

IN THE DIRECTION OF DOWN

D. P. PENFOLD

When in Rome do as the Romans. It follows that most Midland Mountaineers who find themselves living in Yorkshire will cast a speculative eye at Potholing at some stage during their exile. They are, of course, convinced there is nothing in the field of mountaineering experience which might seduce them from the joys of warmed and sunlit rock, the soaring buttress and the sharp arete. All the same the nagging curiosity persists : what *is* it like down there ? How does it *go* ?

For me the answer was found in the company of a group of experienced and competent Potholers from a Yorkshire Club known and respected for both seniority and safe potholing. It was May : the weather was dull and, at breakfast in the hut, did not appear very promising. No one seemed to mind this in the least.

The first job was to lay out and prepare the tackle. This consisted in the main of life lines, belay lengths and ladders of the two types usually employed, namely, rope ladder and electron, the last named being made of thin steel rope with tubular metal rungs. They are compact when rolled and light and easy to handle.

After the tackle was assembled it was carefully checked against the various pitches given in the guide book. At this stage I learned we were to descend a pothole classified by the guide book as a V.D.P.—a very difficult pothole, and its depth was given as 140 feet. This sounded reassuring enough. Familiar, even.

By now a jeep had appeared and the gear was loaded on to it. Most people wore overalls and had already donned their helmets and this gave me a feeling of being involved in a form of military operation. I self-consciously put on my helmet, boarded the jeep and merged into the pattern.

Out on the fell we abandoned the transport about a mile from our pothole, shouldered the gear and set off. It began to rain. At first sight the entrance to the pothole was unimpressive. It seemed no different from dozens of other shakeholes in the area ; measuring some 40 feet in surface diameter it sank funnel-like to a hole about 6 feet across. A few ferns grew at the edge and from these the rain dripped from our view into the hole.

Operations commenced with a belay length being passed round a well anchored boulder near the lip of the shakehole. To this was clipped a length of electron ladder some 30 feet long which was then carefully lowered down the first pitch. The "leading" party of four made ready to descend, each man taking with him one or more items

of tackle. The first man clipped himself to the lifeline which had been made ready by one of the support party, who himself was firmly belayed to another boulder, and stepped on to the ladder, into the pot and started unhurriedly to descend. It would soon be my turn to follow so I set about filling and lighting a carbide lamp and fixing it to my helmet. Almost as soon as this was done I was given a roll of electron ladder to carry and ordered to clip on to the lifeline and get going.

A few careful steps took me down the funnel to the ladder—there were five men below me and I had been assured that dislodged rocks or scree would not be appreciated. I gazed down the pitch of some 25 feet, which looked about 50, and the electron ladder seemed impossibly narrow. Successful use of ladders depends on balance and on ability to make a non-rigid ladder perform as if it were rigid. This is best achieved when standing in the ladder by passing the arms to the other side, or rear, of the ladder and grasping the rungs that way.

On reaching the bottom of the pitch I stepped off on to a scree slope, unclipped and watched the lifeline snake back to the surface. The scree went steeply down for a further 25 feet until the walls converged and here, in the floor, I saw a hole just large enough for one to get through.

My companion was waiting there. since from now on we were to descend more or less in pairs, and I fixed on the lifeline he had ready, took my last look at daylight for some hours and squirmed, feet foremost, through the letterbox-hole. I discovered the disconcerting fact that, although the aperture through which I was passing was small, my legs hung free inside and I had then to climb down a short wall to the floor. My nailed boots eventually found a foothold and I wriggled gingerly through. Once my head was inside, the wall turned out to be only 8 feet in all and I promptly offered to jump down and was equally promptly rebuked by my companion for the suggestion. I resumed my chastened way down and soon we were ready to move again. We were now in a boulder-strewn passage and after a few yards the roof came down and crawling began. For the first time I noticed the acrid but not unpleasant smell of burning carbide lamps and saw, too, that our breath was visible. The walls of the passage were dry and the rock was brownish in appearance but I had no time in which to make a closer inspection of my surroundings as we wriggled onward.

In a little while we began to hear the pair ahead and then I could see their lamps bobbing slowly along. It was soon apparent to me why we were overhauling them, for they were wading, in a crouching manner, through water; the low roof of the passage made a doubled up posture necessary. This section, I was informed, was the Canal.

"It's not bad," said my informant. "About waist deep in the middle."

I plunged, what I hoped was manfully, in. And indeed it was not bad. The guide book had said it was 60 feet long and I did not presume to doubt this useful information. It would perhaps have been better, however, if the book had warned that the movement of the pair ahead would inevitably send a sizeable wash back in my direction. But it didn't and I took it more or less square on the chin and all but dropped the roll of ladder I was still transporting. Soon the Canal assumed the proportions of a small stream and then I saw we had reached a small chamber.

The next pitch had already been laddered by the leading party and three men were down, the fourth was awaiting our arrival, and he soon departed once we had arranged the lifeline for him. The pitch, when I came to descend, was not long but one landed over a pool some 2 feet deep and care was needed to circumvent it and avoid a further wetting.

Now followed what was, for me, the most interesting part of the descent. A narrow passage, or rather fissure, 300 feet in length, opened from the chamber and twisted away downwards. It was a tight fit and progress was both cautious and slow. I remember thinking it was rather like chimneying except for the fact that one's head was more often than not lower than the feet. We were still carrying a roll of ladder each and at times, when we stuck, found it better to squirm on a foot or two, pass the ladders over ourselves and then proceed to overtake the ladders, and so on. It was surprisingly tiring.

In such a position, as I waited for my companion to negotiate a sharp and tight bend I glanced up and saw by the light of my lamp a tide-mark encrusted with small twigs and other water-borne debris which marked the level, two feet above my head, at which the flood waters had last raced through. An interesting discovery at that particular moment!

Towards the end of our long crawl we passed through the Double Corkscrew. This, on reflection, was a left-hand bend immediately followed by a right-hand bend. By now I had discovered that I could best get round a normal sort of bend which curved away to the right by simply crawling or squirming with my left shoulder pointing downwards, thus keeping my stomach towards the axis of the curve—and the reverse applied. But when a curve is immediately followed by another proceeding the other way, as in this case, the problem of transferring from one position to the opposite is more than a little interesting! Add to this that con-

founded roll of electron ladder and there can never be a dull moment.

I got through somehow and soon, a little bruised, came upon some of the others. To my great joy they took from us the ladders we carried and we then waited while they pressed on to ladder the final pitch.

This went down some 40 feet and deposited us in the final chamber which, although being about 50 feet long, broad and high, was rather disfigured by an enormous slope of mud and boulders in the middle. After negotiating this with care we came to the end of all things, called, in this case, the Stalactite Chamber which contained some quite large and fascinating shapes. Here we relaxed and ate a little food, for our outward journey was finished.

It is not considered the done thing to remove samples of Stalactites or other natural phenomena from such places but I was sorely tempted to do so until I remembered I needs must pass through the Double Corkscrew again on my way back in the direction of Up.