

A Big Effort.

'You go, you commit yourself, and it's the big effort that counts.'

'Rock Climbers In Action In Snowdonia'

The details of a good summer's climbing quickly fade into a general blur of much rock and steepness and expenditure of nervous energy. In retrospect, only one type of climb stands out vividly: the 'big grip'. It is these 'beautiful experiences' (as Warren Harding provocatively called his epics) that are the most memorable; they are certainly far more interesting to write about than climbs which went well.

Some routes seem to exercise a strangely compelling power over me – as soon as I see one for the first time I must climb it. They are rare, but when I come across one I cannot be satisfied until I have tried it.

'Are you going to give it go, then?'

The crucial words have been said; the forbidding gritstone roof beckons. The big 'perhaps' that has been gnawing at me all day now becomes, in a bold and exhilarating moment:

'Yes – I'll give it a bash ...' There's a feeling both of tension and relief: a decision has been made; the thing will soon be settled one way or the other.

'OK, let's have the rope then.' In the concentration of preparation, events move quickly and before I know what's happening I'm saying, 'Belay me well, then,' and Tim is saying 'Right,' and the rock is moving past.

A chimney to start – it seems easy. I heave away on hunks of gritstone and arrive at a gloomy recess beneath the big roof. I pause for a runner, tense with apprehension at what is to come.

The ground ahead looks uncompromisingly fierce — a large impending block standing out against the sky to the right is where it goes. I get out my longest tape sling, drape it round my neck and clip it to the rope in readiness. A deep breath and I'm away. I reach up, hand traverse, bring my leg up, pull. Very strenuous — I drape a sling over the block with one hand — 'Get over there, you b_____!' — feed it down behind the block — 'Phew!' A pull-up, and I'm on the block. So far so good. It's a sensational position. I must move quickly.

A long way to the right there is a sloping hold on the lip. I pivot up, grab a jug, and my right foot is bridged out against it. The rock still seems to be forcing me back: the jug is very low and the feet are bridged very wide, so that I'm rocking precariously.

Can't stay here for long, must get into balance. I try moving up, standing up as high as possible on the feet — C___! Nothing there! I try a small underhold on the wall above. No good — I scuttle back down to the block.

B_____ hell, this is quite a position! I go up again — stretch — lean over to the right — push down with my left hand. Reach for a crack to the right — C_____! Nothing there either! — It isn't a crack. My right hand is now playing arpeggios and chromatic scales on a wrinkle. Try further right. No good — my strength is going — God, I thought the hard bit was over!...

Upward progress has now stopped, the first big doubts are coming.

I lurch back and crouch on the jugs in a bunched up position, try to rest. Keep it cool, Gordon ... keep your cool! Not much left now. Reckon I could just about reverse it but, if I have another go, I probably won't be able to. It'll have to be an all out attempt or I'll be off. Got a fantastic runner. Right! you can do this b_____ thing, Gordon! —

'OK, belay well! —' I call to Tim.

Up again, bridge, try traversing further right this time before going up. Bl_____ hell! A superb horizontal jam! — Bring that other hand in quick — and the other foot ...

For a fraction of a second time seems to stand still. Every hold and rugosity stands out in sharp relief. There is no sound now except for my heavy breathing; the sun beats down; and my mind is now fully blown. Then I reach sideways, both feet poised precariously on the sloping hold on the very lip of the overhang.

I can scarcely breathe with suspense —

I've done it! I — *think* — I've done——

---A whirl of sky and gritstone, then there's a hefty bash on my helmet as I hurtle diagonally into the side wall, and I'm bouncing around in the air on the end of the rope.

Tim, apparently unmoved by the whole thing, both physically and emotionally, lowers me the few remaining feet to the ground. We decide that Kelly's Overhang is the clear cut victor in that particular

battle with the rock, and make a hurried departure down the moorside from High Neb to our car.

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Two days later we are standing at the foot of Dinas Cromlech feeling fairly satisfied with the HVS we have just done, and wondering what to do next. We look through the guidebook to see if there are any VSs or HVSs *neither* of us have done before. There is only one: 'Jericho Wall.

'Right then, let's do that,' Tim says, and off we go without even a moment's thought about the meaning of the name.

I am soon belayed at the big ledge at the bottom of Ivy Sepulchre, having wandered up the first, tree-climbing pitch. And before long, Tim is forging his way up the steep, shattered wall, prancing about on very little, with nothing in the way of protection, and looking a bit red in the face. It quickly becomes apparent that my hopes of having a quiet daydream, gazing out over the Pass, are not to be. For not only is the wall steeper and more exposed than it at first looked, but reports are coming down about poor rock and wobbly holds. Anyhow, despite these complaints, Tim is soon out of sight around the arete, and I am simply left to tend the rope as it moves slowly out into the unknown.

In due course it's my turn, and I find my attention considerably re-enlivened, not only by some very worrying holds but also by the discovery that the colourful runners Tim has placed, offsetting the drabber tones of the double rope, are something of an illusion. They seem to be held in place more by good luck or invisible tape than by any features of the rock. There are tape slings half resting on small spikes, and little nuts nestling haphazardly behind loose flakes. The remnants of a holly tree represents the acme of protection on the entire pitch.

After about fifty feet of steep climbing on small, mostly loose, 'organ stop' holds, a superb exposed traverse round the arete to the right enables me to re-join Tim at the stance — a very commodious grass ledge.

I now bedeck myself with runners, read the guidebook, and generally start getting nervous.

'OK, I'm off.'

'OK — but just stop getting your knickers in a twist.'

'They're completely untwisted,' I retort snappily — and, with that, I move off to the left and around the arete. An easy traverse leads back

towards Ivy Sepulchre — which looks remarkably inviting from this exposed position — to a point below a large shattered groove in the wall. So far I haven't managed to get on any protection at all, but eventually I arrange a half-inch tape behind a very small spike that moves. Anyway, I can see a holly tree above, and this provides some incentive for moving fairly fast up the groove. The holds are quite good, but they creak and rattle in their sockets, and unfortunately this steep climbing requires them to be used rather heavily.

At this point I catch sight of my brother, who has just appeared on the arete of Cemetery Gates. This is a bit of a surprise. I think: 'C___, I mustn't look gripped or I might put him off!' He seems to be moving up rather more confidently than I am, which is somewhat disconcerting. But I soon forget all about him as things on my own route start hotting up.

The first thing which happens is that the holly tree which I assumed would provide both a good runner and a welcome rest provides neither. I don't think it could be classed as a tree, and it certainly isn't living. But that doesn't stop me from putting a tape sling around it; and so I move on again not a little perturbed.

It is now necessary for me to traverse up and right to regain the rounded crest of the arete. It is very steep, my arms are starting to weaken, and my technique is rapidly giving way to brute strength and ignorance.

The experience becomes a blur of heaving away and making rather desperate lunges for holds, and in this fashion I continue up the steep crest of the buttress. I am not 'gripped', oh no! — I am driven on by blind fear. Things have never felt sharper on the sharp end of a rope in my life, the holly tree already seems miles below, and Tim may as well be on another planet. The feeling of detachment and massive exposure is now extreme, and the rope hangs heavily from my waist.

Keep your cool, Gordon, and it'll be alright... If you get gripped, you've had it.

I've long since forgotten the rather complicated guidebook description. I just storm on with the single intention of getting off this vertical wall, and back on to the horizontal, as soon as possible.

The skyline of this seascape of alien, contorted, frighteningly steep rock that spreads out before me hardly seems to be getting any nearer.

Above is a shallow scoop, and I pull up into it and find I can rest to some degree; but my legs are starting to shake with the strain. After trying many small nuts, I manage to get half a 'Troll' wedge jammed in a shallow groove. I am beginning to appreciate what it must have been like the days before nuts. Scouting around a bit, I spot a large flake about ten feet to the right. I totter across, only to find that it is loose; but I reckon it will take a downward pull. I clip on a runner and start feeling a bit happier.

But my feeling of security is very short-lived for, as I move up, the rope friction increases alarmingly. Large jug-holds have started to arrive but this improvement is more than outweighed by the rope drag. After every move it's necessary to haul up a few feet of slack for the next. My forearms are starting to feel like heavy logs of balsa wood, and all sorts of other changes are taking place in my heartbeat, rate of breathing, etc.

What in the hell's happened to the rope? I've only got about three runners on! Then I have an idea, and look down, and see just what I've done wrong. I've clipped the same rope into the last two runners. They are close together, at the same level, and there is a bulge between them. What an incredible mistake to make on such a badly protected pitch! But I can't possibly climb down now.

The climbing ahead is fortunately much easier, but at each move the rope friction becomes worse.

Keep with it — stay with it — stay on the rock — don't get gripped — think it out — keep calm — try to keep calm

The grassy terrace at the top (absurdly called 'The Valley') comes suddenly with one last back-breaking heave, and it would be an understatement to say that I have never been so glad to reach the top of a climb.

But it is not over yet, as climbing techniques now have to be converted from the vertical to the horizontal, as I claw my way up the grass on hands and knees, heaving at the rope with one hand, making my way towards a large rock on the right.

Here I lie down for several minutes, pausing from the great output of physical and nervous energy. Fortunately no one witnesses this ignominious end to the climb, and I have recovered some of my composure when a grinning soloist appears from nowhere.

‘That looked quite interesting...!’ he says, before skipping off in the direction of Horseman’s Route.

Taking in the rope proves to be nearly as great an effort as the climb itself, since it has now almost completely jammed. I realise that Tim is probably having to climb with a lot of slack. He has been oblivious of my adventures, and his comment when his somewhat strained face finally appears, is:

‘*Can’t* you take in a bit better – it made it a bloody gripping route to second!’

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