

## COMING OF AGE ON THE LAMMERGEIER SPIRE

By Graham E. Little

THE ageing process is a matter of compromise, about balancing ambition and ability. To pretend it isn't happening is a sure-fire route to frustration and suffering.

Descending to base camp at the foot of the Miyar Glacier, I sensed Jim's disappointment, we had failed on The Orange Tower and I had reneged upon our plan to try the big mixed line on the north face of Point 5760m. Both my physical prowess and my tolerance of risk were in question — in truth my body was tired and my head just wasn't in it. Peaks and rock towers all around us yet we had achieved so little. Jim had every right to be annoyed with me, yet he was both tolerant and philosophical. After all, reaching a top is fine but the icing on the cake, our exploration and appreciation of this magnificent mountain world has the deeper value. All the same, there was a sense of unfulfilled business. It called me, siren like, as I drifted into deep sleep.

The pleasures of family and home are just ten days away and I keenly anticipate them. We have only three days left at base camp before a walkout down the flower decked Miyar Nala. Clearly, we can't just sit around for three days! Our friends, Kevin and Brian, are heading down the valley to do some rock climbing on the flanking slabs. I catch Jim gazing up at the splendid unclimbed rock spire high above the east flank of the Miyar Glacier that had immediately caught our eye on arrival at base camp ten days ago. There really is no debate – we have to climb it! The plan is simple; we will get as close to the base of the spire as possible, bivouac, climb it the following day and then descend. Dan Singh, our head Kumaoni porter, is willing to carry our hardware up to the bivouac, allowing me the benefit of a relatively light load.

The ground leading up to the foot of the spire is much more complex than it appeared from base camp. We are forced to set up our bivouac at about 4800m, well below the foot of the spire and to the south of a rock ridge bounding an apron of wet slabs. Before heading down, Dan Singh joins us in some heavy engineering to create something approaching a level bivi ledge on the boulder strewn slope.

Jim and I agree that it would be wise to undertake an afternoon recce of the approach ridge in preparation for tomorrow's attempt of the spire. The nagging doubts are returning, my base camp enthusiasm is on the wane, but I keep them to myself. As I scramble up the narrow, scree filled gully towards the little col on the ridge above, I decide to adopt a 'pitch at a time' tactic and see how it goes. From the col we solo a short distance until the ridge narrows to a near knife-edge. Roping up, I ease past a perched flake and then climb an awkward step to reach the edge of a wide gap in the ridge. Jim descends to the foot of the gap and dumps one rope and most of the rock gear. I note that the wall on the other side of the gap has no easy line. As we reverse down the ridge, a great bird glides below us, wide wings stroking the air in effortless glide. The ease of the lammergeier's flight contrasts with my own feeling of clumsiness. It is *of* the mountains; I am *in* the mountains.

Our bivi site slips into deep shade as Jim cooks up a splendid dinner of soup, tortellini and smoked fish. We slip into our sleeping bags at 6pm, the clearing sky promising a cold night. Jim is soon asleep. I lie gazing up at a dazzling star filled firmament. I watch and think for hours before gliding with the lammergeier on the wings of dream sleep.

Jim wakes at 5am. I lie white and cold in a sharp frosted bivi bag. Our water bottles are frozen. Jim makes breakfast — the hot fruit tea encourages me to get moving but I eat some noodles with little enthusiasm. The first ten minutes out from our ledge is mind over body stuff as I battle with leaden legs and morning phlegm. However, I soon get into a rhythm. Moving over familiar ground, through the shadows of the sharp dawn light, we return to yesterday's gear cache. Jim leads a fine, long groove pitch out of the gap and I follow with the clumsy sac. Jim volunteers to take the sac and I hand it over without compunction. Clicking into route finding mode, I weave an intricate line up slabs, grooves and chimneys until the angle eases back and snow patches merge into a well-

frozen snowfield. I edge and kick up the steepening neve, using my nut key as a surrogate ice axe. After nearly four hours of hard labour we gain the slabby foot of the spire's west face at an altitude of about 5150m. It is a good feeling.

I take the first pitch and run out nearly 60m on beautiful, easy angled grey rock. It is covered with a battery farm of chicken heads making the climbing embarrassingly easy. Jim leads on through to the top of a short vertical wall that defines the obvious gash that separates the lower third from the upper two thirds of the face. Nearly kneecapping myself when a large flake slides off, I climb down into the gash to belay at the foot of a squat pinnacle. Jim climbs a snow/ice groove to a narrow neck on the upper side of the pinnacle. The sun warms us as we swap big boots for rock shoes. I run out 60m up poorly protected but pleasant slabs. Sitting on the exposed belay, a biting north wind chills one side of my body whilst a weak sun warms the other. Gathering clouds soon shut out the sun's rays and by the time Jim joins me I'm chilled to the bone. Jim leads through and up into the 70m corner that is so obvious from below. The climbing is immaculate though much easier than we had anticipated. Donning my thermal top, I carry on to the top of the corner, taking great care not to dislodge a stack of poised blocks at the belay. As I watch Jim climb the final pitch, it becomes clear that the weather is about to break, the midday sky darkening around us.

The summit is perfect, a narrow spine of orange and grey granite, wildly overhanging a snow gully far below that separates our spire from its parent peak. At only 5350m. we are on top of the world! Churning grey clouds soon mask our deep view into the Miyar Nala. It is time to get down.

We down-climb and abseil to the gash in a rising wind and quickening snow flurries. The snowfield gives a soft landing and we swiftly slip-slide to the top of the rocks. Snow flurries merge as I solo down wet slabs and chimneys. In descent, I am in command, the survival gene switching into overdrive. The terrain is treacherous, yet I am in my element. The rock steepens as we approach the wide gap. I wait for Jim and we agree that it makes sense to abseil down into the gully demarking the north side of the approach ridge. A 60m abseil, down wet ropes, takes me through a veil of whiteness towards the grey gully.

It is as in my dream, the great bird drifting past again, it's wide wing feathers heavy with wet snow, unreal and surreal, yet of this place. I am as close as I can ever be to the world of the lammergeier.

Jim and I plunge unroped down the gully, the soggy snow sucking at our tired legs. 'This is the place to climb out', Jim says with absolute confidence. I know that he is right. The steep, icy groove is not easy but we are going home and nothing can stop us. As if pre-destined, we arrive at the notch in the ridge that overlooks our bivi site. Jim starts to down-climb the greasy rock. 'It makes sense to abseil', I insist. He knows that I am right. Soon we are stuffing wet gear into wet sacks and then heading down.

I am tired, and have to fight a strong desire to sit down. Snow covered boulders do their best to break me, but I plug on, just keeping Jim in sight. As we loose height, the terrain gets easier and a strange yellow light settles around me. Jim waits at the lateral moraine but I urge him to press on. As I stagger over the terminal moraine towards base camp, young Homu Singh runs towards me, offering to take my sack. I refuse, but I am warmed by his offer.

Many brews, a good meal and a glass of whisky in hand soon banish fatigue. The effort of a twelve-hour non-stop climb and descent is in the past, our success and return are in the present. There have been many similar occasions in my life, yet this time I have come of age. I have taken many risks yet I am still alive. It is the end of a perilous journey, a journey of seduction and beauty, yet a journey where many friends have died. I know that

Jim is pleased with our ascent. It is modest in the greater scheme of mountaineering achievements but it has a perfect feel, as if symbolising all that is best in this crazy game.

Walking down the long stretch of the flower splashed Miyar Nala, I think of many things.

The expression 'quit while you're ahead' comes into my head and puzzles me. I decide that the importance of winning sits at the root of this expression. It is very clear to me that mountaineering is not a sport, is not about winning, but is a way of life. It must co-exist with other ways of life. Striking the right balance between the lives we lead is the key to fulfilment. Age of course must be factored into this balance. Through ageing we gain experience, sometimes understanding and rarely wisdom. Satisfaction and survival come from the right equation of effort, risk and reward. The equation will be different for every individual and is ever changing. I now see the way ahead.

I feel a sense of profound equilibrium at this place in time. A flight of glossy-winged choughs rise up from the dung splattered flats ahead of me. They wheel and call as if complaining about the disruption to their beetle-eating breakfast. This is all new, yet there is a strong sense of *déjà vu*. The walk in, the climb and the walk out — they are the journey of life.

Jim catches up with me and we walk down the valley together, through the resin-rich pines and then across the footbridge to the dusty road-head.

**Summary:** Thoughts on ageing and climbing plus a description of the first ascent of the Lammergeier Spire, 5350m, above the east flank of the Miyar Glacier, Lahul, India, by G. E. Little and J. Lowther, May 22, 2004.