

## MEDITATIONS ON A THEME OF H. M. KELLY

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Motionless on the tilted slab I recognize a familiar situation. With fear in front, pride and the rope behind, I am frozen, my mind pushed back and forth attempting to put down fright and to summon up confidence. This place is the crux of the climb—not a hard one for Scafell—but the knowledge that it is the crux sharpens my conflicting emotions. If I overcome it I shall be assured of temporary glory, a reason for pressing on. Should I turn back, however, no one will blame me, no one does in this game. A hunter is scorned for refusing a fence, but a climber is never mocked for turning back at a crux. All the greater reason for prudence then.

I shuffle on the small footholds and lean my head against the wall behind me. Looking along the line of the slab I stare out at Pike's Crag, sunny, broken, beginning now to tremble as the day moves towards noon. It looks a very desirable place and I wish I were there. My gym shoe rolls on the narrow hold and hastily I step back into the corner where the slab joins the bounding wall. Here, on the guttering of the cliff, the brilliance of the day is reflected into the shadowed rock and strikes under the eaves in a pale, comfortless light.

In this corner I can lean out above Jim who is twelve to fifteen feet below and look more carefully at the problem. A long scrutiny will always delay the dreadful moment of commitment. Jim is not impatient; he has tried and retired from this position. He would try again no doubt but at the moment he will not press the point. I am left alone above his head. Twelve feet—should I come off I shall fall only twelve feet, hit the ledge and stay there. On the other hand, I may bounce and go on for another twelve feet; not very far but the thought touches my mind with cold apprehension.

Nervously, my glance slides down past Jim into the ghyll below and down its rift to the scree where they fan out on the floor of Hollow Stones. The mid-day sun is throwing the shadow of the cliff outwards and the air between me and the shadow is blue, dense, almost tangible. I gaze down from my niche as into a huge, limpid pool where the hazy, summer day is filling the great coombe, lapping against Lingmell and the Scafell Pikes and spilling far out to drown in a blue-grey mist the hills of the Copeland Forest.

Jim shuffles his feet again, adjusts the rope round his back and calls up, carefully, as if afraid of breaking the spell that seems to have claimed me, that he is willing to have another go at the slab. He says that perhaps his kletters are better than my gym shoes, that . . . His voice fades quietly, thoughtfully, into the recesses of the cliff and is

lost in the air. He is not eager to try; his confidence, like mine, is brittle today. Scaffell is a great tester of confidence, casting a shadow in the mind and numbing determination.

I return to my slab and look yet again at the, by now, familiar features. There is this move and that move and that. The sequence has been followed by scores of climbers these past thirty years; climbers older and less nimble, with arthritic hips and stiff knees, climbing in wind and rain in nails . . . I look closely at the rock—no, not in nails. My courage does not respond. I remain limp and irresolute in my corner. I wonder what follows the crux. This is madness. I am now recoiling from what lies beyond, from what I cannot see. My imagination flies up the climb (I wish my body were as quick) and returns aghast at what it fancies is above. I collect myself, remind myself to take the pitch in small bites; hard routes are nibbled at, not gulped down. I realise that the lack of handholds on this slab precludes a return. Once started the sequence of moves must be carried through. I begin at last to understand the nature of this crux, the nature of all crux. The moves, I argue, are not hard in themselves. The difficulty lies in convincing myself that I can make them before I start the first one.

Feeling happier at having at least formulated this problem, I begin to make preparatory movements, indicating to Jim that I am setting off. I twitch the rope and Jim braces himself on his stance, full of attention now. I'll try once more. I call down, "One more try, keep an eye on me, Jim!" With this exhortation I step out again on to the slab and make the first of the moves. Now the second move, quickly. Swing the left foot up, high on to the edge of the slab, the skyline that divides my immediate world and the great gulf beyond. God! I've missed a hold. "Watch out, Jim," I cry inwardly. My right foot on its little knob slews and twists, my leg trembles. Somehow I emerge from this moment of panic and I move up and out to the brink of the blue pool and stand at last on the platform that hangs on the edge of the slab above the plunging buttress. Jim says something from below but I barely hear, my ears are filled with the soft drumming of my heart. I turn and breathlessly and, with an effort to seem calm, indicate to Jim how I did it. Since he has seen it all and I know little of it the explanation is ridiculous but I am recovering as I talk, preparing myself for the rest of the pitch. Jim listens for he will have to face the crux again and this time there is no climbing down from it, which was always possible before I crossed it. With the crux behind me we must both go on up.

I have crossed from the inside to the outer edge of the slab which continues steeply above me. The illusory security of the

corner has been exchanged for the isolation of this airy perch; I am feeling very vulnerable here. I am at the place to which Kelly descended before making this route and from where (so story has it), on the first ascent he paused and, looking down, earnestly entreated the rest of the party to follow since he could not return. I am still nervous but committed by this thought of no going back. The rock is smooth and no runners can be put in place. I am fond of runners; I am happy setting them up and the lessening weight of a karabiner necklace brings peace of mind on a pitch. Today I dare not pause to improvise ingenious protection. I am climbing on the dregs of my confidence and must keep moving. The rock is steep, smooth and I find no resting place although one can rest anywhere if calm and properly adjusted to the position. I keep going up and the slab narrows and eases as I go. The holds increase but so does the runout and I am all the time conscious of the depths below. I do not often climb fifty feet of such rock with the rope running away in an unbroken curve to my second. Worry and thoughts of dropping off crowd into my mind. Fighting my fears and in this manner making the pitch doubly difficult I work up to where the slab, running into its right-hand wall, dwindles to nothing or rather to a belay, a mighty belay fashioned solidly and firmly, a dinner to a starving man, a sail to a shipwrecked sailor.

I can see Jim's head below as I turn on the stance and breathe deeply. He is no more than fifty feet beneath me—could so much emotion be crammed into a mere fifty feet? Whole climbs have seemed shorter than this one pitch. I tie on and pull at the rope. Hauling it slowly up the slab, I look out once more at the dreaming hills. I have time now to wonder as I stare at the familiar shapes if Kelly also paused down there with a sharpening of perception when he came to make this route thirty years ago. Perhaps I should look through the old journals; he must surely have left an account . . .

But the slack is now in and Jim is looking up. I lean out and call down: "Up you come, Jim; there is really nothing to it!"