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**The Reconnaissance of the Minya Konka**

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ON the southeastern borders of Tibet, where the high plateau drops abruptly down into the fertile plains of Western China, lie several ranges of peaks which are generally looked upon as a continuation of the main Himalayan chain. At about 29° 30' North latitude and 102° East longitude, not far from the great river trenches of the Salween, Mekong, and Yangtse, extends a most conspicuous and spectacular, though little-known massif, that of the Minya Konka (24,900 ft.).

During the past decade the region has been visited by several expeditions, notably those of Dr. Joseph Rock and Arnold Heim, and the mountain had been known to missionaries of that region for a number of years previous. No attempt had ever been made to climb the Konka, and those who were familiar with it pronounced it unclimbable. No accurate information as to its altitude or its exact position had ever been published.

In the spring of 1932, an expedition was organized consisting of Terris Moore of Haddonfield, N. J., Jack T. Young of Canton, China, Richard L. Burdsall of Portchester, N. Y., and the writer from Dover, Mass. It was called the "Sikong Expedition," a name derived from the province of southeastern Tibet which we intended to invade. The expedition had for its purpose three main objectives—a complete and accurate survey of the Minya Konka Range, an attempt to climb the Minya Konka, and the collection of zoological specimens along the Tibetan border.

Terris Moore has already written an account of the ascent of the Minya Konka,<sup>1</sup> so it is my intention here to present only

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<sup>1</sup>*A. A. J.*, ii, p. 1. It now appears desirable to present this description of the admirable preliminary work of the expedition.—*Ed.*

the salient features of the two months of survey work and reconnaissance that preceded the climb.

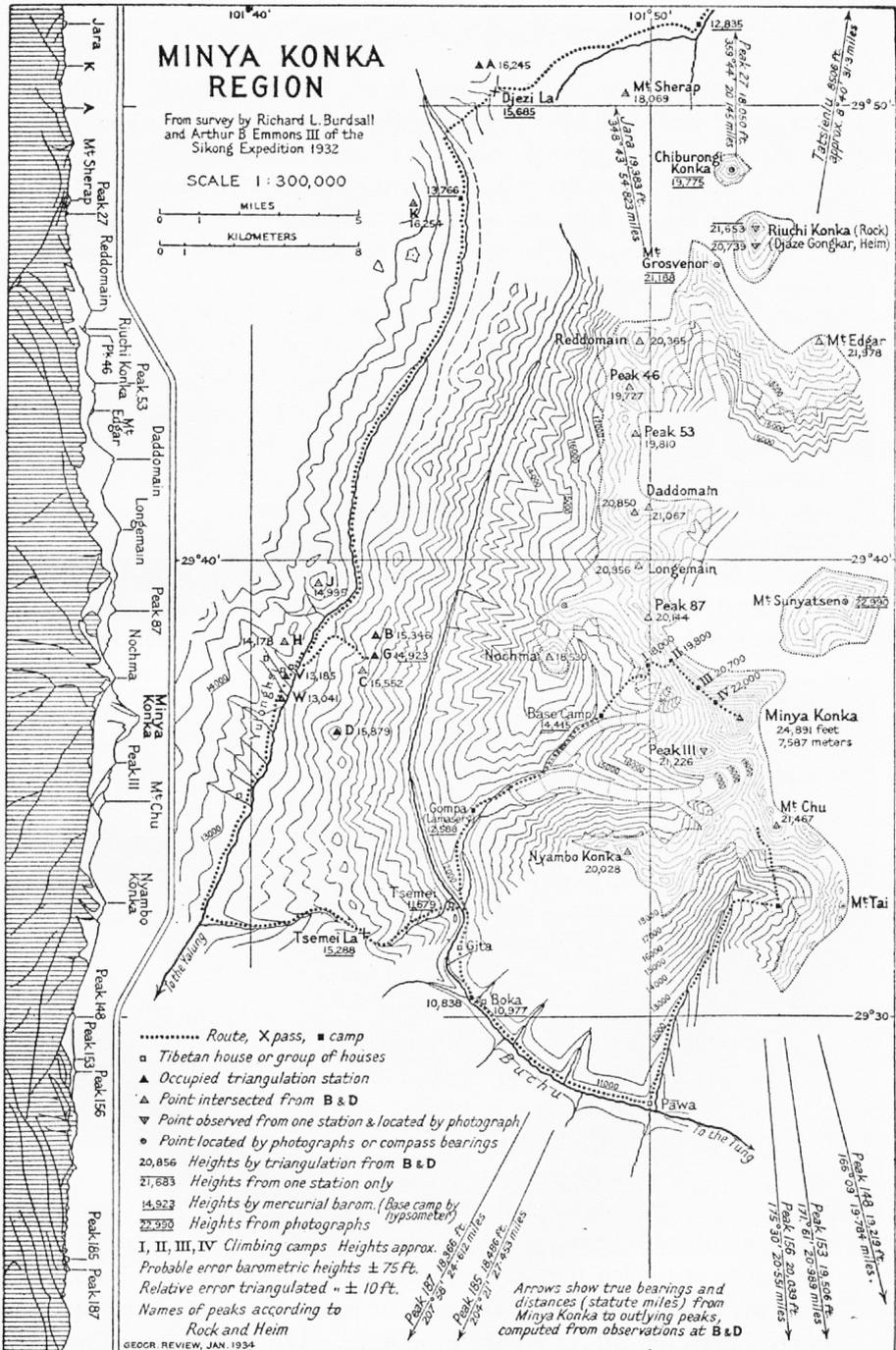
In June, Burdsall and I, constituting the surveying party, left Shanghai for Tatsienlu, a small town on the Tibetan border which was to be the headquarters for the expedition, leaving the other two men to conclude some last minute affairs in Shanghai before rejoining us in Tibet.

In the six weeks required to reach our destination we covered nearly 2,500 miles and crossed the entire breadth of China. For twenty days our Yangtse River steamer churned its muddy way up through magnificent towering gorges, past small straggling towns, some of which were reported to be in the hands of Communists. At length the hills gave way to plains of rice paddies, and we found ourselves in the great plain of Szechuan Province, the garden spot of China, and one of the most fertile valleys in the world. The head of navigation proved to be Kiating, a rather large town lying at the confluence of the Ya and Tong rivers.

The road from here boasted a bus, such as it was, but after a day's ride of one hundred miles we were relegated to rickshaw travel. The foothills rise abruptly from the plains at Yachow. Here it was necessary to obtain a guard of soldiers from the magistrate, as the road to Tatsienlu runs through much wild country inhabited by bandits. Burdsall and I walked this stretch with a caravan of twenty coolies and our guard. In eight days' march, we crossed two 9,000-ft. passes and covered nearly two hundred miles.

Arriving in Tatsienlu on July 23rd, we were most hospitably received by Dr. Cunningham and his wife of the China Inland Mission. They not only gave us lodging but rendered inestimable help in organizing a yak caravan for the trek south through Tibet to the mountain, and later saw that supplies were sent out to us at regular intervals.

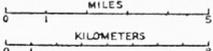
After four days spent in Tatsienlu overhauling and repacking equipment, we took leave of this last vestige of civilization and began the last stage of the journey. The track began to climb at once, the first day's ride bringing the caravan well up into a pass known as the Djezi La (15,700 ft.). The next day, on crossing the pass, we obtained our first view of the snow peaks. The Konka remained hidden in a mantle of clouds, but some of the subsidiary ranges were visible. One of the most striking of these,



# MINYA KONKA REGION

From survey by Richard L. Burdshall and Arthur B. Emmons III of the Sikong Expedition 1932

SCALE 1 : 300,000



- ..... Route, X, pass, ■ camp
- Tibetan house or group of houses
- ▲ Occupied triangulation station
- △ Point intersected from B & D
- ▽ Point observed from one station & located by photograph
- Point located by photographs or compass bearings
- 20,856 Heights by triangulation from B & D
- 21,683 Heights from one station only
- 14,923 Heights by mercurial barom. (Base camp by hypsometer)
- 22,320 Heights from photographs
- I, II, III, IV Climbing camps Heights approx.
- Probable error barometric heights ± 75 Ft.
- Relative error triangulated ± 10 Ft.
- Names of peaks according to Rock and Heim

Arrows show true bearings and distances (statute miles) from Minya Konka to outlying peaks, computed from observations at B & D

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Courtesy of the Geographical Review, published by the American Geographical Society of New York

later identified as Rock's Chiburongi Konka (his elevation: 19,000 ft.), was a beautiful tapering spire rising immediately to the south of the pass. It is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful peaks of the range despite its relatively small size, and it served not a little to whet our appetites for further exploration.

On the fourth day the trail traversed a high upland valley, that of the Yulong Longba. We were now in typical Tibetan plateau country with broad rolling grassy hills over which large herds of yaks grazed. These herds were tended by families of nomad Tibetans, whose large black yak-hair tents dotted the valley floor. They seemed most friendly and on several occasions prevailed on us to accept the hospitality of these smoke-filled abodes. They are fine upstanding people of rugged physique, and differ greatly from the opium-sodden Chinese of western Szechuan. Their principal source of livelihood is embodied in the herds of shaggy yaks which in devious ways provide them with food, shelter, and clothes. We looked forward with great pleasure to the months we were to spend among these hardy people.

As the afternoon wore on we sighted the village of Yulong Hsi where it was planned to establish a headquarters for our survey work. After a bit of preliminary exploration it was decided to place our base camp on a range of hills beside a small lake at 15,000 ft., directly facing the Konka range across a deep valley.

Triangulation stations were then located on two adjacent hills and a mile base-line laid off in the level Yulong Valley. It is hard to refrain from rhapsodizing on the view from these survey stations. Superb, magnificent, sublime—any adjective would seem futile in describing it. Our enthusiasm knew no bounds. A more ideal location for the work would have been hard to conceive.

The range of hills ran roughly north and south and was flanked by two steep-walled valleys several thousand feet deep. For the entire sweep of the eastern horizon the eye was dominated by the snow-clad Konka Range, its flanks and buttresses dropping away into the valley almost at our feet. Far to the south rose several other massifs scarcely less impressive. These had about them an air of mystery and loneliness, for on all existing maps the region in which they lay was marked "Unsurveyed." Two giant pyramids in particular aroused our interest, for they seemed to rival even the Minya Konka in altitude. We named them the

Cathedral Peaks, and they later proved to be in the vicinity of 20,000 ft.

West of us lay range on range of brown grassy hills stretching away to the blue haze of remote horizons in the far interior of Tibet. Several peaks, which we later descried from high on the Konka, lying to the southwest, were now out of sight; those we believed that Rock described as the Konkaling Peaks or the Holy Mountain of the Outlaws, the Konka Risumgongba<sup>2</sup> (Rock: *ca.* 20,000 ft.).

As we swung the telescope of the theodolite farther west another stately range was discernible, which we believed to be the so-called Kanze Range, 150 miles away. Off to the northwest rose a gleaming mass of glaciated rock surmounted by a mighty shaft of rock and snow, the Zhara Shan, believed by the local tribesmen to be higher than the Konka. It stood out by itself, a solitary monolith unsupported by any subsidiary ridges, and it was easy to see why the Tibetans exalted it to a position comparable to that of the Konka. Heim had given the altitude of the Zhara as 19,000 ft. which compared favorably with ours of 19,383 ft. It was fifty-six miles distant from the nearest triangulation point.

The weather favored us beyond our fondest hopes, and by the third week in August all the necessary observational data had been acquired. Over twenty-five major snow peaks were measured by theodolite, ranging from 18,000 to 23,000 ft. and terminating in the Minya Konka which our field calculations showed to be 24,891 ft.<sup>3</sup> in elevation. These altitudes were based on a series of mercurial barometer readings over a long period and compared with a simultaneous series taken at the nearest *known* elevation. The position work was done with the use of time signals by radio. The data thus obtained have been turned over to the American Geographical Society,<sup>4</sup> which very kindly loaned us their instruments.

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<sup>2</sup> *Nat. Geogr. Mag.*, July, 1931.

<sup>3</sup> The figures previously presented in *A. A. J.* for the altitudes of the peaks in the Konka Range, due to an error solely in the assumption of the original standard sea-level conditions upon which the barometer readings were based, have now been universally amended to read approximately nine hundred feet higher.

<sup>4</sup> *Geogr. Rev.*, Jan., 1934.

The arrival of the monsoon coincided with the completion of the survey work, and as our interest now turned toward mountaineering, its accompanying bad weather was decidedly unwelcome. But time was precious and we could ill afford to wait for it to depart six weeks hence.

The Konka presented from the west a most spectacular appearance, rising high above its neighbors. It resembled a slender granite pyramid and seemed to soar to unbelievable heights in a series of huge precipices and jagged Himalayan ridges. There were decided faces on all four cardinal points of the compass. The northern and western slopes fell away almost sheer for thousands of feet, and one glance was enough to destroy any belief in the feasibility of their ascent.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the mountain from this side, however, was presented in a bold steep ridge on the northwest, descending from the summit to about 21,000 ft., where it was separated by a short gap from a long high spur running northward. In this ridge lay the only glimmer of hope in what was visible from the survey camp, but it presented so formidable an appearance and so many problems that it was considered only as a last resort.

Although we had avidly consumed all the available literature and photographs, no information or description of the southern or eastern reaches of the Minya Konka could we find. The reason for this is obvious in that, aside from the general remoteness of the massif, the range runs in a north and south direction, and approach from the east being difficult, those slopes had remained obscure. In fact the Konka is so well guarded by secondary peaks of the 20,000-ft. caliber that a thorough reconnaissance from any side but the west was a most arduous task. The Konka system has been aptly defined as not a range but a "complex," and a complex it most emphatically is!

Burdsall and I had decided to do as much preliminary reconnaissance as we could before Moore and Young joined us in the middle of September. To this end we had brought complete equipment and food supplies for nearly a month's ice and snow work. Before a conservative attempt could be made via the northwest ridge, it was necessary that the enigma of the south and east faces be solved. Hence our watchword became, "To the East! to the East!"

We packed away the surveying instruments and assembled a yak caravan. Bidding farewell to Yulong Hsi we travelled a day's march south and then, after crossing the Tseme La (15,288 ft.), descended steeply into the valley of the Büchu which flanked the range on the west, then turned abruptly east at its southern end.

A day was spent at a small lamasary, the Konka Gomba, perched on a mountainside overlooking the snout of the Konka's great western glacier. Here a closer and less misleading view of the northwest arête was available. From this new angle it appeared somewhat less steep, the slope varying somewhere between 35 and 50 degrees. Several ice buttresses of no mean proportions broke the skyline, presenting unwholesomely steep pitches in the event the ridge proved too sharp to prevent turning them. Then, too, there was always the problem of the gap which took on an even less pleasant aspect. No, this route was assuredly not a thing to take liberties with, and we labeled it, "For Emergency Only."

Continuing southeast along the Büchu River we came at length to the Tibetan hamlet of Boka. Here the trail for all purposes ceased to exist, and our yaks could go no further. A base camp was pitched beside the rushing Büchu. For several days thereafter I essayed a little exploration, unaccompanied by Burdsall who had blistered feet, and found that our position was still considerably to the west of the summit and that we were shut off from it by the barrier range of the 20,000-ft. Nyambo and its neighbors.

Taking a light kit and food for eight days, we back-packed eastward along the Büchu for eight miles to the mouth of another valley I had found, running north into the very heart of the complex. Our objective then became to gain its headwall and investigate the situation from there. In the course of five days of rain we worked our way up along this new valley, dispensing with porters as we needed the added acclimatization which packing at this altitude would give.

When the weather finally cleared we found ourselves in a magnificent cirque of peaks, several of which rose nearly sheer to over 21,000 ft. A camp was pitched at 16,000 ft. in a glacial basin. I then proceeded to indulge in the luxury of a day off incurred through a slight attack of snowblindness.

September 7th dawned clear and the reconnaissance party set off for a col in the north wall at about 20,000 ft. The easiest line of approach lay across a secondary glacier which had its source in the col, and despite several rather formidable icefalls which we hoped to outflank, the ice for the most part was but little crevassed. Three feet of fresh snow and our lack of acclimatization produced the inevitable result that after eight hours of steady plugging we were forced to turn back at about 18,000 ft. without glimpsing the Konka at all. Food was running low, but we eked it out hoping for good weather in which to make another try for the col now that a trail had been broken. But no such luck. A snowstorm made a return to Boka for fresh provisions imperative, without a second chance for a try at the col, though the camp was left intact for a later occasion.

Moore and Young arrived at Boka on September 19th with additional supplies and equipment. They had followed our footsteps the entire way and had been seven weeks on the road. After a council of war, it was decided that Moore and I should continue the work of the reconnaissance, while Burdsall and Young spent their time in adding to the zoological collection, which up until now had been sadly neglected. Then, when a route had been chosen, we would combine our efforts in an attempt on the summit.

Accordingly Moore and I took our leave and returned to the cirque. This time the trip was made in two days, and upon reaching the camp we were delighted to find that much of the fresh snow present on the former occasion had now melted. In fact the weather in general was so much better, that the baleful influence of the monsoon seemed at last to have departed entirely.

The day following our arrival dawned beautifully clear, and Moore and I set out for the col in high spirits. We followed the general trend of the glacier but varied the route slightly over the former one. The glacier presented a good crampon surface and we made fast time, reaching Burdsall's and my high point by 10.00 A.M. Just above here we struck the first of the icefalls and by dint of a bit of step-cutting penetrated it for several hundred feet, where the way became effectively blocked by a huge transverse crevasse.

Retreating a short distance, we traversed some distance to the right and finally passed the fall on an avalanche fan. These fans

we had religiously avoided until now, as judging from the size and frequency of the avalanches descending into the cirque from all sides, they seemed veritable death-traps. As the walls above this one were still in the shadow, however, we considered it a legitimate risk in chancing it.

After crossing a small plateau, another fall similar to and of greater extent than the one just encountered blocked the way. By dodging seracs and making use of a snow bridge we worked our way to the base of an ice couloir which seemed the only means of surmounting a 50-ft. ice wall. It was menaced by several insecure-looking ice blocks and was steep enough to require handholds in several places, but Moore who was leading at the time, seemed undaunted and the thing went all right with fifteen or twenty steps, while I belayed from below.

This couloir gave on another plateau which had been formed largely by avalanche débris. This was crossed as rapidly as our failing breath would permit, and when we were safely out of range of anything coming from above, rest and lunch seemed in order.

We soon pushed on, however, as clouds were beginning to mass themselves up from the south and we were much afraid of missing our coveted view from the col. Now followed about eight hundred feet of steep snow lying at 50°. Fortunately there was a good crust and we were able to kick steps for the remainder of the distance to the top of a shoulder flanking the col on the east without difficulty.

We were delighted to find that, while a few clouds swept across the ridges to the north, they by no means shut out the view. I was disappointed in observing, however, that the summit lay only 15° to the west. We had hoped that the angle would be at least 45° to ensure a complete exposure of the east face.

We stood only about two miles away from the base of the south face which dropped sheer for 4,000 ft. nearly devoid of snow. A jagged razor-back ridge ran from the southeast and connected with the peaks of our cirque in a series of awesome crests topped by fantastic ice-cornices. Through a break in this ridge the eye traveled across the precipitous east face to the northeast arête. It did not require much perception to see the chances of a successful attack on these two sides were but nil!

Somewhat dejectedly we turned our backs on the Konka and a chill wind that swept through the col and sat down to munch a piece of chocolate. The view to the south was magnificent. Across the cirque lay range after range of billowing peaks as far as the eye could see. We looked especially for the mysterious Mt. Tseme with the binoculars, for if it existed at all it would surely have been visible from this coign of vantage at 20,000 ft. No peak which could even vaguely tally with its bearing and description presented itself. We concluded its existence a myth.

After taking a round of magnetic-compass bearings to augment our survey map, we left the shoulder at 3.30 P.M. The descent to the first plateau was made in short order as only in one or two places were belays necessary. I was leading across an avalanche fan, when both feet broke through a small snow-covered crevasse only a few inches wide. I fell in such a way as to sink a point of my left crampon deeply into my right leg just above the knee. Fortunately the steel point missed the knee-cap and also cut no tendons. I dressed the wound hurriedly from a small first-aid kit, as we were in the line of fire from an avalanche couloir, and we proceeded.

Luckily I was able to walk, although somewhat stiffly, and after an awkward time with the couloir and in one or two places in the icefall below, we reached camp safely in three hours. The day's accomplishment in some ways had been thoroughly satisfactory. We now knew exactly what the situation was in regard to the Konka on this front. Our sole line of attack, however unpromising, clearly lay in the northwest arête; no uncertainty on that point remained. We felt agreeably pleased with the extent to which we had acclimatized, having climbed without undue effort 4,000 ft. to an altitude well above 20,000 ft. in six hours.

It was decided that the reconnaissance camp should be evacuated at once, both because our work in this locality was finished and because I was anxious to get back to the base camp before any complications should develop in my leg. Taking loads limited to forty pounds, the residue of the supplies being left for porters to retrieve later, we returned the entire distance to Boka in one day. Thus Moore and I accomplished in four days what Burdsall and I had failed to do in ten. So does the factor of weather in Himalayan mountaineering play havoc with the best laid plans.

When our sad news had been imparted to the others, a council was held. It was now September 25th. We calculated that we could not hope to be within striking distance of the top for at least another month, an almost unprecedentedly late date for such high altitude work, when winter storms would have commenced. We had but little faith in our ability to carry a camp high onto the northwest ridge judging from what we had already seen of it. To further complicate matters, our faith in the local men as porters could hardly be described as implicit, and it was foreseen that most, if not all, the high portage work would have to be done by the sahibs.

But there was no harm in trying, and if the Konka proved too much for us, there were several interesting peaks of more moderate altitude to the north which would make fair prizes in themselves. Thus we determined to carry on the campaign and transfer the theater of operations to the west and north. Burdsall and Young returned to the reconnaissance camp accompanied by several porters while Moore and I returned to the lamasary to conduct a further investigation from that point.

My leg was now healing with no alarming effects upon my walking ability. It is a fortunate circumstance that the ice on high mountains renders steel crampons sterile, for no sign of infection developed in the wound. There was great hope that by the time the assault began the leg would be completely healed, and such proved to be the case.

Moore and I were again welcomed cordially by the lamas, and were given a large room in the lamasary to use as a general headquarters for the climb. When they heard, however, that we intended climbing to the summit of their sacred Konka, they became somewhat less enthusiastic, believing apparently that our purpose in so doing, far from being altruistic, was to obtain a fabulous lump of gold they claimed reposed on top. They felt that its removal might displease the spirits of the upper regions, whom it was their duty at all times to placate. We diplomatically calmed their fears by assuring them that the Konka's gold reserve would remain untouched. Superstition of this kind is only one of the many inherent, and at times exasperating, aspects of mountaineering in Tibet.

The two of us, on the day following our arrival, climbed a shoulder behind the lamasary to a point at about 17,000 ft.,

whence a closer view of the northwest ridge and its approaches was available. We picked a route to the top of the spur at a point where it seemed most accessible. Through the binoculars the slopes of the spur looked unpleasantly steep and prone to avalanche, but remembering the axiom that a mountainside is never what it seems until one is actually on it, we drew no definite conclusions. The upper part of the ridge above the gap looked less fearsome, and it was encouraging to note that there seemed a possibility of circumventing the worst problems by going out on the north face. The gap was still a source of worry but until we were actually confronted by it there was no use in drawing premature conclusions.

On returning to the lamasary, Moore set off for Boka to assist in dismantling the camp there, while I took it upon myself to explore the glacier valley in the hope of finding a suitable track to the foot of the spur and a site for a climbing base. This I did the following day, scrambling over four or five miles of lateral moraine until I discovered a beautiful little meadow lying at the very base of our shoulder. It lay at an altitude of 14,500 ft., and being well sheltered from the wind and abundantly supplied with both firewood and water, it made an ideal place for the base camp. Its one drawback was the fact that it was rather difficult of access for laden porters and to reach it one must ford a swift glacial torrent. The spur seemed to offer on closer inspection a more varied choice of routes than we had heretofore suspected. I regained the lamasary feeling definitely more optimistic about the whole situation.

Loads were sorted and made up. October 2nd saw a small column of four laden sahibs and six porters making its laborious way over the rough moraine toward the foot of the lofty northwest shoulder. The opening gun of the siege against the stronghold of the Minya Konka had been fired, and the fight was on!

In the month that followed we pushed ahead the line of four camps to an altitude of 22,000 ft. on the main summit ridge, and on October 28th, Moore and Burdsall returned to Camp IV from the summit, victorious.

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