

THE OTHER WAY

SHOWELL STYLES

It was one of those April days when the clear warm sunshine gives no hint of the coming gloom and chill of a British summer. I had spent most of it lying beside the stream near Pont-y-Cromlech, watching three rock-engineers on a crag far overhead constructing a rope-and-piton scaffolding under an overhang. At mid-afternoon they were still hammering, so I left them to it and walked up into Cwm Glas.

On Clogwyn-y-Ddisgl two climbers were halfway up Gambit, and I lay down beside the little sunlit tarn to watch them. A moment's observation convinced me that here, at least, was something worth watching. Their technique resembled that of the ladder-and-peg experts in that it diverged from traditional mountaineering practice, but there the resemblance ended. The Leader, having reached the stance beyond the upper traverse, busied himself with a series of complicated gestures close to an obvious rock spike. Then he turned and made hand-over-hand movements in the direction of his Second, who eventually called loudly: "That's me!"

"Come on!" shouted the Leader, and braced himself in the time-honoured belaying attitude while his companion climbed.

The ritual was the same that may be observed on most crags where the old-fashioned methods are still in use. The divergence from normal technique lay in the fact that they had no rope.

Had they, perhaps, some new and wonderful kind of nylon rope which was not visible to the human eye, I wondered? I watched the Second reach the stance, slip an invisible anchor over the belay, and pay out a non-perceptible rope as the Leader tackled the chimney above after adjusting an apparently non-existent waist-loop. Curiosity overcame sloth at this point, and I scrambled up the Arête behind the Parson's Nose to await the emergence of the two climbers on the crest above Gambit. They chose the traditional finish up the mottled wall, so I was able to observe their final operations when they arrived at the top of their climb, just below my perch.

"You forgot to coil up your rope," I remarked as the Leader, followed by his Second, came up the last bit of scree.

He reddened faintly. He was a youngish man with a thin and meditative countenance.

"The Club doesn't insist on that," he said. "The Psyche Climbing Club, you know."

"And anyway," added the Second, a chubby youth with glasses, "we won't have to bother when we're Whitmanites."

I confessed that I hadn't heard of the Psyche Climbing Club before. "One of the newer clubs, I presume," I added.

"We've been in existence for twelve years," replied the Leader diffidently. "Of course, we keep ourselves pretty quiet—no B.M.C. membership or Club Hut or badge."

"And what," I ventured, "are Whitmanites?"

"I suppose you could call them the Tigers of our special form of climbing." The Leader glanced doubtfully at me as he passed a glucose tablet to his companion and took one himself. "It's rather tricky to explain. Maurice Herzog—the Annapurna chap—says somewhere that the highest ideal of the mountaineer is harmony with the mountain."

"And that 'harmony disappears the moment the extraneous element of mechanization is introduced,'" I said. "I remember that. I rather agree."

The Leader looked relieved. "Well, that's one of the Club's starting-points. Another is Menlove Edwards. We count him as an early prophet, so to speak. In the nineteen-forties he was pointing out the line we've taken, but about then British rock-climbing started to import new techniques from the Continent and most climbers took the opposite route, away from Edwards' line."

Light began to break on the mystery of the invisible rope.

"I think I see what you're getting at," I said. "I've always thought that when pitons and slings received a British blessing there must have been one or two climbers who took the other way at the crossroads."

"That's it," said the Leader. "We took the other way. You remember how Edwards stressed the psychological side—how ropes and belays were almost beneath his notice. When he *did* climb on a rope, and there wasn't a handy belay, he'd build a little pile of stones and put his loop round that—a psychological belay. Moral supports existed in his own mind, you see."

"You can tell from Edwards's guide-books," put in the Second, "that good holds spoiled a climb for him. He preferred faith to a sound handhold any day."

This seemed to me rather a sweeping statement, but I said nothing.

"So that's where we started from," the Leader took up the story. "Our accent is on psychological equipment, not on material aids. Instead of adding to the climber's burden like the new technicians we aimed at reducing it. Instead of lugging round more pitons and more ladders and more rope, we decided to go the other way and scrap the lot."

"You couldn't do that all at once, surely," I objected.

"No. We started by banning all pitons, snaplinks, and slings. The next thing to get rid of, of course, was the rope. Nowadays we do this by easy stages. First we climb with it in the old way, using it as a moral support only. If it's only a moral support, it's obviously of no physical use, so we gradually transfer our faith from the rope to the gestures which accompany its use. In time we discard these too."

"I'm practically due for that," interpolated the Second with some pride.

"Then there's the artificial aids like special kinds of footwear," continued the Leader. "Vibrams, P.A. soles, nails. The bare foot and the bare hand naturally make the best and closest contact with one's climb, but of course a barefoot technique has to be acquired gradually. I'm in process of training for it now."

He glanced down at his feet, and I noticed for the first time that he wore a pair of close-fitting slippers made of the thinnest leather, their soles covered with what looked like fine-mesh wire netting.

"Do you scrap special clothing, too?" I asked. "I notice you're both wearing windproof anoraks."

"It's reasonable to defend yourself against the weather," he explained tolerantly. "It's unreasonable, and unfair, to invent new forms of attack on a mountain that can't alter its defences."

"Another thing," put in his companion. "It's more logical to handicap ourselves than to try to make climbing safer and easier—that is, if we want to prolong the life of the sport."

"But surely," I protested, "artificial climbing has opened up new crags and new routes, for those who practice it. Its made routes possible that would be impossible by free climbing methods."

The two members of the Psyche Climbing Club exchanged glances.

"We disagree with you there," said the Leader slowly. "You see, our Club maintains that just as the 1900 limit of possibility was passed in 1930 and that limit passed again in the 1950's, so we can go on passing it. The introduction of faith —" He paused. "Menlove Edwards left sound holds to perfect himself on bad holds —the Clogwyn-y-Geifr routes, for example. We go a stage further. Our Whitmanites have made routes on faces which may be described as completely holdless."

I stared. "Without pitons? But I can't believe —"

"Neither," broke in the Leader quickly, "would Haskett-Smith have believed that any one could lead Cenotaph Corner. I know the ancients used to talk about faith and friction, but we're doing away with the friction now. — By Freud!" he added hastily, glancing at his watch. "We'll have to go, and with all speed. Good afternoon!"

"Hey!" I shouted after them. "You haven't told me why your Tigers are called Whitmanites!"

"Look up Walt Whitman's Song of the Open Road," he called back. "Fifth verse."

When I got home I looked it up. The relevant lines seem to be these:

"Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of
the holds that would hold me."