

## **There Must Be More To It Than This**

**By Andrew Hilton**

The climber's hand gratefully accepted the offer of the crack and he thrust deep, it was a good width and he tensed his fingers, feeling his glove bite and hold. Straightening his left leg, he pivoted upwards and pulled onto the small ledge, swivelling as he did to sit and gaze outward.

His breath raced from the exertion and he inhaled deeply, satisfied with the completion of the section and eagerly anticipating the final phase - 'the crux!'

However, he knew he was fooling himself, something was missing, it should be better than this - where was the thrill, the exhilaration, the heightened senses, the adrenaline rush?

When his grandfather had died the climber had inherited grandfather's box jot climbing gear, which also included an extensive collection of the climbing literature of the era. Searching for fulfilment in his sterile world the climber had devoured every word, revelling in desperate climbs, in bold risks, glorious climbing moments snatched in terrifying weather, on fragile rock, success against the odds, safety after all had seemed lost. What really gripped him, what really brought him, time and again, to these words, was a search for something more in his own life. These climbers of the twentieth century had been truly alive, they were free - he had never experienced the wild joy at the end of the climb, the indescribable elation of survival, the camaraderie of shared risks and fears. Like everything else today the climber's life was regulated, controlled, risk free and ultimately, hopeless.

The climbing equipment in Grandfather's box was, of course, now obsoleted by technology, but for some strange reason he had been drawn to the shoes - close fitting and brightly coloured, still in reasonable condition. In a rare act of defiance he had stubbornly insisted on using these when he began climbing, the soles gripped much better than the instructors had claimed and, despite the laughter and ridicule, he felt that, in part, his Grandfather's spirit was with him when he climbed.

Sat on the ledge he gazed across the valley. Whilst it was only a kilometre away he was unable to make out the underground area where he had left his vehicle, or the office where he had paid his access fees. The Controller had been surprised by his choice of climb 'nobody climbs the old routes these days', but he knew his grandfather had been there, he had written of it in his diary, how he had struggled on the final pitch. Perhaps it would be here, climbing with his Grandfather's words in his mind, that he would find the elusive satisfactions and elations which he had been seeking ever since he had taken up climbing. It had been a difficult decision. He had only been allotted twenty ascents that year and he had been reluctant to use one of these precious access permits on such an old fashioned route. He was quite capable of climbing the most difficult lines but he had found them ultimately unsatisfying. He was even considering whether this would actually be his last climb, perhaps a different Leisure Activity would be more rewarding. 'Come on grandfather, inspire me' he had thought. He paid his fee to the controller, offered his pack for inspection, endured the usual questions about his strange shoes, signed the disclaimers and had downloaded the details for his chosen route.

And so here he was, the climb was two thirds complete, he was as unsatisfied as before 'one more section, then that's it for climbing - I need more than This'. He had always enjoyed the fresh air, the warm sun on his back, the exercise, but.....

He looked at the Climbers Pack on the harness, around his waist. Grandfather's books had frequently been extremely funny: maps, guide books, route cards, getting lost, even going 'off route'. None of this could happen these days: it wasn't permitted to climb away from the designated route and climbers always had to register their plans, and download the details of their chosen route, before setting off. He pressed a button on his climbing pack and craned his neck to look upwards. The route glowed in red dashes on the rock, the recommended holds highlighted,

green for feet, blue for hands. It could even be set to show whether it was a right or a left hand hold but the climber enjoyed working that out for himself. He also insisted in turning off the glowing route guides before he started climbing, relying on his memory as he moved upwards.

The climbing pack had a second purpose. The invention of portable anti-gravity packs had revolutionised climbing, Grandfather's ropes and mechanical devices were a strange reminder of what had gone before. The pack sensed a fall within two metres, slowed it, then allowed a gentle return to the ground. Nobody had died climbing for over fifty years now. They had gone on to design shoes with tiny servo motors in the sole to grip the rock securely, to bend to fit the shape of the hold, to provide lift to the foot. The climber had tried them but, perversely, insisted on Grandfather's shoes instead.

He did use the new Power Gloves. The motors would expand to tighten within a crack, would grip tiny protrusions with tremendous force, would curl around an edge. It was possible to hang, suspended on one gloved finger. Standards had immediately leapt forward, Grandfather's Extreme route was anything but that now, which was why the climber was the first person on this route for many years.

He thought again of the magic of those old climbing stories, of the sensations he was searching for, of the sense of loss. 'Come on grandfather, climb with me.'

After a while he turned again to the rock and began to climb. He moved easily, with a fluid grace, his muscles revelling in the effort. He reached the crux and paused to work out his moves: a crack, but an awkward width, an overhang. He decided quickly and moved.

His right foot flat against the rock, held by friction and the angle. His left hand curled beneath the undercut hold by his waist as he pivoted up with his legs, right hand flapping frantically for grip. He could smell the fir trees on the valley floor. His hand closed around a bulge, a poor hold, keep going. The undercut hold for his left hand was comforting but he had to move, a bird cried in the far distance, his right hand found better purchase and he shifted balance and reached up with his left, gripping the angle of the rock. The breeze played with the hairs on his neck, seeming to tease each individual hair.

A corner for his left foot gave him an angle, he could feel the textures of the surface under his sole, and he pushed and levered upwards. He could reach above the overhang now and his fingers desperately pushed deep into the crack and he tensed, feeling the rock bite into his skin, pulled, then straightened his arms, teetering, his upper body rocking over the upper lip of the overhang. His arms were locked, his legs extended, no leverage there, and his face was close up against the rock face, he could smell the damp in the crevices, the rich colours of the rock danced before his eyes.

Laying his cheek against the cool rock he squinted upwards and managed to see the next hold, shifting his balance onto his right hand he gently walked the fingers of his left hand across to caress the hold. Secure now he raised his right leg onto the top of the bulge and stood up, the cooler air kissing his tongue and catching the points of his teeth as he stepped up onto the small summit.

Throwing his head back he hollered at the skies, filled his lungs and screamed again. His heart was banging against the walls of his chest and his muscles burned and glowed. He surged with energy, dancing giddily on the summit rocks - he could see for miles, hear every living thing in the valley below, taste life in the air. His spirits soared, he had never felt like this before.

Fifty five metres below, on a small ledge where the climber had stopped to rest, lay a pair of Power Gloves and a Climbers Pack.