund faints. He rises for the next diary entry.

May tenth, 1953. The expedition has ground to a standstill. Yesterday the porter who was carrying my best four suits jackets lost his footing and perished after a two-hundred-metre fall, so the porter carrying a bunch of pants that don't match anything is a right waste of space now. We have reached the camp where most of the team will remain while those who signed up as mountaineers (knowingly or not) will continue. I'll gladly be away from these stumbling Sherpas. For the last week they've been pointing up at the summit of the mountain saying, "Everest, Everest!" Lazy buggers. Just because the end is in sight doesn't mean it's okay to slack off. "I'll 'ave a rest' when I get to the top, thanks."

What's that? (*pause*) What do you mean I have too much stuff? I sent that porter home with all my bloody pants. (*pause*) One bag each! Don't be ridiculous, man. My collection of bee photographs takes up more than one bag. (*pause*) Right, I forgot we'll be coming back this way. Alright, I'll sort it out. (*calling*) Tenzing! Hey little buddy. You can carry an extra couple of backpacks, right? (*pause*) What do you mean you're not supposed to carry anything? Isn't that exactly why we hired you? (*pause*) You're not a porter? So what – you're just here to eat my pets? You're fired! (*calling*) Mr Hunt. Mr Hunt! Tenzing won't carry my bee photos! I want to sack him.

May thirteenth, 1953. Disaster strikes. The tubing on our gas stove froze solid overnight and warped when it thawed and now we have to eat cold porridge. A hot breakfast was the only thing getting me going each day, now I have to stomach insufferable motivational speeches from Tenzing about altitude and safety and how to stay alive. If I'd wanted to bring my bloody mother, I'd have exhumed her before packing!

May eighteenth, 1953. Disaster strikes again. One of the men discovered my middle name is Percival. It took me long enough to come to terms with having a woman's name for a surname but this is just... (*pause; calling*) Shut up! What kind of a name's Alfred Gregory? Like, which one's your first name and which one's your surname huh? (*normal tone*) I keep telling these apes my *other* middle name is Rocky but they just snicker and call me Percy Boy. (*calling*) Oh look who's talking, Tenzing Norgay! (*normal*) "Are you relaxed?" (*bad Asian accent*) "No, I'm tensing." (*normal*) "Are you straight?" (*bad Asian accent*) "No! Gay!" (*muttering*) Stupid monkey-faced yak herder. Get a real job, you gay hippy.

May twenty-second, 1953. Disaster yet again. Our fearless leader Mr Hunt has paired me off with none other than Tenzing bloody Norgay. Aside from the innumerable things that irk me about the man, he's a right slacker. I always catch him daydreaming as he strolls up the mountain. Like, look at that! He's doing it now! (*calling*) Tenzing! How are we going with those muesli bars? (*pause*) Come on man, you have all the gear. Catch up. (*normal tone*) He'll want me to pull him next.

May twenty-sixth, 1953. A slight mishap. Tom and Charles had to turn back when they discovered I'd replaced their spare oxygen tank with my Roget. They were angry, affronted, cross, displeased, enraged, fuming, fierce, furious, incensed, maddened, outraged, resentful and wrathful. They called me something synonymous to mute and misbegotten but I assured them I'd be highly qualified to capture the full breadth of their emotions in writing. Not to worry, Tenzing and I will still head to the top.

Eleven AM, May twenty-ninth, 1953. We are nearing the summit. I can barely breathe. We're scaling a vertical wall of ice. Most of our gear is at the last camp. (*calling weakly*) Tenzing. Oxygen. (*takes invisible oxygen tank, gasps in*) Thank you. Tenzing, while you're there, I need to find the perfect words to describe the view from the top. Can you get my pack ready? (*normal*) Superb. Just a dozen more feet to climb and we'll be there.

Eleven-thirty AM, May twenty-ninth. This is it. The trek has had its ups and downs but a few more steps through this paper thin air and I'll be on top of the world. A moment. (*calling breathlessly*) Tenzing! Wait up. I need air.

Edmund hobbles quickly across the stage and jumps up in the air.

Ha! I did it! First man to summit Everest! Suck it, Norgay. I mean, suck in that oxygen, buddy. The silver medal's still pretty bloody impressive. I'm sure you'll go down in history... in Nepal.

Edmund stumbles, about to pass out, when he's handed some oxygen. He sucks in gratefully.

Thank you. Look at this panoramic vision of pure beauty, Tenzing. These jagged peaks like rows of celestial teeth. Clouds like Zeus's solidified breath. The azure expanse of sky. Valleys below as expansive as... no, I've just used expanse. Uh... widthy...

Say, Tenzing, pass the thesaurus would you? (*pause*) What do you mean you switched it for that extra oxygen tank? How am I supposed to come up with the perfect word? (*pause; calling*) Tenzing!!

Edmund hobbles quickly off stage in pursuit of Tenzing.