

Ye Canna Go On Forever

[for the *Climbers' Club Journal*]

It was a beginner's mistake. After fifty-eight years of climbing I was stuck astride the first pillar of a single-pitch climb. Bum-beached. Bulged off it above, and feet flailing below. It was the right foot that might have reached a foot jam. The left skidded off the fine grains of the vertical edge of the pillar. In past situations like this in recent years I've been able to use a hand to lift a thigh. But now both hands were preventing me peeling over backwards, bouncing down the grass slope, across the track and into the gently lapping Atlantic Sea. My son Tom had found that the crux was getting off the second pillar. So the game was up. Defeated by a Severe. Another lower off. There was a time when this used to happen on a 5b, a long time ago. Now I have to blame my invisible double, Arthur Rightus.

I was a little shocked at how quickly Tom was ready for the lower off. It was immediate. I've trusted his three-point belays since he was fourteen. Now here we were, on the Scottish island of Canna (pop. 6) for the day, and he, at forty-five, was lowering his old dad off the first little climb that had looked so amenable with its two starred twin cracks - Flying Buttress Central, the easiest route on Wave Crag East. Tom abbed for the gear. I could only take a picture on this rare blue-sky day on this tiny island.

We scuttled round the corner to find a Diff I could actually climb. It had the ignominious name of Minnow. Then it was time for the walk back to the ferry via the island's empty honesty-shop for an ice-cream. We sat outside in the sun facing the sheltered bay where yachts were anchoring for the Saturday evening restaurant opening. There must be a sailors' grapevine of bubbles in the brine about this improbable event. Beyond the bay the island of Rum raised its whale back into the cloudless sky. I was content to say to Tom, 'Ye canna go on forever'. It was a decision that made itself and, out here in that most beautiful place, it was OK.

Tom said, 'Better a lower-off than an emergency hip replacement'. A National Health Service oxymoron my elderly neighbours would say, as they resist going private for an operation as long as they can bear the pain.

Actually, the pain first hit me with full power six years ago in a scruffy little quarry called Vallis Vale in the English Mendip Hills as I made a long stride for a hold on a VS with the ominous name of Wasted Metal. It was Steve Neads' turn to do the opposite of the heavy lifting. I thought I'd torn something serious, but Arthur had me in his first grip. The Tuesday Night Gang removed my harness as I lay prone and rigid with pain. We'd climbed over a fence to get in. Fortunately many Mendip climbers are also cavers and Mark Faulkner had his caving overalls in his car. So, on it was on this item of

apparel that I was dragged under the fence and driven home. At the hospital, after a while waiting in a wheelchair, the nurse said, 'Just get on that bed for me so I can examine you'. With a scream I hurled myself up onto the bed, which quickly produced painkillers before an examination could be undertaken. A scan revealed old Arthur Rightus, 'pre-operative', which is a National Health Service technical term for 'put up with it'. I am hoping that the late Queen's 'episodic mobility issues' are not fatal for the socially less elevated of us commoners.

But two years ago I couldn't even step up to the start of Bottle Buttress at Wintour's Leap in the Wye Valley. On a sharp January day, after waiting by walking leisurely up the river for the sun to hit the crag, I had to call for a rope from the ever-patient Dave Wynne-Jones because the first rock-step up the approach scramble was too high. It was a wonderful route, described as 'wayward' in the guide. I fell off the crux traverse when another stride too far produced a sudden twinge. A pendulum on the peg into brambles brought me to yet another well-belayed partner. Rope-coiling at the top, I lingered over the dying light on the river below. In the woods opposite the tawny owls echoed each other. I kind of knew I'd not be back there like this again.

On the way home from Canna I called in at my club's climbing hut, the old schoolhouse at Grange in the Lake District. Tom lives outside Lincoln in Eastern England and I live in deepest Somerset in the Southwest. For our mad annual May Day holiday trip to spend a day climbing on a Scottish island we meet up in Penrith, on the edge of the Lake District where I leave my car. So on return to Penrith, after we'd parted, I hatched a cunning plan for the conclusion of my climbing career. I walked into the hut and asked if anyone would care to join me on the morrow for my last ever rock-climb. 'We will if you give us some of that single malt', offered club member Colin Struthers on behalf of himself and his mate Mike Thompson, a member of that legendary Scottish club, the Craig Dhu.

The following morning I led the first pitch of Brown Slabs Arete, slightly unnerved by the polished holds and glad to get gear in. The last time I did this route I'd soloed it, savouring every move. Now I was delighted to belay on that stance above the lake, up in the air of an epithalamium, celebrating a lifetime's marriage to rock. Colin came up complaining with heavy sarcasm that others seemed to have been this way before. He led through, kindly taking my camera, and as I finished, congratulated me on my 'last ever climb, but one ...'. He could not believe that this was a valedictory climb. Ah, the kindness of strangers. The generosity of one's club members. The relief of realising, at last, that 'Ye canna go on for ever!'

Terry Gifford

Wookey, England