

Last Virgin in the Khumbu

Bill O'Connor

What could I say? When a man like Peter Hackett asks if you fancy having a go at a Khumbu virgin, what is there to say? Peter has for the last 8 years given much of his time to running the Himalayan Rescue Association Hospital at Pheriche, one of the highest Sherpa settlements in the Khumbu heartland, and is recognised as an authority on high altitude medicine and by many as an authority on Khumbu virgins or the lack of them!

Ever since wandering up the Ngozumpa Valley to Gokyo north of Namche Bazaar and over the S Cho-la, a glacier pass at the foot of the mountain on my way to Everest Base Camp, I had longed to have a go at Cholatse. Although surrounded by some of the most famous and lofty peaks in the Himalaya, Everest, Nuptse, Pumori, Ama Dablam and Cho Oyu, Cholatse 6440m (or Jobo Lhapshan on the Schnyder map) had remained unclimbed. To many of the high Khumbu Sherpa, Chola Peak as they call it is regarded as a 'sacred summit', one of the five goddesses surrounding Mount Everest or Sagamatha—the mother goddess of the Earth'. As well as being sacred, the Nepalese authorities had hitherto refused to give permission for the peak to be climbed, although its beautiful form had over the years attracted a great deal of interest. Perhaps the other reason for its being chaste was the mountain itself. From every angle the peak presents its steep fluted flanks; great walls of rock and ice separated by airy corniced ridges that lead the casual eye of faith upwards until icy mushrooms and rifts bar progress . . . the stuff nightmares are made of! And only in recent years, with the acceptance and the development of rapid lightweight style Himalayan climbing, have the more technical peaks become the aim of mountaineers—climbs where the choice of route is determined as much by the quality of climbing as by summit considerations.

After several years of badgering the Nepalese authorities, Al Read, the MD of Mountain Travel Nepal, was given permission for an attempt in the Spring of 1982. The Spring season of '82 was a busy one in the Khumbu with major expeditions 'fixing' their way up many of the famous peaks; the Austrians on Cho Oyu, the Swiss on Lhotse, American women on Ama Dablam, whilst the Russians with a cast of hundreds were putting their sports plan into action to get up Everest for May Day.

With all this going on, our now Anglo-American Expedition was meeting for the first time at Al Read's house in Kathmandu. From the outset we wanted this to be a low budget, low profile climb, done for its



Photo: Bill O'Connor

1 *The Last Virgin in the Khumbu: Tsolatse (6440m), NE face rising above the Tsola Tso*

own sake and our pleasure.

Right up until I met the team in Kathmandu I didn't know who the team was, apart from Al and Pete, although Pete had mentioned that Galen Rowell had been invited. At Al's house I was met at the top of the dimly lit stairs by a looming giant who blocked what little candle light was coming from the room beyond. A huge hand engulfed my own and shook it vigorously in the competitive grip of a Californian rock-jock. Vernon Clevinger is a rock climber of the highest calibre and looks as if he would be equally at home on muscle beach or Malibu, with his bulky frame and tanned youthful face capped by a shock of blond hair coiffed by the elements. An appearance worth at least 2 grades in itself. Inside Al's drawing room I met John Roskelley; very much a surprise addition. John, who ranks as America's Numero Uno in the big mountains, has a long string of Himalayan ascents to his name, including K2, Makalu (solo), Gauri Shankar, Uli Biaho and Trango Tower. An independent character, he has been the butt of much petty controversy that haunts climbing politics. His outspoken nature and singlemindedness as well as his outstanding ability make him a difficult man to live with or emulate. As the only Brit on the expedition I was the obvious target of much tongue in cheek mess-tent humour so it was good to co-opt Roskelley, whose mother came from Bradford, into the British contingent! Galen, who was indeed on the trip, was busy shepherding a group of 'mail-order photographers' around the Sherpa villages and would be joining the team at Base-Camp.

During a hectic 2 days in Kathmandu the expedition's Tilmanesque organisation and preparations were completed with Mountain Travel Nepal clearing our peak and trekking permits whilst the Sherpa staff loaded wicker baskets of gear which were walked rather than flown into the Khumbu. On 3 April we landed on the alarming tilt of the Lukla airstrip and spent the next 10 days leisurely exploring the Khumbu, acclimatising and waiting for our porters to walk the equipment in from Lamasangu. The days of wandering from Namche Bazaar meeting old Sherpa friends, drinking chang and photographing Thar were perfect for getting to know each other before the climb.

Galen also put in his first appearance at Thyangboche. He arrived at the monastery having jogged the 600m from Phakding up to Namche and then down and up several more hundred metres to Thyangboche, not as it turned out to see us but rather he was hoping to meet his wife whom he hadn't seen for several weeks! Finding that she was camped near Pangboche he decided to jog on. Fearing the effects of too much exercise we encouraged him to stay long enough to drink plenty of fluids and chew a diamox before he sped, ever upwards, ever onwards to his loved one. The following day we met him on the way back to meet his group; pale but perky!

By mid April 4 of us with our Sherpa Sirdar Ang Nima and cook Pemba had set up Base-Camp in a Yak pasture at 4725m below the W

Face of Cholatse: three 'North Face VE 24s' and a huge blue mess-tent loaned from Mountain Travel. At this stage Galen was still roaming the Khumbu, and Al Read who from the outset had decided not to join the actual climb, was detained by business in Kathmandu.

From previous trips and photographs of the mountain we all felt it was climbable, Alpine style, in a couple of days by a strong party. But now at closer quarters Cholatse began to reveal its real worth. From quite low down in Himalayan terms, the SW ridge, the line all of us had finally decided upon, was protected by a great tumbling glacier which was overshadowed by the hanging ice on the W face proper. Over the next few days we established a cache of equipment on the spine of the lateral moraine beside the icefall and whilst John and I did another carry from Base, Vernon and Peter had the first crack at the icefall. From the top of the moraine we watched them winding their way around unstable seracs, finding a route through the icefall that rose towards the back of the cwm and the headwall they hoped to climb to establish our first camp on a Col at 5670m on the SW ridge. Again we had underestimated the problem.

'How was it you guys?' asked Roskelley as we sat in the mess tent drinking hot sweet tea and munching our daily dose of peanut butter and jelly-covered biscuits, a delicacy that has equal status to a toasted teacake or perhaps even a buttered scone amongst Americans. 'Wow-man, it felt real freaky' Vernon replied thoughtfully. 'Felt as dangerous as the Khumbu icefall—not as big but real dangerous' added Peter, who had climbed Everest from the South Col solo the previous autumn. We were impressed. 'We holed out at a big crevasse, you can't really miss it, just follow the wands, we dumped some gear there . . . it looks as though it might go round to the left' he added in his Californian drawl.

The following dawn John Roskelley and I left to push the route through the icefall, whilst the others were going to carry another load to Cache Camp. The morning had begun quite clear, although strands of high cloud were already scudding across the sky and building a barrier: a solid mass of grey against Cho Oyu at the upper end of the Ngozumpa Valley. 'I'm not too keen to go wandering about in the icefall in a white-out' I said, voicing my fears to John, who had already made the point over dinner the evening before. He nodded agreement and we descended the moraine to the glacier. Once on the ice with crampons on and lost in play all was forgotten. We followed the sparse line of bamboo wands that yesterday's team had placed. By the time we reached their end cloud was filling the cwm and rime was forming on hair and beards. We climbed instinctively, side stepping and threading our way between tower block seracs. Then gently, almost unnoticed, the first snows began to fall, a blanket of silence. From time to time a mass would slide, hissing, over the frozen surface; a fearful noise amplified by our tension into massive avalanches that locked us rigid, looking and listening in fearful expectation.

By mid-day we had reached a point below the headwall leading to the col. Crossing the 'schrund where avalanches had filled it, we waded through steepening granular depth hoar trying to reach a runnel where, hopefully, firmer snow would lead upwards. John led through, fighting for a solid purchase in the steep collapsing granules. 'Keep that rope running' he shouted down as I tried to free it from a snow mushroom. 'Ropes fixed . . . come on up' John had tied the rope off to a snow stake and rested whilst I followed with a jumar on the rope.

The heavy loads, soft snow and steep climbing were taking their toll. I led through, but swinging leads was inefficient and unnecessary. John took over the lead and I carried. At a small outcrop he fixed a rock pin and I pulled up on the rope. In the depth hoar the snow stakes were easily pulled out and the rope felt very insecure. From the rock band the route ran out left to an icy rib which led upwards for another three pitches until finally a small cornice gave way to the col. 'Wow-fantastic, a real party patch' John enthused. I followed the almost vertical pitch and discovered for myself the perfect spot. A sheltered hollow protected on the far side by rocky pinnacles.

'Looks like the gods are with us', I said as we walked over towards the shelter of the pinnacles and threw off our heavy loads. John started the MSR stove and melted snow while I busied myself cutting a tent platform.

Feeling pleased with ourselves we sat on our packs drinking a hot sweet fruit drink and the stove spluttered on, melting more snow. Unknown to us, Clevinger and Hackett had given up their rest day and instead of leaving their heavy loads at the cache they carried on. 'Hey-you-guys . . . get a brew on.' We were surprised by Vernon's shout. 'We're coming on through.' In high spirits we photographed them on the final pitch of the headwall, jumaring the climbing rope we had left in place. We handed them a hot drink as they came over the top.

'Good effort you guys' said Peter, adding jokingly 'Couldn't let the A team go to the top without us'. During a brief clearing we studied the route above. The SW ridge led in a sinuous sweep towards the summit. 'If we go for it, reckon we should be up-and-down in a couple of days' said John. We agreed. The route above looked steep but straightforward and judging from the pictures, once we were on the summit plateau it should be all over. 'If Galen doesn't turn up soon he just might be too late—and then one of us will have to do it again just for his pictures' joked Vernon, reflecting our mood of high optimism. We rapped back down the headwall leaving ropes in place. We could pull them up later when we needed them.

In the evening Galen arrived at base from Phortse bubbling with enthusiasm having left his wife and clients at Lukla. Now eager to get on with the climb he wanted news of everything. Together at last in the mess tent we seemed poised; we had the green light and everyone was set for the big effort. The following day we had planned as a rest day and a

chance to do final personal packing before the climb. Galen did a carry of his own stuff to the cache, just for the exercise, and seemed to be going well.

D-Day was the following day but it never seemed to arrive. Instead dawn was a uniform grey and a blanket of fresh snow covered base. The Yaks that grazed around the camp were frosty and their breath steamed from their mouths freezing in the long hair around their faces. Departure was delayed for another day. Ang Nima and Pemba prepared favourite foods to satisfy the inner man: great mounds of boiled potatoes, chili sauce and fried eggs, washed down with gallons of 'ready-made tea', a hot sweet elixir brewed in the same pot, a Sherpa speciality that has never tasted quite the same in Britain!

Three days of poor weather followed our return from the col. Feelings of frustration and gloom etched our optimism. Not helped in my case by Giardia, a gut parasite that produces vomiting and a nasty dose of Kathmandu quickstep! I moped around camp feeling very sorry for myself.

Early morning tea on the 20th brought us from our tents to the first clear start in days, although to the south over India huge castles of cumulus were boiling up whilst the deep gorge of the Dudh Kosi was filled with a sea of cloud. Shouldering our loads of mainly personal gear, sleeping bag, pad, one piece climbing suit and other clothing we left Base where Ang Nima was burning juniper and droning a toneless mantra for our safety.

At the cache we changed into plastic double boots, a mixture of Koflach and Kastinger, and sped down the familiar side of the moraine onto the ice. Now known terrain, the danger of the place was just as real. Peter shattered what false sense of security familiarity had built up by repeating, 'Just like the Khumbu . . . not as big . . . but we have got the W face'. As we roped up, a huge serac broke away above us to the left crashing down the face, disintegrating into particles and covering the upper glacier with a cloud of ice dust that billowed towards us and, as if consumed, disappeared without trace.

Better acclimatised now, the route through the commando course of the icefall went quickly. The bamboo wands leading to the headwall seemed like the bell at the end of each round in a drawn out fight . . . 10 down . . . 5 to go . . . seconds out . . . ding! Fearing the consequences of what an avalanche would bring, but wanting more what turning back would deny, doesn't leave much of an option. My journal records: 'Real pleasure today. Felt totally committed to the climb, nothing else mattered. Same kind of adrenalin high I get on the rock at home when climbing is all that matters, not protection, nor how small the holds are or difficult the moves, but just being there and climbing'.

At the col we were pleased with our day's effort. Whilst John and Galen put the Domes up three of us had a look at the ridge ahead, intending to leave our climbing ropes fixed on it to give us a good start in

the morning. Almost at once the reality of the ridge was realised. Instead of giving straightforward climbing on fairly steep snow the surface turned out to be brittle ice and mushy and because of its geometry very insecure climbing indeed. Forced to climb out to the right around an overhanging split in the ridge the truth of its difficulty dawned. At the end of the third pitch we tied the rope to an ice screw and rappelled in a direct line to the col.

From outside the tents it was a spectacular sunset through the huge clouds that were now a feature of every day. I was nursing a slight headache and vomiting frequently. Instead of freeze dried I drank and chewed a Diamox. Sleep was fitful, aware of both tomorrow and the falling snow hissing over the tent's nylon. At 3.30 digital bleeps shocked us awake and the noise of the stoves was as intrusive as trial-bikes on the Marlborough Downs. Peter had had a bad night. Unable to sleep he, the Doctor, had diagnosed flu. We were faced with a crisis. If we waited a day or two we would have to go down to restock and the daily pre-monsoon storms with their afternoon snow seemed to be building for something big. It was a difficult decision. Peter had put the trip together and was the catalyst for the group and now we had to deny him a chance of going to the top.

Even though we cut everything to a minimum the Lowe Expedition packs were still full. Safety and survival depend on an optimum amount of gear. We had decided that the leader would be lightly loaded to move quickly and safely and the others would belay themselves with a jumbar on the climbing rope fixed by the leader, thus doing away with the need to belay. The last man would then take out the gear, pull up the rope and pass it on to the man ahead and so back to the leader. After 5 very steep pitches John, who was climbing superbly, called down. 'We've got to get rid of these loads. We'll never make it'. The climbing was steep and technical on ice that varied from hard blue green to brittle almost atmospheric soufflé. At around 6000m, after climbing over a series of rocky pinnacles on the ridge to a point where there was a slight dip, we found a place where a platform for our two small tents could be pitched.

Whilst Clevinger and I hacked away, John and Galen pushed upwards to fix the ropes for the morning's efforts and again save time. Between hacking out the platforms we watched them as John led, climbing around bulges and traversing rightwards over steep drops under overhangs of curling snow. They rappelled back and the rest of the day was spent rehydrating; an almost impossible task at altitude.

'It looks like it should go, but it's hard' said John, 'we won't be able to climb the ridge, we're gonna have to drop down below the cornice and climb diagonally rightwards up a steep ramp between the ice and the rock face below! Really scary if you come off . . . you're out over overhangs' he said drily.

The sky was a mass of cloud at different levels. Looking westwards we could see the peaks of the Rowaling: Gauri Shankar, Menglungtse and

to the south Numbur. Lightning was striking between the clouds; the signs were ominous and the Sherpa legend that a virgin peak remains veiled until the gods are appeased seemed true.

Three thirty. More digital bleeps and robot-like I pull on clothing before leaving the cocoon. Then quickly drink the tepid squash to suppress nausea and hassle with double boots before leaving for the summit push. Coldly immobile, the climb up the first rope with frozen jumars is a nightmare of incompetent movement and fumbling. Tubular screws won't clear whilst minor bulges and off-balance moves seem grotesque. By the end of the third pitch, commitment and rhythm surge back and the day's light gives new perspective to the route ahead.

Roskelley, climbing confidently and fast, dances sideways up the steepening ramp. Crouching below an overhang he lays away off an icicle to gain an upward step. More than 20 ice pitches later the route is barred by a huge serac barrier, a step in the ridge caused by a crevasse-like split. From a rocky perch, a platform jutting from the ice, the route leads up and leftwards into the back of the rift and so onto the face of the serac. Two more long leads up seemingly vertical ice lead to a platform above the serac. Together for the first time since the morning we are all surprised by the difficulty. The cloud has closed in and it begins to snow.

I lead off until the way ahead is halted by a huge crevasse, a monster. It looks like a full stop. John has a look to the right where a sliver of ice arches across the hole. Lying flat he pulls himself across and climbs another vertical step to gain a steep snow slope above. We have gained the summit plateau. In the now complete white-out we cross the broad steep snowfield winding our way round crevasses until a bergschrund butting against another vertical ice wall bars progress. Traversing leftwards we look for a weakness in this final defence until passing time forces a decision. Upwards over the bulging lip of the 'schrund John hooks his way, following a diagonal line of weakness up and across the wall to a point where a split in the ridge above slices down the face and provides a convenient slot for a belay. From this stance a bulging wall of ice leads to the exposed ridge above dividing the W and SE faces of the mountain. Surprised by a section of bottomless depth hoar, we have to crawl along the ridge spreading our weight to gain a purchase and a few metres. For a split moment there is a break in the cloud and the four of us, prostrate, can see the summit only a few rope lengths away. Like pilgrims on a holy march we push ourselves forward until a final steep pitch leads to the summit ridge. Exposed to the full fury of wind and snow we edge gingerly along the crest until one at a time we stand on the summit of Cholatse.

With axes buzzing and scalps tingling we linger, relishing briefly our summit. Fearing the coming storm and having left our sacks below on the summit plateau we hurriedly rope down the ice wall to our 'life support packs'. It is now late to get down to camp so we are faced with an open bivouac on the plateau at around 6400m. Lying down we each

withdraw into the solitary confinement of our sleeping bags. During the night the storm blows itself out but not before the snow has found its way into our tightly drawn bags. Galen and I have Goretex and down bags that by morning are soaked, whilst the Qualofil bags that John and Vernon are experimenting with are dry and warm. Between fits of clenched teeth, shivering thoughts are fixed on descent. Fearing the rappels and the possibility of an error in descent, I find myself, like a child, wishing I could be transported back to Base with its luxury, warmth and security without having the ordeal of descent.

Dawn is a watery affair; the storm has passed but the sky is still confused, with a myriad of cloud forms about. Gradually the peaks of Everest, Makalu, Cho Oyu, Nuptse and Chomolhari in Tibet are silver-tipped by the rising sun. The 20 abseils, swinging sideways crab-like along the diagonal ramp, are filled with tension, all of us fearful of the abyss below the ramp where a slip will mean a swing out over space. By the time we reach our high camp, fear and the thin cold air have left us parched. Camp provides a respite; a chance to brew, relax and pack our things before the final airy flight down to Peter and the col. Already a day overdue we know he will be worried. Unbeknown to us, those at Base Camp had seen us for a brief moment just below the summit; we had been only four! By the time we reach Peter it is again snowing. Unable fully to hide his disappointment he congratulates us and pushes around hot drinks. We pack up camp and clear the site, leaving nothing on the mountain, and then run the gauntlet of the icefall for the last time. With total relief we gain the moraine and wander slightly apart down the valley towards base, to be met by Al Read and his family and Ang Nima and Pemba who hand round hot flasks of orange. They are full of smiles.

For us the expedition had been a total success. A major unclimbed peak in Alpine style. No one was hurt; we remain good friends. And the route, well, hard to subdue. But then that's how virgins ought to be.