

The Climber's Tale

by Ian Blake

Solo climbing was frowned on when I started. I only tried it once. I was staying at that hotel with the bunkhouse which was used by all the great names. Chris, the landlord, an Englishman from Lancashire, led the Mountain Rescue Team. He'd nod at the collection of boots in the hallway, saying in his flat, northern vowels, "Boots of dead climbers. Yer'll see that the nails are loose. Or they're these new rubber-soled boots."

We were fair game for leg-pulling and learned not speak until spoken to in the evenings, awaiting a cherished invitation from one of the "Tigers" to "Come over to the fire." Brash tyros, who assumed warming themselves to be their right, found no accommodation available the next time they tried to book.

I'd intended merely a loosening walk, but when I found myself at the foot of Slugan Mor ("Great Gullet") - the original Classic route, now rarely attempted because it is usually slippery with mud and slime - marvelous sunshine and dry rock proved too great a temptation.

That Friday the holds were sharp and clean but, squeezing up "Chimney Crack", my battered guide slipped from my pocket and fell fifty feet. However, the route up to that great scoop known as "The Theatre" is unmistakable. Luxuriating in the warmth, I lounged there in the sun for a while, assessing possible exits, all of which looked far more severe and exposed than I remembered from the book. The most obvious route seemed to be a traverse to the left consisting of a substantial ledge for the feet and excellent handholds.

I set off confidently enough. Even when I came to a rather wide gap in the ledge there was a marvelous jug-handle for the left hand so, letting go with my right, I pulled across. I could now see that the ledge, still comfortably wide at first, rose and narrowed to a mere wrinkle before fading out altogether beneath a daunting buttress. Tentatively, I sought a secure handhold. Nothing. I tried again, reaching further round but, as I inched my left hand forward, I felt the bulging rock pushing me off balance. I knew I'd have to retreat and find another way out. That was when I discovered the handhold which had made it so easy to hop across the gap in the ledge, now sloped the wrong way. I tried again with no more success. It was impossible to reverse the move. I could neither retreat nor go forward.

There was in no immediate danger of falling, but nobody knew where I was and below me was a drop of several hundred feet. Could I go up? I reached high above me. As my hand explored the rock, it came across something which was entirely unexpected. A short, stubby, well-smoked pipe. Moreover, it was still alight; I burned the tip of my finger quite badly on the glowing dottle. Sucking my fingertip and cursing, I took in the charred and battered rim, from which smoke still curled and a silver band on which were engraved the initials F.E-S.

Somebody was just ahead of me on the climb! And not very far ahead at that. There was obviously a route which "went." Relief !

"I say, is there anyone there?" No reply. "I think you've left your pipe here." No reply.

"Hullo ?" I called again, much more loudly.

"Did you say you've found my pipe?" The voice, quiet, almost apologetic with a distant echo of the West Highlands came, not from above, but from around the buttress. "D'you think you could pass it to me? I feel quite lost without it!

"I'll try," I said doubtfully.

"I'll reach round and y'can just pop it in my hand if you will." After a minute or two, a hand and a tanned arm in a check shirt reached round the overhanging buttress. I stretched as far as I could and the pipe just touched the receptive fingers which closed round it.

"Can you tell me what the next move's like?" I said as casually as I could, not wishing to admit that I was really and truly benighted.

"Of course. It is a bit hairy. I almost got it wrong ! Come as far as you possibly can along that ledge you're standing on. It fades out rather, as you'll see, but you must get your right toe on the extremity of the wrinkle. How tall are you?"

I told him.

"Aye, then at shoulder height for you, there's a good friction hold for your right hand provided you pull down on it. And there's an excellent jug-handle for the left hand, on this side, once ye've pivoted round the buttress on your right toe and your right hand. Takes a bit of nerve, that's all. You must give yourself enough momentum to swing your left foot round here onto this splendid mantel-shelf where I'm now standing and for your left hand to reach this hold. Too slow, you'll peel off and it's about four hundred feet before you stop! Thanks for the pipe."

I found the handhold for my right hand. Getting my right toe out on the last of the wrinkle was nerve-wracking. My leg began to tremble and I shifted quickly back to safety. I tried again, and again returned - even more rapidly. I could hear nothing round the other side. The pipe-smoker had obviously gone. After ten minutes I tried again, but I was losing my nerve. The sun had gone from the rock. A chilly wind was rising. No doubt he would raise the alarm, when I did not return. If, of course, he was staying at the inn !

I had too little experience to understand that, on a mountain, discretion is not cowardice. Nevertheless, I'd never have attempted it again, had it not been for the sure knowledge that the pipe-smoker had done it before me. So I wriggled the nails on the toe of my right boot to the tip of the wrinkle and pulled the fingertips of my right hand down onto their pressure-hold. After one further, fruitless, attempt to stretch my left foot and arm round the buttress, I pivoted back then, with the acquired momentum, committed myself blindly to a final, foolish, desperate swing. Left leg and arm flailing, the buttress pressing me outwards, I felt the fingers of my right hand slip. My right hand came free. Only my right toe still touched the rock-face. Very, very slowly, I began to fall back into space.

And a scrabbling left hand grasped the most welcome jug-handle in the world fractionally lower than I had assumed. My left foot found a broad, sure, ledge. Right hand and right foot joined the rest of me. Shaking. Clinging on. I opened my eyes. The rock a rose at a comfortable angle with huge holds all the way. A doddle! Fifteen minutes later I was on the top. My saviour had long gone.

*

After a bath, I went into the bar. Only "Tigers" were allowed to park their matches, pipes, maps, karabiners, ice-axes and tankards on the wide mantel over the fire. I wasn't surprised to note my rescuer's pipe there.

As Chris pushed me a pint of shandy, he asked where I'd been. Knowing his views on solo-climbing, dreading his condemnation and the inevitable ribbing I'd get, I was deliberately vague, but he gave me a sharp look and demanded precise details. I owned up.

" You cracked Crucifixion Buttress! Solo? Yer daft yoong boogger!" Then reaching for that large leather-bound book, inscribed First Ascents, he very reluctantly pushed it across to me. 'Daft young boogers' did not really warrant being credited with a first ascent in his opinion.

"Oh," I said hastily. "I wasn't the first. There was a chap ahead of me. He's staying here."

"You're the only guest so far."

Without saying anything, I pointed towards the pipe.

"You'd no bloody business to put anything there ! He moved across, picked it up.

"I didn't put it there. He did. I found it. And handed it to him round Crucifixion Buttress," I was irritated now.

Looking right into me, he spat out, "Listen to me, laddie! I don't know where you got this. But you don't joke about E-S. He fell four 'undred feet and 'e's dead."

"No, you listen. I'm not having my leg pulled just because I'm a beginner. Three hours ago, the owner of that pipe told me about the holds.' I took a deep breath. "I'd've seen any rescue party!" I pushed my singed finger under his nose, "See that blister? I can assure you that pipe was still well alight, when I gave it him. It's what he was coming back for!"

He stopped absolutely still, the pipe in his fingers; repeated my words as if to himself, "Told me about the holds." His eyes went blank. Then distant. "So E-S did it after all. His 'undredth first ascent!" He carried the book back over to the long, scrubbed table and painstakingly wrote, Crucifixion Buttress; First Ascent, Fergus Escott-Smith, 20th. July, 1939.

"Dare say folk'll reckon it's a mistake 'mongst all these 1959 dates," he murmured wryly. "Twenty years ago to-day. My first rescue as landlord. We brought him into this room. Put him on this table." He glanced at the clock above the bar, "About this time," Then slowly, thoughtfully, "That would explain it a'course. We did wunder, seeing it weren't ont't'body."

He perceived my puzzlement.

"F.E-S never climbed without 'is pipe," he explained patiently. "Swore it brought him luck so long as 'e 'ad it in 'is pocket. Or 'is mouth er'course. But this time he moost'a left on the ledge where you... " and, as realization suddenly dawned, " 'E moost'a fallen going back for't."