
NICK BULLOCK

Love and Hate on the Edge of Darkness

With eyes on stalks and my neck stretched, looking like a tortoise wearing a helmet attempting to clear its shell, I knew it was going to be a skin-of-our-teeth affair. Why do I repeatedly find myself in these life-threatening positions? One move was all it would take to get us to safety, just one risky move. The gap we were desperate to squeeze through was getting smaller by the second. My knuckles turned white, gripping hard, but the decision was out of my control.

A large black cow nearly finished us by swinging its rear end into our path, but the beggar whacked it, shooing it away. As the gap reopened, Dawa twisted the throttle and with a roar the motorbike flew through the tiny space. Leaning first to the right and then to the left, the Nepalese climbing agent handled the Honda with the skill of someone accustomed to the hectic anarchy of Kathmandu streets. I, on the other hand, had just returned from a month in the mountains. My nerves were still frayed from terrifying flights to and from Lukla. The climbing had certainly been less scary than the travelling, and that hadn't been particularly risk free.

Powell, Cartwright* and Bullock; the dream team we were not. Stubborn, driven and determined would be a fair description of our *ménage à trois*. Powell was laid-back, quiet and rangy, super-fit with a reputation for a lightweight and quick approach in the hills. Cartwright was the superstar of the team, the youngster at 28, sure of himself, chain-smoking, hard drinking, hard climbing, no-nonsense, no bullshit, to the point and straight to the pub. I was old; 37 years old, aching, battered and grumpy, but with a certain cunning in my favour. The trip was of my making, the proposed route, big, hard and unclimbed.

We acclimatised on the hills opposite our objective, the massive 1600m north-west face of Teng Kangpoche in the Khumbu. It was no surprise that the face, ice-streaked, loose limestone, threatened by séracs, was unclimbed. Cartwright pushed for the 'nails' approach – big bag, seven days up and three days off the back. I suspected his 10-day epic on Ama Dablam in 2001 had affected his mental state. I favoured a light and fast approach – four days up and one day down – on the same side. But I've known Cartwright long enough to know I was on to a loser trying to persuade him to do it my way. Powell was not concerned one way or the other.

* Jules Cartwright was killed in an accident on 30 June 2004 while guiding in the Alps. He and his client Julie Colverd, who also died, were on the approach to the Cassin route to Piz Badile in the Bregalia. It is understood that the pair, who were roped together, slipped on a steep snow slope and fell 150m. An obituary of Jules will appear in the next *AJ*.



7. Al Powell and Jules Cartwright on the trio's first attempt on Teng Kangpoche's north-west face. (*Nick Bullock*)

Leaving the freezing cold, half-built lodge at Thyongbo for our first attempt, I struggled beneath the weight of my huge rucksack. Cartwright forced the pace and I forced myself to keep quiet. Due to the late arrival at Thame of the other two, the chance to stash kit beneath the face the previous afternoon had been missed. I had walked up to the village a day earlier. By way of explanation for their late arrival Powell complained of being 'powered down'. For 'powered down' I substituted 'pissed up'. An evening's partying in Namche had been too tempting to miss.

The initial snow cone at the base of the face proved to be solid, supporting bag and bodyweight. Cartwright again set the pace, Powell followed and I moaned. The giant north pillar stood off proud and challenging to the left. A massive crumbling rock wall running from the pillar enveloped the three of us. Tottering blocks threatened and séracs miles above teased and intimidated. Easier-angled fields of loose rock, ice and snow ran and ran. The wall was something to behold; runnels, ice streaks and water ice. Mega Route X, Point 5 Gully, Zero Gully, they were all here waiting to be climbed.

We left behind the concerns of the daily grind of work and bills, even the fetter of the rope. Each step was liberating in a worrying sort of way. The runnel tightened and the incline grew steeper, but with good snow we continued to solo. Occasionally the heavy rucksack, stuffed with seven days' food, gas, ropes and tent, pulled and threatened. Cartwright stayed ahead, strong, natural, powering through unconsolidated snow. Powell followed,

competitive, refusing to allow the gap between himself and Cartwright to widen. I was at the rear, old, stubborn and aware of my weakness in this big-bag game. Guilt coursed through my body at leaving Cartwright to break trail for so long. But it was because of his approach to the climb that my pack was so heavy. With this warped sense of the just, I hung on to my dignity.

Reaching an overhanging, ice-smearred slab broke the uniformity of what had been a twisting, turning, Scottish grade III gully. Without any persuading we decided to climb a mixed corner to the right. Cartwright, still in front, was now in his element. Rock bulges were turned, corners hooked and torqued. A delicate traverse using blobs of ice with a full stretch step-down was gibbered at, if only by the six-foot dwarf on the team. 'What the hell is this?' I yelled.

The first roped climbing had come as a shock. Cartwright and Powell are a lot taller than me and had been able to step down to a horizontal crack ready-made for a crampon point. I found the whole procedure desperate. I needed an intermediate placement but none was forthcoming. Gently lowering myself, my strength was drained by the parasitic sack and I used a pick placement in a blob of ice for vital support. The ropes running horizontally left around a corner rubbed on sharp edges of rock. Powell, out of sight, pulled. The rope drag allowed no feeling for sensitive belaying. I swayed. Powell pulled for a second time and again I resisted. A tug of war was not in the script for survival. I stretched, full body length hanging from the pick in the blob, straight-arm-hanging and still six inches short. Commit! Commit Commit! The ice blob made the decision for me by breaking away. Splinters of ice flew, sparks flew, and I slid. My left front point found the crack and snagged. Powell pulled again and I moved towards him, leaving behind the 'what ifs'. There was still too far to go to dwell on 'what ifs'.

Around the corner the angle of the face eased and the snow became deeper. Cartwright was selflessly breaking trail up a large snowfield leading back toward the runnel. Guilt hit me hard once again – I should have been up front breaking trail, taking my turn if only for my own peace of mind. It was still only day one and already I detested the rucksack, the soft snow, Cartwright's drive and determination, his fitness and his lack of years. 'Bastard'. At that moment I hated him but hated myself more. Why do we have to get old? At one time I would have been fighting for the front. My competitive streak wouldn't have allowed anyone else to do it.

At the top of the snowfield a perfect tent spot presented itself, protected by an overhanging rock. Powell volunteered to stay and dig. Ahead the runnel had turned into a perfect two-pitch 75° Scottish gully. When Cartwright asked if I want to lead I jumped at the chance. It would in some way redress the balance and ease my evening of self-doubt. The sack of injustice could be left behind, as the plan was to climb two pitches, fix the rope and return to the tent ready for a speedy ascent next day.



8. Al Powell on the first attempt on Teng Kangpoche's north-west face.
(*Nick Bullock*)

Climbing the first pitch the old feeling of joy at vertical movement returned. Cartwright joined me and I set off again to lead the second pitch of this Himalayan Ben Nevis-Green Gully impersonator. At the top I fixed the ropes ready for the morning's jumaring. As I slid back to the tiny yellow dot 120 metres below, the mountains across the valley turned red. Huge Himalayan faces of rock, snow flutings and ice turned on a light show to behold. Everest, Lhotse, Cho Oyu stood proud on the horizon, pushing into a clear sky.



9. North-west face of Teng Kangpoche. (*Nick Bullock*)

Back at the tent I sat outside as the others sorted the inside. Making a tiny, single-skin, two-man tent into a home big enough for three is the work of a conjuror, not a climber. I felt better after taking a share of the work, yet silently questioned my feelings and motives. Why did I feel the need to prove myself? Why did I question my motivation if someone else took the lead? Was I threatened by the onset of age?

That night was one of the worst I had ever spent on a mountain. I had drawn the short straw and ended lying between the others, cramped, unable even to turn to lie on my side. As milky-grey, Gore-tex filtered light entered the tent, I lay awake, much as I had the whole night. I felt wrecked. I waited for one of the others to start the stove and begin melting snow. An Alpine start this was not, but eventually, breakfasted and packed, we were ready to move.

'Are you going to take these ice-screws Jules?' I asked, wondering what other gear was going to be left for the last man up the hill to carry.

'No.' Came the sharp reply.

'Oh, why's that then?' I asked, taken aback by his shortness.

'I'll just do everything shall I? Yesterday I broke trail, carried all the gear and cooked. This morning I even melted the snow while you and Al lay there. How the fuck are we going to climb this thing if there is only one of us doing the work?'

Age has mellowed me, but even so I did consider some of his early morning rant unfair.

'Oh, so I'm wrong to say I led two of the three pitches yesterday, am I?'

Powell, being Powell, said nothing and continued sorting gear. Cartwright, in full flow by this time, continued, 'Hey, I know if we continue finishing at 3 o'clock and starting at eight we're never going to climb this thing.'

He was right, even if I still disagreed with some of the tirade. I was smarting at what I considered the wrong approach to the climb. Subconsciously this was gnawing away at me and making me sensitive to small, inconsequential matters.

Cartwright climbed alongside the fixed rope, kicking hell out of the snow, still angry and obviously re-playing the argument. We both were. The runnel twisted and turned. Cartwright apologised for the argument and I duly accepted that we both needed a kick up the backside. For hours we moved together, pitched, soloed and cajoled until the final pitch of the day – a beautiful overhang dripping with ice – was climbed and fixed ready for the morning. Cartwright's words had done the job and we'd made good progress. Shadows lengthened, colours intensified, sweat froze, darkness beckoned and a ledge for the tent was excavated.

I could feel something was not right with me. As Powell and Cartwright dug, I milled around trying to sort myself. For two days my bowels had seized and I felt as backed up as a leaf-bound drain in autumn. Cold penetrated my bones and my head felt light. Stamping a ledge into the steep snow I ripped at my clothes. Crouching was difficult and I really didn't want to tumble down the slope half-dressed. I strained for an eternity, until finally my bowels decided my backside had frozen for long enough. Half-an-hour later, with blown snow melting in my underwear, I rejoined the others. Crawling into the tent, I forced myself tight into a corner. Wrapped in all my clothes I slid into the normally comforting feather-down sleeping bag but still I felt cold; then sick, then light-headed.

'Give me the pan,' I yelled.

Quickly, Powell passed the cooking pot.

Head stuffed into the pan, throwing up, I felt proud I hadn't missed. That would have been a disaster at 5400m in a small tent.

'Hey, bet you were worried I'd miss and throw-up all over the tent weren't you?'

'You mean like you did half-an-hour ago?' Powell whispered.

'What do you mean, like I did half-an-hour ago?'

I could now see the worry in his face and the obvious relief at my return from the land of the lost.

'You've been unconscious, we've been planning how to get you down.'

'Oh well, no need to worry now, I feel fine, just give me that pan again will you. QUICK!'

The throwing up continued for the rest of the night.

Next morning's inevitable retreat merely added to my guilt. I arrived at the Everest Summit Lodge in Thame utterly drained, half-an-hour behind Cartwright and Powell. Rest, recuperation, a running race (for Powell), several drunken sessions (for Cartwright), several bakery hits and strong, tar-like espresso (for me) and gallons of milky tea for all saw Cartwright and myself ready to do battle once more. Powell was on a limited three-week schedule and had to return to Britain.

Food and gas had been stashed at the high point of our first attempt. Collecting our hardware, we were back on the face after a break of five days. The high wind was cause for concern though. Great plumes of snow stretched into the sky, powder fingers grabbing at the speeding clouds. Spindrift avalanches poured down the face, along with bouncing, whirring rock. Unseasonably warm weather had stripped the snow revealing loose rock no longer bonded by sticky-safe ice. We picked our way up the same line as before, insignificant dots in the maelstrom, a tiny rowing boat fighting the vertical, crashing seas of white. Hiding behind a pillar of rock, we drew straws for who should tackle the open ground ahead.

'I don't want to go out there, it's an artillery range,' I whimpered.

'I agree, this is madness.'

I led out for 60 metres and then another as Cartwright followed. Speed was of the essence. We moved together with just an occasional piece of gear between us and without belays. Still smarting from my poor show on the first attempt, I forced the pace, nervous of being hit by flying debris yet scared of failure. The large blocks of freshly-riven rock half buried in the snow spelt 'retreat', yet slowly and meticulously we continued to climb until we reached the high point of our first attempt. Fortunately the wind had subsided with the onset of night. I pulled onto the ledge and waited for Cartwright, glad we had forced the issue and made it without injury. It had taken us 11 hours to gain the same point that previously had taken two days. I was cold and knackered but relieved at last to be fit. Nestling into the tent, the extra space was a luxury with just the two of us.

Diving for cover in the crackling, frozen interior of the tent, we waited to be wiped out as hurtling rocks shattered the silence, cannoning from one side of the gully to the other. Thankfully, the missiles whistled over the tent to continue exploding down the face. All night spindrift, ice and rock pelted the thin skin of the tent. A second night followed a harrowing day until finally we could stand the inactivity and threat no more. Taking advantage of an early morning lull in the wind we packed and ran. We parted company at Thame. Cartwright had seen enough to convince him he wanted to live a little longer, while I returned to the hill once more to look at an easier, safer line on the north-east face.

I had been wading in thigh-deep powder since 1.30am. Darkness clung to me and the cold burrowed deep into my bones. Clouds of condensation poured from stinging lungs. Why had I felt so bored resting the day before

in Thame, as if the warmth and safety were passé and not deserved? I was at last level with the dominating feature of Teng Kangpoche's north-east face, the north pillar, but the way ahead was uncertain. A direct line was my objective, but from where I was standing, beneath the shortest way to the east ridge, the top section looked broken. A right-rising traverse to meet the fluted runnels beneath the summit appeared the best way.

Turning to gaze down to the valley, I glimpsed the dim yellow lights of the monastery above Thame flickering with reassurance. Comforted that I could be seen and was not alone, I hoped the monks would say a prayer for me. Right, always right, kicking and punching at steep, unconsolidated snow. As the sky lightened to pewter-grey, I looked over a deep couloir threatened from above by massive séracs guarding the east ridge. No way would I cross beneath these. Some in the climbing world think me a little deranged maybe, but I knew I wasn't that mad. Yet I was not ready to give in and could see a broken spur of rock and snow leading directly to a vertical wall of ice. This spur was still beneath the sérac band, but I tried to convince myself that any falling ice would be deflected to either side. I chose to forget the massive avalanche we'd witnessed on our acclimatisation week. One of the séracs had collapsed, triggering a slide that swept the whole face.

My spirits surged as I climbed this spur. On my own in the middle of this wild, unclimbed, hostile territory, I felt honoured to be there, alive and in control of my destiny. Glowing tendrils of a rejuvenating sun flickered and occasionally touched my body. Steep ice reared to present a dangerous barrier at the base of the séracs. Quickly, as if a few minutes would make a difference, I kicked and picked around the obstacle and climbed steel-hard, blue-green vertical ice. Then at last, excited, I pulled on to the east ridge and worshipped the sun. The summit of Teng Kangpoche reared up, altar-like, not 200 metres away.

Staggering and happy, I moved towards the steep ice cone leading to the final section of the east ridge. Dark-brooding slots snaked across the flat section of ridge, covered in part with fresh-blown snow. This was a dangerous place to move around alone and unroped, although the bright sun and the new view down into the tree-filled south eased the tension. Cautiously I trudged to the base of the cone. A bergschrund appeared, large enough to crawl inside and give protection against the north wind whistling across the col. Bitter cold had been causing me to stop and warm wooden fingers and toes since midday. It was now 2.30pm, 13 hours since the start of my pilgrimage. The temptation to bivvi and wait until tomorrow for my summit celebrations was too strong. The opportunity to warm frozen fingers and feet would relieve my worry. But unbeknown to me, as I snuggled into the sleeping-bag with both feet curled around a bottle of hot water, the celebrations would never come. My cold and lonely vigil at 6350m was to be my high point.



10. North-east face of Teng Kangpoche. (*Nick Bullock*)



11. Nick Bullock below the summit of Teng Kangpoche following his solo ascent of the north-east face. (*Nick Bullock*)

Discovering the slope beneath the summit was badly crevassed with no way around, I regretfully turned tail and ran, though not without the nagging voice of castigation. I reached the valley after six hours of abseiling and down-climbing, following the direct line I had intended to take on the way up. Since returning home, I have learned that the east ridge was climbed in 1984 from Kwangde without permission. I have called my line up the face *Love and Hate* and graded it D+/TD-.

Summary: An account of Alpine-style attempts on Teng Kangpoche (6500m) in the Khumbu, Nepal, by Nick Bullock, Jules Cartwright and Al Powell in November 2003. After two attempts on the north-west face, Bullock succeeded in a solo climb of 1600m on the north-east face, creating *Love and Hate*, D+/TD-.

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