

CHAPTER 4



# *Arlene Blum Ascends Annapurna*

*"I needed a strong leader but not a dictator."*

Blum had braved violent winds and mammoth snow to push high up the slopes of Annapurna, one of the most awesome mountains. She was determined to lead a climbing team on the summit—not just for the expedition but on behalf of women the world over, leading more than an expedition to one of the most treacherous spots; she was leading a cause. Annapurna is a part of the most exclusive of all mountain ranges: fourteen Himalayan peaks that all tower above 26,000 feet. None of the "Eight-thousanders" had been scaled until 1950, when Maurice Herzog led a French team to the summit of Annapurna. Three years later, New Zealand's Edmund Hillary and Nepal's Tenzing Norgay reached the ultimate Himalayan summit, Mount Everest. Climbing is a sport of adventure and risk, expedition climbing is a sport of extreme adventure and risk. By the time Arlene Blum had come to thrive on its special blend of camaraderie, delighting in the grand vistas and challenges that come with vertical slopes and thin air, she had already climbed in Alaska and on Everest, and now,

in October 1978, she was leading an expedition of women to attempt Annapurna.

Organizing a Himalayan expedition is akin to running a start-up with dozens of full-time employees for several months of outdoor work under extreme conditions. The red tape is an irritant, personnel a headache, logistics a nightmare. Add in the large consequences of even small missteps—a slip off a cliff or into a crevasse—and a Himalayan expedition can seem ludicrous to even the most seasoned outdoor enthusiast, still more so if one is called on to lead it. But Arlene Blum was undaunted. She had recruited a crack group of ten climbers, hired 235 porters and Sherpas, and was now leading them, loaded with six tons of equipment, up the slopes of Annapurna.

Expedition mountaineers have diverse motives; each maintains his or her own "balanced scorecard" on the way up, thriving on the spectacular views, the esprit de corps, or the sheer physical challenge of the act. But traditionally expedition climbers have shared a single ultimate purpose, an unambiguous bottom line: to reach the top. George Mallory, the renowned British climber who made three attempts on Mount Everest in the early 1920s, articulated the main point when he was asked by a journalist, "Why do you try to climb this mountain?" Before disappearing near the summit of Everest in 1924, in what is still one of mountaineering's great unexplained mysteries, Mallory replied with a four-word phrase that has become part of our lexicon: "Because it is there."

To the uninitiated, such a purpose can appear irrational, even absurd. But to the expeditionary climber, to place a foot on the top of the world and see it dropping off in all directions is the driving ambition. Raymond Lambert, a Swiss alpinist who climbed to within 800 feet of Mount Everest's top a year before Hillary and Tenzing succeeded, is remembered best not for getting there but for falling short. He "had to console himself ever after with the knowledge that he had paved the way for Sir Edmund Hillary's conquest," recalled an obituary. He "came within 800 vertical feet of immortality."<sup>1</sup>