

SLINGS AND ARROWS.

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Every so often C has a desire to do something difficult, and until it is satisfied there is no peace for his friends. To satisfy him once more, we walked on a July morning in 1950 from Snowdon Ranger over the hills to Cwm Silin, through scenery whose quiet beauty never fails to intrigue me. We were bound for the Great Slab, that noted feature of Cwm Silin.

Our proposed climb was a direct and consistently steep route up the right-hand side of the Slab and more than 300 feet in length. We divided our party into two ropes of three, C leading the first. He attacked the steep smooth wall below an obvious niche high up and about 20 feet from the retaining wall on the right, and before long was forced to make a long ascending traverse to the left, no means of upward progress having presented itself. To us below the traverse seemed quite pointless, for the whole wall was smooth and apparently devoid of holds. The sole reason for his move, we decided, was to pluck a solitary flower growing in a crack above his head ; and various disparaging remarks about reckless botanising were shouted up at him. Ignoring both the flower and the remarks, however, C began a long and very delicate ascending traverse back across the wall and arrived safely in the niche, where he made a stance.

The two remaining members of C's rope looked at that second traverse. The two others on my rope looked at it. In turn they decided that it would be preferable to do the easier left-hand route up the Slab on that particular day. They traversed on to it, leaving me to tie on, rather doubtfully, to C's rope. Disregarding cries of "Leave C there as a warning to others," I succeeded after some difficulty in joining him in his niche.

The next pitch led directly up for 120 feet to a tiny grass ledge. C found it increasingly difficult as he advanced, and when it was my turn to follow I was distinctly relieved to find on the ledge a good belay in the shape of a large bollard. By now the sense of adventuring into the unknown was added to the steepness and exposure. Once more C moved slowly and very steeply upward until he was perhaps 70 feet above my head. Here he remained for some time, poised on the minutest of holds. To me it seemed that the bare rock ahead provided no possible connection with the crest

of the Slab, and since further attempts at progress seemed unjustifiable I advised him to come down before he grew too tired to hang on. However, he drove in a piton, and using this as a running belay managed to advance very slowly on holds which—as he said later—had been quite invisible to him at first. They led him up to an easy traverse, which had been hidden from below; and this proved the key to a successful finish. By moving left, C was able to attack a steep grassy groove which led diagonally right towards the edge of the Great Slab. While he was still on the treacherously loose grass in the groove he reached the limit of the rope and had to wait patiently while I tied on a second length of nylon. He was then able to reach a crack, into which he inserted one of those thread-belay chockstones which always seem to jump into his hand when the need is crucial.

While we were busy with this operation it started to rain—not the usual light and wetting Welsh rain, but a really heavy downpour. Water cascaded down the Slab and wind and rain raised their voices together, making communication difficult. C, drawing in the slack between us, felt the rope check as the knot of attachment reached the snap-link on the piton and refused to pass through. He did not immediately realise the situation, but sent his piton-hammer down the rope on another snap-link to enable me to remove the piton. This, of course, halted at the piton snap-link and stayed there—for the present. Meanwhile I had pulled down the offending knot, and—balancing precariously upwards on inadequate holds—just managed to reach it and untie the second rope. But before I could attach myself to the dangling end C started gaily pulling in the slack, doubtless marvelling the while at the speed of my ascent.

The rest of the party had now finished their easier climb and arrived at the finish of ours. Peering down, they saw C pulling in the rope and watched the end come up to him with no climber attached. Naturally they feared the worst. But by leaning well out from the edge they could just see my head 140 feet below, and I was forthwith encouraged with comforting remarks to the effect that I would probably have to stay there all night.

As for me, the moment the rope sailed up out of reach I had belayed myself with a spare loop. This was lucky for me. For no sooner had I done so than C's piton-hammer—freed as soon as the rope had passed through the fixed snap-link up above—flew off the rope's end and went sailing down past my head to destruction on the screes far below. I had barely time to gasp at this unanticipated thunderbolt before piton and snap-link—that confi-

dence-inspiring running belay!—whistled past, missing me by a very narrow margin. I drew a long breath and looked with gratitude at my belay. This relief was premature. Down hurtled yet another snap-link, with sling attached, and hit me fair and square on the head

Well, it was my own snap-link, borrowed by C, so I managed to be grateful for its return and ignored the somewhat painful method chosen. No one has been able to explain where it came from, however, and C himself emphatically denies that he returned it so promptly.

Contact and understanding established at last, I moved up the streaming wall, pleased with the way my Vibram-type soles stayed on the rock despite the continued rain. C says that only his heavy Vibram soles enabled him to stand so long on the small square-cut holds which are a characteristic of this climb, particularly on the piton pitch. Beyond the grass groove there remained only a short pitch of easier rock to finish this very steep and exposed route, the second half of which—so far as we know—has not been led before.

The easy pitch landed us on the ridge above the Slab, where I offered C my congratulations on an inspired and very fine lead and my condolences on his heavy loss in ironmongery.



That grim and yet pleasurable mounting of the heart as a horse gathers himself between our knees and rises, as the gust freshens suddenly and the sheet grinds before it and the boat heels, what are they to the climber's sense, half joy of battle, half fear of defeat, when the rope goes slowly away into nothingness, as only the grunts of the leader and the scratching of his boots tell him that he is not alone with immensity?

—Lord Schuster.