The Hidden Valley

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From a distance, the little town of Tukche resembles some desert fortress, with its flat roofs and windowless, seemingly continuous whitewashed walls. As one approaches, it becomes apparent that the town is, in fact, split by a narrow cobbled street. On either side of it, carved wooden doorways give access to courtyards where horses are tethered and women are weaving gaudily-dyed wools. Apart from this street, the walls are indeed almost continuous and it is possible to walk from end to end of the town over the roof tops, stepping around fruit and grain spread out to dry. The likeness to a fortress is not entirely fanciful for early in the 19th Century the local Thakali merchants were granted by the Gurkha kings of Nepal a monopoly of the salt trade with Tibet, and since virtually all salt has to be imported into Nepal, they waxed fat on the proceeds. Until the Chinese seizure of Lhasa in 1959, Tukche was the chief centre for this trade, and the solid two-storied houses, each looking inwards on to its own courtyard, were both store houses for salt and grain, and strongholds to withstand marauding bandits from Tibet or jealous rivals from the chain of petty castle kingdoms between Kagbeni and Mustang to the north.

Today, the richer merchants have transferred their activities elsewhere. Only occasionally does the mellifluous clanging of deep-toned bells herald the arrival of a train of gaily-plumed mules, and usually they do not stop. Although all the houses are occupied, some by Tibetan refugees, the town wears a forlorn, forgotten aspect and its main street seems unnaturally silent and deserted.

But even if it is reduced to a shadow of its former glory, the geographical position of the town still renders it significant to travellers like ourselves. To the E, on the far side of a broad alluvial plain of stone and sand, where the great cleft cut by the Kali Gandaki river widens temporarily, the magnificent wall of the Nilgiris dominates the valley. To the W, steep pine clad slopes rise up to Tukche peak—not quite visible from the town—the northernmost outlier of the Dhaulagiri range. In effect one is emerging from a defile between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri massifs, and only four more days' travel are needed to bring one to Mustang and the Central Asian Plateau. One of the easiest Himalayan passes, the course of the Kali Gandaki is a very ancient trade route and, though a comparatively modern town, Tukche can be seen as a doorway, not just strategically but also climatically and culturally, between the very different worlds of India and Tibet. The flat roofs and small area under cultivation are symptomatic of a dry climate. The pines and junipers, hitherto so thick, are beginning to thin out and by Marpha, less than two hours' walk beyond, trees have all but disappeared. This far north, the monsoon has lost its impetus and much of the rain that might yet fall is stolen by Dhaulagiri. All the year round, strong winds blow up and down the valley, banging shutters and rattling doors, and raising clouds of dust which make travel uncomfortable. Culturally, the Chorten gateway on the north side of the town—a typical feature of nearly every Buddhist village—is the first to be met as one travels up from the S. Passing beneath the fresco painted on the inside of the archway, albeit sadly faded and cracked, one is not just leaving the town but leaving behind an Indian-orientated Hinduism and entering the sphere of Tibetan Buddhism. Although the division, be it between climates or cultures, is obviously far from clear-cut, the Chorten gateway of Tukche is nevertheless a significant symbol for the traveller.

Since Nepal was first opened to foreigners in 1950, many people have visited Tukche. Almost the first were members of the French Annapurna expedition who used it as their base while they were debating whether to attempt Annapurna or Dhaulagiri. In order to examine the N face of Dhaulagiri, they ascended to the Dhampus Pass, 5175 m, behind the town. Contrary to what their maps had led them to expect, they found that this did not give them access to the Dhaulagiri basin. In fact, they could not even see Dhaulagiri which was hidden behind the shapely cone of Tukche Peak, 6919 m. In front of them lay an intervening valley whose existence had previously been unsuspected. Only when they had crossed the top of it and reached a second col, which later became known as the French Pass, did they at last reach the view they sought. The French eventually plumped for Annapurna, but eleven years later the successful Swiss expedition to Dhaulagiri approached the NE spur by this same route.

The valley they had unexpectedly discovered, the French named the Hidden valley, not entirely the romantic misnomer it might have been since the Dhampus Pass is the only straightforward entrance to it. The French Pass leads only into the heart of the Dhaulagiri complex; attempts have been made to cross high cols in the W to reach the Mukut valley, but they have been unsuccessful as far as we know; while at its bottom, the valley tapers to a narrow steep-sided gorge which has always been regarded as impassable, though this we only learnt later. Studying the map in Kathmandu, the Hidden Valley looked invitingly remote and isolated. Moreover, ringed by 6000 m peaks, with Tukche Peak at its head and two 5800 m peaks on either side of the Dhampus Pass, it seemed all a small, light-weight climbing party could desire. Of course,

71 *Nilgiri from Dhampus Pass*

there was no chance that such an attractive area, so close to the Kali Gandaki, could have escaped the attention of others who wished to climb in the Himalaya without paying a huge royalty for the privilege. Tukche Peak we knew to have had at least two ascents, the first 'unofficially' by an enterprising group of Peace Corps Volunteers. As for the smaller peaks, we neither knew nor greatly cared which had been climbed. Our ascents were unlikely to be firsts, but if you know nothing about a mountain, climbing it can have much the same excitement as a first ascent. What we looked for above all was climbing of an Alpine scale and difficulty in an untramelled setting.

We arrived in Tukche in the middle of October. I had been climbing among the Alpine peaks of Kulu during September and afterwards was by no means ready

to return home. So my wife Netti and I flew to Kathmandu where David Gundry was waiting for us. Three days later, visa extensions and trekking permits in our pockets, we were in Pokhara, thanks to the new Chinese-built tarmac road. Two years ago, the journey to Pohkara involved an expensive air flight or a week's walk. Now it is a day's bus journey. From Pokhara, six days' easy walking brought us, together with four porters and a total of 300 lb of baggage, mostly food bought in Kathmandu, to Tukche.

The trail, crossing two transverse ridges between Pokhara and Tatopani and thence up the Kali Gandaki gorge, with views of Annapurna on the one hand and Dhaulagiri on the other, is justifiably famous both for its spectacular scenery and the variety of its cultural types. But we were disconcerted to find it difficult, at times, to discern a Nepali face among a throng of Americans and Japanese. One hundred years ago, Leslie Stephen described the Alps as 'the Playground of Europe'. Today, Nepal is the new Playground, not only for Europe but for America, Australia and Japan also, in a word, for the wealthy leisured nations of the world. As well as being the ultimate goal of many mountaineers, for hordes of 'overlanders', both E and W bound, the mountains and culture of Nepal are the high-point of a journey. Economically and logistically, it is probably easier for the modern student to visit Nepal than it was for Stephen to visit the Alps in the 1870s. Being mostly young and healthy and, contrary to a widely-held opinion, not interested solely in hashish, the majority of visitors to Nepal are not content to remain in Kathmandu but quickly head off into the countryside. Unlike the governments of India and Pakistan, that of Nepal has capitalised on the western desire to walk among mountains for pleasure, rightly reckoning that an influx of tourists to the mountain villages cannot help but benefit the inhabitants economically. Whether it benefits them morally is another matter. On treks to Jomosom and to Langtrang we found ourselves persistently pursued by children stridently demanding 'paisa', cigarettes or sweets. The spontaneous hospitality and friendliness experienced by early travellers and still to be met in less accessible parts of the Himalaya, is here giving way to that relationship between tourists and locals all too common elsewhere—often sullen or hostile, always strictly commercial. It is a sad but apparently inevitable process which is going on all over the world.

Less than a week after arriving in Tukche, we were comfortably ensconced on a rock platform on the far side of the Dhampus Pass. A day and a half had sufficed to take us through pine forests and over the yak pastures beyond to the snowline at 4800 m. The strongest porter was persuaded to stay on a day, helping us to carry heavy loads to just below the col and proving himself a natural with axe and crampons. Thereafter we were our own porters and, despite deep snow, two more days of ferrying loads were enough to establish a base.

The week had not been uneventful, however. To start with, we found we were not the only ones trying to get off the beaten track. A group of seven Frenchmen, four of them guides, with three Sherpas, twelve porters and 100 kilos of specially imported French sausage and cheese, set off from Tukche on the

72 *Tukche Peak*

same morning as ourselves. Three of them, instead of following the normal yak-herders' path, took a more circuitous and difficult route which only brought them to the yak pastures as night fell. Unfortunately, our porters, following the wrong set of sahibs, went with them. They eventually spent the night huddled under a boulder at the French camp; Netti and I slept in a tiny yak-herd's shelter an hour away, saved from going all day without food only by the generosity of the French; while David, choosing to go exploring on a particularly dark night, lost the path amidst a maze of yak trails and repented at leisure on the cold hillside, perched disconsolately among some juniper bushes. Rather shame-faced, we rejoined forces the following morning under the amused gaze of the French. Our solitary Vango Mark III came in for some slightly superior glances, too. Apparently it was not a 'tente isothermique', whatever that may be. We were secretly pleased, therefore, despite their kindness to us, when, after an uncomfortable night above the snowline and without reaching the col, they decided that their equipment was inadequate and beat a retreat. Shortly after this, my stomach began to give trouble. We had to spend one night camped on the col, an exposed site at the best of times but, much to my discomfiture, the wind chose that night to strengthen from the habitual cold breeze to a good thirty knots, raising a scurrying ground drift that rustled insistently against the sides of the tent. The thermometer, sheltered from the wind, registered −20°C. I did not enjoy the five sojourns in the snow forced upon me by my inside during the night. To make matters worse, I ran out of suitable paper and in the dark could not find any more. Drastic situations call for drastic measures and, quick as thought, one-rupee notes were being sacrificed to the cause. Now, at our base, the only intruders were a pair of hungry ravens all too adept at foraging from the camp sites of absent climbers. Down below the glitter of metal revealed the wreckage of the aircraft used by the Swiss Dhaulagiri expedition. Otherwise we were gloriously alone in a silent, empty mountain world.

Unfortunately, the peaks of the Hidden Valley proved something of a disappointment. Such small glaciers as exist are tucked away out of sight at the head of little side valleys and the peaks themselves are almost like the rounded

hills of Britain, lacking the fluted ice faces, the séracs and the bergschrunds of truly glaciated mountains. In a normal autumn, the Dhampus Pass can be virtually snow-free and the snowline well up the flanks of the mountains, which would increase the resemblance to, say, the Lake District in winter. As it was, heavy unseasonal precipitation in early October had fallen as snow as low as 4000 m and only on the lower and S-facing slopes did it subsequently melt. It was this snowfall that was so disastrous for the Italians on Annapurna I. We found ourselves with excellent weather, apart from an ever-present wind, but soul-destroying knee-deep snow to climb on. The steeper the slope, the deeper the snow. Nor was it simply soft snow. Day temperatures in the shade remained well below zero and above 4500 m the heat of the sun was insufficient to allow an appreciable freeze-thaw process to consolidate the snow. Instead, the wind formed a thin crust over it which was the bane of our existence. It was never quite firm enough to bear one's weight for more than the occasional step or two—and even then the second man was bound to break through instead—yet strong enough to force one to make the effort of stepping up on to it. I do not think I have ever had to cope, day in day out, with such a consistently exhausting surface. How we longed for skis. Indeed, some of the peaks of the Hidden Valley could be not just approached but actually climbed on skis, which would give long and exciting descents.

We succeeded in climbing Point 6005 m and Point 5846 m on either side of the Pass, uninteresting climbs rendered purgatorial by conditions; but an attempt on Tukche Peak fizzled out almost before it had started. Though well acclimatised and fit, we were mentally unprepared for the sort of drudgery that, I realise now, must constitute the climbing on most big mountains. Having no commitments to sponsors and no programme to fulfil, when it became clear that our route, very straightforward in itself, was going to be one long struggle with the snow, we had no compunction about turning round.

So it was that after only a week inside the Hidden Valley, and with enough food for at least another ten days, we found ourselves camped in the valley floor at about 4725 m wondering what to do next. Though a wind was rarely absent and plumes of drift were a constant feature on the high ridges, the sun continued to shine and the view up the valley to Tukche Peak, the huge N face of Dhaulagiri I looming over its shoulder like Big Brother, made us half regret our decision. But we had only to set foot on snow for such regrets to vanish and thoughts of attempting one of the nearby 6000 m peaks to evaporate rapidly —in the minds of Netti and myself at any rate. David was keener to accept the challenge, and so we agreed to split forces. Netti and I were to continue down the Hidden Valley into the Keha Lungpa valley, and so to the Kali Gandaki and back to Tukche. David decided to ascend a side valley, hoping to climb a small but attractive aiguille at its head, and then cross a col into the Mukut valley. In the event, discretion proved the better part of valour on the aiguille and a combination of crevasses and snow conditions turned him back just below the col. Making a leisurely descent, he recrossed the Dhampus in a snow storm and joined us at Tukche after nearly a week on his own.

In the meantime, Netti and I had had a more exciting and taxing time than we

had bargained for. We had set off, Netti valiantly breaking trail, fully expecting to be out of the valley the same evening. Apart from indicating that a river flowed down the Hidden Valley, our rudimentary trekking map gave no useful information whatsoever, but even from the Dhampus Pass we had been able to see that it narrowed to a gorge. We naïvely believed that this gorge would debouch almost immediately into the Keha Lungpa and that it would be obvious whether or not we could pass through it. Carrying 45- and 60-lb loads respectively, we covered less than a mile in the first two hours, going steadily downhill. The river, already quite a broad stream though only released from the ice a little higher up, was chuckling its way cheerfully through the snow on our left. Animal tracks were everywhere and we could see two separate herds of what were probably mountain sheep browsing on islands of rock and grass protruding from the snow. Suddenly, with little or no transition, the crust was thick enough to bear our weight. For the first time in two weeks we walked on a firm surface and without effort and soon we were approaching the gorge. The rock portals we had seen from the pass proved to be no obstacle but far from opening out into the Keha Lungpa as we had hoped, the gorge merely twisted round to the left out of sight. Here, moreover, the sun was a rare visitor for the snow was powdery and treacherously concealed a boulder bed over which we slid, slipped, stumbled and fell, every lurch and painful recovery an effort at 4500 m. Only where frozen avalanche debris had been spewed out by side gullies was the going any easier. Fortunately, it was not long before we came to a point where a huge avalanche had flowed right down the gorge, obliterating the river. Here the gorge was perhaps 200 ft wide, its rock walls, almost vertical, towering up on either side. For several hundred yards we followed its twists and turns, picking our way round spires and over ramparts of ice until the river temporarily re-emerged in a swirling pool. A narrow gangway of ice and a convenient boulder enabled us to creep between sheer rock and the water, until the river was once more smothered by ice. Although this ice was like a vicious tide-race suddenly frozen solid, progress over it was fairly rapid. The gorge became narrower and narrower. As we rounded each new bend, we half expected to find ourselves entering the main valley, yet at the same time we half expected to find the river filling the gorge and the way impassable.

Finally the ice did come to an end and the river came foaming out from beneath it between rock walls perhaps 30 yd apart. The right bank was still feasible, however, and we followed it for 100 yd floundering waist deep between snow covered boulders, until the cliffs dropped vertically into the water, barring further progress. Fortunately, the left bank was more hopeful; all we had to do was cross the river. Easier said than done. There was only one point where it looked possible. Two boulders in midstream supported growths of ice which, if they were solid, would provide stepping, or rather, jumping stones. The stream was swift and deep, however, and weighted with a heavy pack a slip could be fatal. We roped up and put on crampons, and I lassooed a spike of rock upstream as a belay. Netti went first. The first ice mushroom held, but when she landed on the second it slid away entire from its base. As it did so, Netti toppled over sideways so that she fell into the water upstream of the boulder, thus saving herself from being swept away. Regaining her feet, she made a lurching plunge for the far side and, embedding the pick of her axe into

apparently solid ice, attempted to pull herself up. She was almost out when the whole slab of ice, several square feet in area, broke away from the rock beneath and she was left scraping frantically with her axe for a purchase. Luckily she found something and a few seconds later she was sprawled gasping on the rock.

When she had recovered, she hauled the sacks across and I followed, crampons scratching on the bared rocks. 'This *must* be the end of the gorge.' I reassured Netti. 'We'll camp as soon as we're out of it.' But rounding another corner, we were confronted by yet more rock falling straight into the water. There was no option but to recross the river, which here widened a little and was shallow enough to ford without the rope. Nevertheless, leaping across a deep channel on to a platform of treacherous ice, I fell in up to the waist. Further across, Netti lost her footing and, though in no real danger, fell on hands and knees in the water, her sack shooting over her head making it almost impossible to stand up again without help. Rather than plough through the soft snow on the bank, we waded now by choice along the shallows at the river edge until it became necessary to cross over again.

Immediately in front, the gorge narrowed to a defile a mere 10 yd wide but helpfully plugged with snow. On both sides, rock walls rose compact and sheer for perhaps 2000 ft, though so foreshortened that it was difficult to judge. About 400 ft up in a recess of the left wall was a huge slit similar to Ossian's Cave in Glencoe. On the bank beneath this cave was a strip of flat crusted snow just wide enough for a tent. 'We'd better camp here,' I said. 'Oh, can't we go on a bit,' Netti answered. 'I'd much rather get out of the Hidden Valley before stopping. I don't like this place.'

It was tempting; but there was only half an hour till dark and there might not be another camp site. As things turned out, it was just as well we did stop.

Next morning, our clothes cold and clammy, we climbed over the jumbled ice blocking the defile and scrambled along a shelf about 50 ft above the river. Then a rope became necessary. It had to be the second rope as the other, after its wetting the previous day, had frozen into a solid lump. The problem was a little re-entrant which bit into the slope we were crossing, followed by a steep downward traverse to reach the river bank again. The rock was conglomerate liable to flake away in large chunks and with few cracks of any depth. It was difficult to place pegs but eventually I managed to fasten the rope securely. When Netti had come across, using it as a handrail, I went back for the sacks, glad of the rope as the rock was steep, the holds small and the sacks heavy.

Until the next bend the going was relatively straightforward, but far above the sun had reached the top of the cliffs and stones were beginning to hum down. Hastily we dug out the helmets which had been carried so far and up till now, never worn. Almost immediately, a pebble bounced off my head.

Round the bend, our troubles began in earnest. Here, as we had been dreading, the river completely filled the gorge. For 50 ft or so on our side there was a scoop of smooth water-polished rock a couple of feet above the rushing water

and roofed by rock a few feet overhead. Then the cliff dropped vertically into the river and as the gorge bent round in one of its innumerable sinuations, we could see no more. Packs off, rope on. The climbing was delicate, the rock slippery-smooth; I was very much aware that once in the water, rope or no rope, I would not get out again. At the foot of the vertical section, I saw that if I could climb up 20 ft, I could continue traversing along another scoop at a higher level. Those twenty feet were hard. Out of balance moves are strenuous at 4500 m and padding up a snow-covered slab above felt thoroughly precarious. The traverse beyond was on the same smooth crackless rock, the overhang above squeezing hands and feet closer and closer together until I was bent double. What protection I could find was purely psychological, so I was relieved when, after another 50 ft, I was able to place a really solid 2-in angle. Twenty ft beyond, I was confronted by vertical columns of ice spilling down the rock. I could neither see Netti nor hear her above the roaring of water so I untied and went back for crampons and the other rope, wire-like but at least uncoilable now. Still we could not tell whether we were going to escape from the gorge. The view was obscured by the jutting prow of ice. If it continued at the same angle we should have to retrace our weary footsteps back up the alley, a prospect that did not bear thinking about. Netti was coming across on the rope, now fixed, but impatience to see what lay beyond made me start climbing again. A high step in the ice, a heave, leaning out on an organ-pipe, and I could reach round for a rock hold, noting with relief that the ice was only a small frozen watercourse, gingerly change feet and step across on to a good foothold. The next few feet were the most difficult of all, probably VS, the rock steep and ice-blotched with no positive holds. I placed a peg, but Netti was still on the fixed rope, so impetuously, and perhaps foolishly, I carried on. The crux meant laying away with the left hand, front points stuck into a lump of ice dubiously attached to the rock, then hurriedly crossing feet to put a crampon point of the left foot on a small incut, and pulling across on a fingertip side-pull. I was breathing heavily by the time I reached easier ground and gladly sat down in a small ice cave to take stock.

The difficulties were almost behind us. A few feet beyond the cave was another steep wall but at the foot of it was an icy catwalk just above the river. I lowered myself down to it off an ice piton and tying the rope to a boulder, picked my way downstream for 50 yd, front pointing up and down little walls, side pointing across embankments and stepping across frothing inlets until once more forced upwards. Forty feet of easy-angled but loose and ice-scaled rock and I was on top of a knoll from where I could see for certain that were were through the gorge. Ahead, it widened out into a valley and though puzzling that there was still no sign of the main valley, there was clearly nothing insuperable before us. Elated, I returned to tell Netti the good news.

There were still the loads to fetch, however. This was far worse than the actual climbing. Not only was it extremely strenuous even with the help of a rope, but the top-heavy packs swayed sideways viciously and did their best to jam immovably against the roofs. At the steep step I sack hauled with the help of a prusik; farther along, strapping on crampons with a pack on my back had me gasping; and on the ice section, the rope hung too low to be of much use. All in all, it was

very unpleasant. On top of the knoll, Netti took her sack and carried on while I went back for mine. Dark was falling and I was near the end of my tether by the time I followed Netti's crampon marks up and across a small stream, bowed like St Christopher under a load which seemed to grow heavier moment by moment. I was wondering how much farther I would have to trudge when, unexpectedly, I came across the tent snugly pitched in a little grassy hollow. Netti was bending over a guy. 'Somebody's had a fire here and there's mule-shit everywhere,' she told me excitedly. We were back in the land of the living. As I wearily took off gaiters and boots before they could freeze rigid, I glanced back the way we had come. Suddenly, it dawned on me that the small side gully whose stream we had just crossed was, in fact, the main valley, the Keha Lungpa, unlikely though it seemed. The Hidden Valley was behind us and somewhere nearby there must be a path. The gorge was a dark forbidding slit in the mountain-side; hanging above it was a crescent moon, already bright in the gloaming. 'Happy?' I asked Netti. She nodded, smiling.

Sitting cross-legged in the tent, gulping coffee and oatcake by the light of a stub of a candle, it pleased me to reflect that we were more in the tradition of the early Himalayan travellers than of the modern climber, who is forced by lack of opportunity to do his exploring in the vertical plane. Had we been less ignorant about the Hidden Valley, we probably would not have attempted the gorge. But 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread' and I shall always be glad that we did. Though our exploit was trivial by comparison, I could appreciate something of what Younghusband must have felt, for instance, when he had crossed the Muztagh Pass.

I fell asleep filled with that mingling of exhilaration and relief that adds up to an intense joy and which is usually the hallmark of a great climb successfully completed. At such times, existence becomes charged with meaning, questions of purpose and direction irrelevant. Sometimes I see my life as a quest for such moments, distillates of an experience which, unlike the fleeting intoxicants of speed, beauty, skilful execution or physical exhaustion, remain embedded in the consciousness. Like pearl-diving, this quest, usually unfruitful or only slightly profitable, involves difficulty and sometimes danger. Only very very occasionally is an oyster prised open to reveal a pearl. Were pearls more common and to be found with less effort, they would not be valued so highly, guarded so jealously. The strange compulsion manifest in Steinbeck's pearl-fishers would not exist. The mere overcoming of difficulties can inspire exhilaration, the survival of danger can inspire relief, physical weariness can induce a luxurious state of well-being; but for me, only a few great and memorable climbs have combined all these elements and something more, to create pearls which continue to lie, glowing and unfaded, on the drab sea-bed of my existence. Or, rather, they mark the high-water line of life, gems we prize so highly because they are proof that we have truly lived.

As sleep descended, I knew that our passage of the Hidden Valley, whether or no it had been done before and whatever still lay ahead, was just such a pearl, all the more valuable for being jointly won and jointly held with one so dear.