

THOSE FEARFUL DAYS

I've never been really scared on climbs. Whenever I get into a really scary, dangerous situation, something in my mind takes over, clamps down on my fear, and says, "Okay, you dumbshit. Now what are you going to do?" And, of course, I'm then too busy trying to do something to worry about little things like death and disfigurement.

But before climbs there's plenty of time to worry about the ways I could die. Among the many climbs I've done, three in particular absorbed me more than they should have. The first I knew I'd die on; the third I knew there was a good chance I'd die on; and the second, I didn't think I'd die on, but I knew I'd keep taking 30-foot falls forever. This is the story of those three climbs.

Wales, 1974. I knew I was going to die on Rat Race, a powerful, atmospheric route on Gogarth, one of the powerful, atmospheric cliffs of this world. On a good day the sea laps gently against the huge main wall below you. On a bad day it crashes high onto the overhanging rock, intimidating all but the bravest. I loved the atmosphere, the intimidation, the sea...and I knew I had to climb Rat Race if I was ever to be a real climber.

Its main pitch is a rising traverse across a big, overhanging wall, finishing up a groove to belay below a rotten, overhanging chimney. So off I went, climbing up and out, until I reached the groove. It looked steep and hard, but I climbed until my forearms started flaming out and my little voice said, "No, no. You can't do it. It's too strenuous." So down I went.

I no longer remember how I got down, or what else we did that day, but the very next weekend I was back at the same place, crossing the big, overhanging rock until I reached the groove. Again, the forearms wore out and the little voice said, "No, no. It's still too hard. You'll never do it." Again, down I went.

This was now getting ridiculous. People whom I judged as lesser climbers than I had climbed this route—but I was incapable of it. And so Rat Race became an obsession. I had to climb it, yet I knew I couldn't. It was simply too hard. I had no idea how to do it. I knew I'd have to keep going back to it until one day I pushed past my limit and either climbed it—or died. It's funny how we perceive things in

our youth: to a young man, a single climb can become more important than life itself.

So I was becoming accustomed to the idea of dying in my attempt to do Rat Race when, out of the blue, I met a climber with whom I'd once had a fierce rivalry. He'd done the route and told me how easy it was. No, I thought, I can't accept this. There's something wrong with this picture. So I asked him to describe how he'd done the section that was stopping me. He proceeded to explain a completely different climb, one that bore no resemblance to my route. Suddenly my spirits soared, and I knew I wouldn't die. I'd been trying to climb the wrong groove.

The next day I was back on the rock, this time continuing the rising traverse past the groove I'd been trying. Another ten feet on, hidden behind a bulge, was the correct groove, one

BY ALEC SHARP

with big holds and protection, one that led easily to the belay. I was alive, no longer obsessed, and ready to continue my quest to be a real climber.

Slowly fade out.

Fade in to 1979 and Castle Rock in Colorado's Boulder Canyon. It's a plug of granite sitting in the middle of the canyon, two sides scrambles, one side long, with the most impressive smooth walls around, and one side short, but bristling with overhangs. The main road goes past the easy side, and a dirt road encircles the overhanging and smooth sides, making Castle Rock one of the ultimate roadside crags—you can belay from the car. I was trying to do a new climb up a sequence of blank faces and thin cracks to the left of Athlete's Feat, a climb that became Never a Dull Moment, and on which I knew I'd keep falling forever.

With Dan Hare I did the first pitch, a rising traverse across a particularly blank face, the only pitch I've ever done that uses true fingernail holds. The second pitch led left onto a steep wall that was split by a thin crack. Halfway up, the crack became a smooth, rounded seam—and I couldn't see how to

climb it.

When in doubt, layback. Soon I was stretching for a bucket in a small alcove at the top. "Oh no, my balance is wrong." I started swinging out, then off I flew, ending up beside a very startled Dan.

After a good rest, I pulled the ropes down, and off I went again. I was soon stretching for the bucket in the small alcove at the top. "Oh no, my balance is wrong." I started swinging out, then off I flew. Enough was enough. I didn't know how to do the move, so we retreated to Boulder.

Now the climb started getting to me. It was safe enough, but I just didn't know how to do the move. Nevertheless, it had to be done. When you start a new route, you don't leave it half-completed. It may be paranoia—it usually is paranoia—but you know everyone else with any ability is going to be trying to finish your route before you can.

It rained for days, and Boulder Canyon is bleak in the rain. So for several days the route was preying on my mind. I couldn't do the move, but I had to do the route. Finally, the rain stopped and I was at the beginning of the layback—with Andy Parkin belaying. For some reason, things went differently. The reach for the bucket was easy—I don't know why one day it was impossible and one day easy, but you don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Because the cracks above were wet, the moves out of the alcove were desperate. I've never enjoyed climbing on wet rock because I don't trust my feet. I trusted to luck more than I like to, but what was the choice? However, everything stuck, Andy cruised it, the rest of the route had some exciting face climbing, I pulled a finger tendon trying to avoid using my feet on one thin section, and we finished the thing. Another preoccupying climb ceased to be a worry—I didn't have to come back to climb the crack that I didn't know how to climb.

Fast forward to 1981, to Eldorado Canyon, a wall high on the West Ridge among the pine trees and squirrels, with a view of the snowy Rocky Mountains. What a setting for a climb to die on. This climb I was scared of. It was an unclimbed route that would take the overhanging wall to the right of Purple Haze,

hand-traversing out above a bulging wall to a vague rest, then going for it—following a seam in the blank wall above. I'd rappelled down to clean the route and knew that there were some gear placements after the hand traverse, but no real protection on the difficult wall. However, there was one small hold that was incut enough to take a skyhook.

I was afraid of the unknown rather than of a climb that I'd failed on. I had nightmares about my new route, nights of tossing and turning. After all, who wants to embark on a difficult climb, knowing that the only thing preventing a huge fall is a possible skyhook over a finger hold? The night before my attempt, I hardly slept. Exhausted before I started, I hiked up the hill with Matt Lavender. Preoccupied with fear, I geared up, then tore off foot-long strips of duct tape, which I stuck to my trousers and shirt.

The overhanging hand traverse was strenuous and intimidating, but it led to a small left-facing corner where I could place some nuts and a Friend. The crack in the back was a bit too parallel-sided for comfort, so I stuffed it with everything that fit. Thus lightened, I stepped back into the middle of the wall, where tough layback moves opened up the upper section and brought me to the finger hold. I placed the skyhook over the hold, attached a long sling, then used the duct tape to hold down the hook.

Next came the moment of truth—a series of strenuous moves on small holds, praying all the while that I would neither pull the skyhook off, nor test its ability to hold a fall. God in His heaven must have been listening, because both I and the skyhook stayed on. Ministry of Fear (11d) was climbed, ending a week of fear and trepidation.

These, then, are the climbs that have most preyed on my mind while awaiting the next encounter—when there's plenty of time to worry about all the ways I could die. But it's the awareness and closeness of death that most makes me aware of life. Those climbs remain fixed in my memory, and will be there until I finally depart this earth—a small but precious part of my existence.

Editor's note: Alec Sharp moved from England to Boulder in 1977, and has been here ever since. Until the mid-1980s, he established many of this area's hardest and boldest climbs. (Before leaving the Old Country, he made the first ascent of that wrong groove at Gogarth, naming it the "Ordinary Route.")

RIGHT: ALEC SHARP REACHES THE BUCKET ON THE FIRST ASCENT OF NEVER A DULL MOMENT (12A), CASTLE ROCK, 1979.

R

DAN HARE

