

A Royal Flush

By John Watson

The glass ceiling of the Millennium was fast approaching and I was dissatisfied with something in my climbing. I hankered for something hard and edgy; something to impress; something confounding, intimidating and bitterly virgin. But this was Glencoe - the conquered, the realm of the classic, the intriguing but inherited: like your Dad's patched and historic trousers.

A veil had fallen over my favourite mountains and I had stopped buying magazines, I was lethargic and the weather was bad. All my friends were the same and it just felt like the whole thing was, well, so what? I let the tea go cold again as I flicked through the guidebook, hating my 'ticks' and wondering why I couldn't have said a little more than, 'Yes, done: black tick!' I felt like I had taken no more than a peashooter to the mountains.

I worked my way through the history notes and first ascents, as I always do. Where does history lead us, I pondered: to entropy? I shivered at this conclusion. This ennui had to be countered at all costs and I resolved to do a new route. Hard and bitter.

My ambitions for climbing a new route - in the 1990's in Glencoe - had naturally leaned towards the modern approach. After all, that was where the new routes lay - the thin red lines of E5 and above - and was that not where the pioneer inside should prove itself? I was mulling over this problem, blasé on Abraham's ledge one day, when I glanced to my right and saw what had been wrong with us all along, and why, when it comes to history, we assume it has to be so. I knew the guidebook well, I knew the hill well and there in front of my eyes, like staring at a Magic-Eye picture, there materialised the answer to my ennui: five unclimbed tiers of what looked like immaculate pink rhyolite. They were continuous, bar a few intermediary alps, and the rock flushed in the morning sun, embarrassed at being discovered, as though it had assumed nobody looked at it like that anymore: nakedly.

'VeeEss, I'm convinced of it', I whispered to myself. I let my imagination, unhindered at last, run up the features of the complex East Face of North Buttress. At the next belay on the Direct Route, twisting in my harness, almost pulling Sean off balance on the delicate crux below, I scanned from Crowberry Gully right round the old routes of North East Zigzag and Slanting Grooves, over to the shortening harder pitches of the East face - like a graph of the last century: long wandering routes gave way to the steep classics like Mainbrace, turning the corner down and round to the short hard test pieces of Bluebell Grooves and Craig Dhon't Woll. I turned to Sean, who was sorting the ropes. I tugged his sleeve. Biting down on a bent roll-up he agreed it looked like a good line.

'Must have been climbed before, surely,' he muttered. I sort of concurred, but didn't, because of the way the obvious sometimes has a way of hiding itself.

But there was an excitement in me: I was discovering humility, an open eye and a genetic hunger. All it took was a little luck and an eager bite on the lip. All good routes, I remembered, began in quiet apprehension and they always led you somewhere new: I yet did not know that this would be back to a time when the mountain had been approached by formal voices, surnames, the echo of hobnails and the scrape of hemp on rough rock. I held the excitement in me, like something live and pulsing in my hands.

True to form, the rest of the summer was wet, with sweeping fronts vigorously drowning weekend enthusiasm. On the first good weekend in August, I took advantage of a work-frustrated trainee doctor called Adrian Crofton and scrambled up towards the East Face, Adrian muttering about his stress and his brow knitted with hangover and clutter. At the waterslide, I pointed out the line as it opened into view.

'Oh yeah, I see where you mean,' he said. 'Never seen that before. Wonder why.'

The rock wall had big wet maroon streaks on it, but the sun was up and sizzling on the face and the prospect looked good. We roped up and merrily pointed out Curved Ridge to a couple of New Zealanders who had become confused by the sudden pop-up complexity of the Buchaille.

I looked at my own unknown walls. I resolved to set up just to the left of Brevity Crack, opening the eliminate line to allow me into what I had seen from Crowberry Ridge. The first pitch squeezed its way easily enough at about VS through overlaps and into an unusual slaty groove. Stepping onto a nose of rock, easier climbing led to the perched block of Slanting Grooves. A full fifty metres of VS: fine pitch, and a tempting crack above.

I was beginning to feel younger, in the sense of ages. I pulled Adrian up hurriedly and he noticed he was beginning to smile and rub his hands. He followed the steep crack above and barked at the sudden and intuitive simplicity of the climbing, romping and disappearing over a brow of rock into the blue. I squinted my eyes at the light the way a kid does, to see rainbows in your lashes, and thought of absolutely nothing: I just enjoyed the live tug of the rope and occasionally placed my hand on the bubbled rhyolite, on the secret belly of the mountain. Scree rustled somewhere far below, decades ago.

'Climb when ready, John!'

I cut through my vague reveries and skittered up eagerly. We debated like elders. By my reckoning, we had found the new line: two long diagonal pitches; both amenable, nowhere at all hard, but bold enough to make modem hardware humble. I beamed at Adrian on the grassy alp. The traditional feature of Judas' Rib lay above him. I nodded twenty yards to the left.

'The black groove. It leads to a roof and slab. I think we could use that to trend up and left to the higher tiers.'

Adrian opened his palms and let me lead on without argument, happy to let his moment come by and by.

Just as I set off through the heather with the coils, I saw an old grey snake of rotting hemp. I picked it up and laughed. A lasso from the past: I would have overlooked it a month ago.

The groove was harder than it looked - it vee'd up to a small roof, and I couldn't decide which side to tackle. Eventually, wiggling in some gear, I took a bold step onto the smears of the roof's lip. Swinging up to better holds I whooped with the ancient pleasure of a distinct crux completed. In this mood it felt hard, because we were unlearning our supple pride - grades suddenly went fuzzy and vanished. It felt severe, very severe!

More good rock followed and led me up to a square recess below the ever-steepening walls. I handed Adrian the lead for the next assault, persuading him to keep going up and left, into new ground.

'I think it should go out by that ledge, then up the crack. The way above looks blank, but it's up to you...'

My voice leapt through time, thrillingly backwards and forwards at the same time.
'Jesus, it looks steep, John.'

'It evens out above, I'm sure of it.'

After some wandering and route-finding out onto the left skyline, Adrian crept deviously up to a steep overlap, placed a friend and stepped down to a small ledge. He would be forced left into the unknowable. I let some slack out as he pulled the ropes for the traverse. Then he vanished and

reappeared, weaving in and out of my line of sight, before breaking boldly back into it on the wall above. He had bagged the fourth tier!

I followed his devious line, oblivious to my trendy Habaneros wet from the heather ledge. At last I felt gifted by the uncaring stuff that we call rock and in those moments, following Adrian's line exactly, stepping into the airy traverse, I could have sworn an eye opened in the rock - a kingly eye: watchful, royally wet and merciful - and viewed a noble pursuit, then closed again to rest assured in its munificence.

The pitch was a beauty, requiring guile and not a little boldness and, remarkably, it worked through at a solid VS. The line was beginning to shape up as something distinct and generous.

I congratulated Adrian on a remarkable achievement, which he shrugged off modestly. We were the small kings of a distant land. I babbled enthusiasm at Adrian and spread my arms at the solid wall across from his belay.

'Pink again! The fifth tier!'

Adrian whistled a looney tune.
'Aye, pretty good.'

I stepped onto the steep final tier and followed technical little cracks to a big ledge which led me out right to a comer and then... all too suddenly, after two hours of invigorating emptiness, it was over and there was the breathing vacuum of self, which Murray talked about, and redemption, and history, and a whole lot of things that could not have been expressed but in these epiphanies that modernity rarely allows.

I had come full circle to how it had all begun. I knew something new. I had had an original thought: it had moved up out of time, invaded me in my sleep for all I knew and it had ended in a climb: a simple rock-climb.

I stood for a brief second on the North Buttress of the Buachaille, not knowing where to look - backwards or forwards - then, like everyone else before me, I began to hunt for a belay.