TONY STREATHER

Dawa Tenzing: A Great Sherpa

(Plates 15, 16)

When Norman Hardie and I got back to Camp 5, after making the second ascent of Kangchenjunga, we were in a pretty exhausted state. We were met by those two great mountaineers Charles Evans and Dawa Tenzing. Charles, with Tom Bourdillon, was almost the first man to climb Everest but, owing to oxygen problems, they had sensibly turned back only a short distance from the summit. Though Charles could well have gone to the top of Kangchenjunga, all credit to him that he stayed here, in Camp 5, supporting both George Band and Joe Brown to the top, followed soon afterwards by Norman and me. And when we got down, he had come out from the camp to meet us with extra oxygen and drinks, along with Dawa Tenzing.

Obviously there was great jubilation that not just one but two pairs had completed this successful 'reconnaissance', but then we heard the sad news that one of our Sherpas, Pemi Dorje, had died down in Base Camp almost at the same time that we got to the top; the Sherpas were saying that the gods of Kangchenjunga hadn't let us get away with it scot-free after all. It was particularly sad for Dawa since Pemi Dorje was his brother-in-law. The loss of close friends and relatives was one of the things that would dog Dawa for the rest of his life.

The expedition had started from Darjeeling and it was there that I had my first introduction to the Sherpas. Dawa Tenzing, who was a very old friend of Charles Evans and had been with him, as his personal Sherpa, on two previous expeditions, had brought down a hand-picked selection of his friends from Sola Khumbu to be our Sherpas. This was especially helpful because, sadly, some of the Sherpas of Darjeeling were already getting a bit 'union' minded.

The Sherpas that Dawa had brought were all genuine cheerful characters and many of them went on later to be successful sirdars. I think Urkien is the last one still alive today. And these were the people who would make our expedition such a success and who did so much to make the climb possible. They had brought with them a few of their sisters and girl friends and most of these girls were sent back, but two of them refused to go. 'No, we are going to stay,' they said. 'We want to do the climb and we will carry as well as anybody else.' They weren't given lighter loads than the men and when we reached camp in the evenings they were expected to do the darning and generally keep up the morale of the Sherpas.



15. Dawa Tenzing at the time of the Kangchenjunga expedition, 1955. (*Tony Streather*) (p41)



Right

16. Dawa's grandson, Tashi Dorjee, at the Summit Hotel, Kathmandu, in 1995. (*Tony Streather*) (p41)

It was another 21 years before I went back to Nepal, with the Army Expedition in 1976, and on the way up to Base Camp, at Deweche, near Thyangboche, where Dawa was living, John Peacock and I stopped to stay with him and, sadly, found him in a very poor state. He had been falsely accused (as part of a feud that was going on) of stealing things from monasteries and as a result of this he had taken to drink and given all his money to the lamas of Thyangboche in the hope that this would somehow save him. He was being looked after by his second daughter, Ang Nisha, who was a nun in the little nunnery there, with shaved head and looking, poor girl, in rather a sad state herself. We were able to help him in two ways. First of all I had with me on the expedition a Nepalese officer who went to court with Dawa and made it quite clear that it was impossible that he could have done this. Fortunately the case against him was dismissed. This gave him a new lease of life but he had no money and was much too proud to accept any gifts. However, we managed to persuade him that in recognition of all he had done for climbing over the years he well deserved a pension. This was quite different from a handout, so the Kangchenjunga team and other friends of his clubbed together and we gave him what seemed a minimal amount but to them was quite a reasonable sum as a pension. We paid it monthly through the hospital in Kunde and Dawa had to go up to collect it, which meant that the doctor there saw him from time to time and kept an eye on him.

There followed possibly the happiest years of Dawa's later life. His first wife had died some time before and now he got married again, to the sister of Tashi who was also on Kangchenjunga in 1955. They lived happily for a number of years. Dawa's daughter Ang Nisha married the brother of the head lama at Thyangboche, grew her hair again, ran a successful tea house opposite the monastery and was quite a glamorous person when I saw her soon afterwards.

After those few happy years, Dawa and his wife and a whole lot of Sherpas went down to India on a pilgrimage. On the way back their bus went off the road into a ravine and many of the Sherpas were killed. Dawa and his wife were badly injured, his son and daughter-in-law were killed, and nearly every family of Sherpas in Sola Khumbu were bereaved in one way or another in this tragic accident. Dawa had already lost another son in a climbing accident. Now he lost the use of his right arm and he never really recovered. His daughter Ang Nisha looked after him again until he died in 1985 – highly respected, an Honorary Member of this Club and one of the great Sherpas of all time.

Only a few weeks ago, when George Band went back to Kangchenjunga, I went with them as far as Kathmandu, flew up to Namche Bazar and saw Dawa's daughter. Things had changed completely. Recently some entrepreneurial Sherpas had acquired from the Russians two heavy-lift helicopters. These enormous machines can go up to 6000m and can carry 22 people with all their baggage; and they can fly, regardless of the weather, throughout the monsoon period. I flew up to Syangboche in one of these – there's a daily flight now – and stayed with Sherpa friends at Namche from

our 1976 army expedition. Ang Nisha came to see me there, to talk in particular about her son, Tashi Dorjee, who was at school in Kathmandu. Later I went for a short walk and, stopping at one of the tea houses, I started chatting to a friendly Sherpani there. It turned out that this was one of Dawa's granddaughters – it was her mother and father who had been killed in the bus crash – and she was now married to a successful Sherpa who had twice been to the top of Everest and was running his own trekking agency.

Back in Kathmandu, Dawa's grandson came up to have tea with me at the Summit Hotel – a lovely little boy. And it just shows how things have changed in the last forty years. On the one hand I remembered Dawa, a great Sherpa and a great traditionalist (he kept his pigtail and earring to the last), and now here was his grandson in his modern school clothes complete with school tie, quite a different character. But things have got to move on and at least young Tashi Dorjee will be ready to face whatever awaits him in the years to come.

All of us who took part in the 1955 Kangchenjunga expedition will have as happy memories of the Sherpas as of the great mountain that we climbed together.