

Solo Khumbu Climbs: First Ascents After Lhotse

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ENCOURAGED by the magically clear skies of the Solo Khumbu autumn, George Bell, Dick McGowan, and I planned a few climbs before the return march from Thangboche. Accordingly, we left Base Camp October 29 with four Sherpas heading for Lobuje, from there to attempt the significant peak to the southwest. Lacking information on any other name we simply called it "Lobuje Peak." From grassy alps alongside the lower Khumbu Glacier, Lobuje Peak sweeps up into a rocky crest crowned with an icy cap giving rise to considerable fluted hanging ice. There was a route, we judged, via these hanging ice aprons on the south face.

From our tent pitched alongside a scenic pond, we climbed up moraine and glacial slopes to a col south of the upper slopes. The way was defined: up an easy, rounded ice shoulder; then the 1,500-foot crevassed hanging apron; finally a corniced summit ridge. Twice, little ice walls provided a chopping problem. The other difficulty came after 4 P.M. as we mounted the highest ice gendarme on the ridge. Here we saw a deep chasm cutting us off from the slightly higher final summit. Arriving darkness counseled a retreat. We had reached the west summit, well over 20,000 feet, and had obtained a supreme view of Everest-land from a new vista. Later, while belaying down the ice, the splendid peaks of Taweche and Cholatse brilliantly reflected the moonlight.

Several days later we found ourselves encamped on the highest yak pasture beneath the resplendent and inspiring Ama Dablam, enshrined as "impossible" by the British. Such a maxim, I think, could generally be supplanted with "improbable" by the modern extremist cult. Any serious intentions we had for the summit were negated by lack of enthusiasm due to the advisability of a stronger party and the fact the Sherpas had forgotten the pitons at Base Camp. Difficult, it appears, but perhaps the nearby Hongu Twins are even less attainable. With Sherpas Da Tensing and Chotari, I climbed up new ground to over 20,000 feet on the south-east ridge of the "Himalayan Matterhorn." Here the Sherpas were not overly pleased with the prospect of crossing a steep névé profile, so I climbed on alone for several hours. I learned a number of things about the peak and was able to assess its problems carefully. Halting at a vertical

chimney I fully realized it was time for more security. Through the binoculars I could see Bell and McGowan reaching a snow pass west of the Mera Col.

On November 5 we returned to the body of the expedition, encamped at the ever-lovely sanctuary of Thangboche. Of the unclimbed summits over 21,000 feet in the Solo Khumbu, none seemed a better target than a glistening white spire west of the upper Dudh Kosi. Known in native tongue as Langcha, its beautifully symmetrical peak made an artistic photo through the pines and birches beside the monastery. Not only was it an alluring summit, but through the glasses, it appeared possible, a forecast not applicable to many of the peaks visible without adding "with several days of extreme climbing."

After wading the Dudh Kosi on November 7, we unexpectedly came upon a quaint yak village, typical with its rings of stone wall. Above loomed the spear of Langcha, the shining monarch of the valley. The Sherpas elected to camp here, but first toted our packs to the highest heather, perhaps 18,000 feet. It was only 3 P.M., but we were already in the shade of the mountain fortress fencing the glaciers.

A 5:30 A.M. start was in order. After climbing a monotonous talus moraine, we stepped out onto the sunshine of the glacier cascading past the west face of the peak. Though it was considerably crevassed, connecting links conveniently appeared when most needed. At 9 A.M. we were ready for the final thrust. On a broad face of mixed steep rock and ice, which we estimated rose 1,500 feet, there were three opportunities. All began as couloirs, with higher ice patches, which threaded up to merge near the summit. The couloir to the right appeared adequate but for a slabby rock wall which sheared off its base; this we dismissed for lack of pitons.

Bell led off up the center gully. Above a schrund, crampons bit well into a firm crust, allowing us to climb simultaneously. After an hour the couloir bulged and rose to 60 degrees. The slope, almost water-ice, clearly required steps to be cut. Crouching next to a rock protrusion I squinted as the showers of chopping fragments bounced off my tropical helmet and tinkled down the abyss of the couloir. The ones that missed me hummed, by the time Bell was two rope lengths above my position. Eventually the angle lessened, but steps were still advisable, especially for the descent.

Hours later I cut a zigzag line in the upper couloir and up a steepening veneer of ice that curved up to a ridge on the left. The crest never gave the security for combination climbing, as we had hoped, but did mitigate "exposure nerves" temporarily. It brought us to an airy point, then led

around a granite pinnacle, whose lowest ledge we crossed on our knees. We were behind schedule; the corniced arête leading to the summit promised no respite. From below we had been lured into believing it would be a quick "walk," but it proved much too precarious and exposed for that. In addition, the crest turned into a consistency of mixed powder snow and corn flakes. Bell, whose belaying axe was milling about in this mixture, loudly reminded McGowan, "Remember, if anything happens you've got to jump over the north side of the ridge." Looking ahead at the unstable cornices I added the rejoinder, "Don't forget." It was no place to linger.

By chopping and kicking immense steps, and on the steepest portion cutting body room, I built the route as near to the margin of safety as time would permit. Once a crevasse offered a secure anchor spot; later I carved deep niches in the crest. We were gracefully spared the annoyance of any "cave ins" and stepped onto the summit mound at 4 P.M. Cameras clicked off a round of panoramas from Gaurisankar to Makalu. The rays of slanting sunshine danced off Everest and Lhotse, where a lee cloud betrayed the high north wind. Luckily, it was relatively calm here. It seemed as if we were in the midst of the world's most magnificent group of mountains. In a reverie of route study, I was in no mood to disagree, for from our vista there was probably the most concentrated assembly of severely difficult peaks on the globe. Far behind the wild peaks of the upper Bhote Kosi, Cho Oyo, Gyachung Kang, and the Nup La, we caught glimpses of the expanse of forbidden Tibet. We almost overlooked seeing two beautiful lakes at the foot of our north face, just adjacent to the Ngojumba Glacier moraine. At one shore we could faintly discern a yak enclosure. The descent went better than expected. Loose steps had crusted in the shade and at times we could simultaneously back down our ladder of carvings. Only Bell had cause to gasp when a camera strap broke and the apparatus swiftly clattered into oblivion. But our verbal regrets were swiftly stilled by his cheerful announcement, "It's insured anyhow." When enveloped in complete darkness, we made several rappels from wooden pickets, then slowly cramponed down over the schrund. Little ice hummocks on the glacier began to throw us. Once I felt my feet in mid-air, let out a horrifying shriek, but landed without tumbling after a one-foot free fall. These affronts to our eyesight ended about 8 P.M., and it remained only to stumble down the moraine rocks to camp. Our thirst for tea did not quench until 1 A.M. that night.

The expedition moved to Namche, but continuing had to be delayed until the mail runners arrived with funds. I decided to leave early, make

some exploratory side trips in territory unvisited by sahibs, then catch the others on the trail to Kathmandu.

Kangtega had long denied us the answer to the question, "Is there a route on the other side?", as we were not attracted to the steep walls above Thangboche. With Sherpa Nima Tensing and two Gurkha coolies I set off on November 12 for the unknown valley leading west into the Dudh Kosi between Namche and Ghat. At a village by the river a little girl ran up and gave me three turnips, or "mula." Surprises such as these make one delight in these mountain people.

We camped in the last spruce clump higher than Namche, whose hemicycle of houses could be seen behind a ridge. In the morning we continued on what is supposed to be a yak trail, but which would have considerably slowed a mountain goat. It crossed numerous rock ravines, wound sinuously around cliffs, and once passed behind a small waterfall! Behind a ridge of Tamserku, the valley tended to flatten into a beautiful grassy meadowland. As we walked along the grass strip beside the glacier, the headwall of the Kangtega peaks came into full view. This is perhaps the most magnificent enclosure I have seen. Behind the browning grass and fringe of cliffs the shining ruin of Kangtega's main icefall hung like a panel on the great wall of rock and ice. I marked a good camp spot on the bed of a dried pond, and then climbed to the foot of the hanging glacier. The tragedy of it all was that there was a route; not easy, but hopeful. However, it would require an appalling risk. I was tempted to try it with Nima, but one more look with the glasses convinced me. Virtually the entire route was subject to falling ice at any moment, and though I saw nothing tumble, there were many piles of chaotic rubble as reminders. Possibly an approach from the upper Hongu might solve the problem of Kangtega. Tamserku's only apparent hope were the ridges, which were about as wild and corniced as any Himalayan nightmare could conjure.

The next morning Nima and I set off for the last alpine peak on the south side of the valley. One might call it the fourth peak of Kangtega. About 20,500 feet, it was the only summit that reasonably promised success. At first we were almost discouraged by the tedious crossing of the debris on the glacier. Later, an almost endless grass slope terminated in a talus shoulder. Apparently a grip of new frozen snow held the boulders together. Some scrambling on stratified rock took us to steep snow slopes leading to the summit. Being on the north side, the surface was loose. We needed no crampons, but had to kick deep steps. Having a cold, I was happy to see Nima volunteer to share this task with me. A few little rock walls added variety to the delicate snow pitches. At 1 P.M. we were vic-

tors, admiring wonderful views, and concentrating attention on Numbur, across the deep valley of the Dudh Kosi. Afternoon clouds rolled in; there was little else to do in this belvedere, so the next day we made the intricate descent to Ghat. Villagers told us the expedition had passed the day before. "Why not explore Numbur and the Lumding Valley behind Kwangde," I thought, "and then follow the expedition by cutting across high ridges to the main trail at Junbesi?" One of the coolies said the trail was rough, but he was familiar with it. We added a little local food and started.

The first evening found us encamped under a rock in a magnolia forest. The clouds had come in; by supper time it was snowing lightly. In the morning the trees were rimed with frost feathers and the trail slippery with snow. In a thick mist we crossed a very high ridge col where rock steps had been built into a steep gully. When we had set up our tent in the flattish Lumding Valley, I was ready to call off the venture towards Kwangde, but at night the clouds parted. Under a star-studded sky Nima and I set off up the valley at 5:30 A. M. In an hour I was surprised to see the huts of a yak farm. It was unoccupied now, but the secluded valley obviously had excellent feed. Nima spoke of "big pani" farther up the valley, past a long waterfall. I looked expectantly for this lake, but arriving at the foot of the glacier was surprised to see its size. Covered with a layer of ice, it filled the valley bottom and was only impounded on the brink of cliffs by a little moraine. I surveyed the wild ice walls from Numbur to the ring of Kwangde peaks. It was truly a climbing paradise, but we were limited by time to confine ourselves to one of the lesser summits, just over 19,000 feet. Enroute to the upper glacier we climbed over a grassy hillock to find ourselves suddenly at the shore of a hidden lake of the most magnificent turquoise color imaginable. We both shouted with delight at the thrill of discovering this alpine "blue jewel." The near shore was banked with green grasses, and at the head of the lake was an ice cliff. Above it in contrasting white, rose the pointed ice peak of Kwangde III.

The wind played havoc with us that day. At times it almost blew us over, causing Nima to remark "Lhotse same, sahib." Most of the high summits were plumed, and during our climb we could see a mass of white trailing off the Everest group. Our alpine holiday had to end; the next day found us battling a cliffy trail which climbed a long mountainside of magnolia brush and juniper jungle. After crossing a rocky col at about 17,000 feet, we lost the last vestige of the trail. After several time-consuming skirmishes with cliffs and false passes Nima shouted to come up to a grassy crag he had scaled. A solitary cairn gave new hope, and indeed we climbed through the last col to see the yak trail in the next valley.

High ridges skirting Numbur took us westward. Beyond a battery of prayer flags and chortens at the last high pass we descended a magnificent coniferous forest to the beautiful valley setting of Junbesi. We were now three days behind the expedition, so walked a bit faster and longer each day than most trail tourists. Tangerines and colorful festivals slowed us a few times. Once we varied our simple potato, rice, and chicken diet by purchasing some fresh water buffalo cuts. Crossing one of our last high ridges there was a wonderful view above the cloudy valley depths: Annapurna was dimly visible; nearer rose Himal Chuli, Manaslu, the Ganesh Himal, the Langtang and Jugal Himal. Only on the flight from Kathmandu were these icy giants seen again. That evening we reached Dyhrenfurth and the expedition's camp. Norman cheerfully announced news I was most pleased to hear, "Jeeps will meet us at Banepa, only two hours from here." A bath and good hotel food wasn't far away. The Nepal Himalaya almost seemed distant now, but as I told Nima, "I'll try to come back in a few years, mountains good."

Summary of Statistics

ASCENTS: "Lobuje Peak," West Summit, October 30, 1955; Fred Beckey, George Bell, and Richard McGowan.

Langcha, November 8, 1955; Fred Beckey, George Bell, Richard McGowan.

Fourth Peak of Kangtega, November 14, 1955, Fred Beckey, Sherpa Nima Tensing.

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, George Bell, and Richard McGowan.

