

## THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

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THE majority of climbers can recall personal struggles for survival, times when the pleasure of climbing is brutally exchanged for a fight to regain safety, occasions when the mouth of a hideous trap is suddenly sprung behind them, a trap set by nature over which the climber has no control.

In the wealth of climbing literature there are numerous accounts of struggles. Some of these struggles are now classic : Buhl on Nanga Parbat is probably the best example but he is having competition ; Bonatti has published a whole book recounting his epics, the most unforgettable of these being the Freney Pillar episode. There are struggles which will never be told of because the participants did not survive the trap. There are the less famous but no less real struggles on our home ground. Was Buhl's struggle on Nanga Parbat any greater than that of a hill walker who broke his leg on the summer snowfield of Garbh Coire Mor on Braeriach and crawled unaided from there to Luibeg ? This journey took two days.

How do struggles begin. They are not planned, since no climber would seek out this type of danger ; it is alien to his sport. The trap will spring when objective danger changes the character of a route by suddenly confronting the climber unaware with a complexity of odds. Confronted thus the climber's safety is at once jeopardised. His climb will take longer to accomplish, it will demand greater physical effort, much more than he bargained for. Above all it will bring numerous doubts as to his chances of survival. Thus the struggle is not only a physical one but a mental one. His every fear must be controlled, his every action carefully planned to avoid disaster and in these actions he must have every confidence. Without this confidence he will perish in the trap.

The most hazardous of the objective dangers encountered in mountains is that of bad weather. In summer it will mean wind, often ferocious and driving cold rain, but in winter bad weather excels itself. The wind brings a deep biting cold, the rain becomes snow, spindrift will accumulate at the top of cliffs in large unstable masses requiring careful and tiresome handling. This same spindrift will blind the climber and cause great pain to exposed parts of

the face. Add to this an extreme discomfort due to wet and frozen clothes and you have a very nasty situation.

I have encountered these conditions on three occasions whilst engaged in climbing a route. Anchor Gully, normally an easy but steep snow climb was the locus of two of these struggles. Each time the route was started in calm but misty weather and finished with a fast compass escape in blizzard to the Etchachan Hut.

J. McArtney and I entered the gully expecting a quick climb, but although the lower section took only a short time the steep exit funnel became the trap. A gale force wind laden with drift blew over the lip of the cornice and McArtney's struggle over what would have been an easy cornice at the end of 120 feet of rope was a desperate fight. Even in the shelter of the gully the wind threatened to lift me from my stance. Two years later I entered the same trap with R. Robertson, but this time the snow was in a dangerously wet and unstable condition requiring herculean spade work to lay bear a safe cutting surface. This was not foreseeable since the lower 60-foot snow-ice pitch, which forms early in the season, had been found in good condition. This normally easy route took five hours and we were very relieved to finish it. The cause of the change in snow conditions was a sudden rise of temperature and we walked down Glen Derry in pouring rain. Thus the weather can raise the grading even of easy routes and this must always be borne in mind when attempting a climb.

Robertson and I have often suggested that we should cease to climb together in view of the terrible conditions which we attract. It is perhaps significant that nearly all my struggles have been with him, and vice versa.

In Twisting Gully on Beinn a' Bhuird one Good Friday, Robertson and I swiftly despatched the lower pitches only to be met with a worsening of weather on the long upper recesses which hang above the steep slabs of Slugain Buttress and Three-Step. The physical discomforts suffered on that climb were unbearable. Wind, spindrift and a visibility of nil, plus enormous masses of powder snow gave good reason for mental and physical effort. Once on the plateau after eight hours of climbing my wet clothes froze iron hard in the wind. We took to our heels and ran headlong down the Snowy Corrie to shelter without even unroping. It is interesting to note that Robertson sported two frostbite blisters on his wrists where his gloves didn't quite reach his anorak sleeve.

If the tops of these climbs had been far from shelter, for example

on Braeriach, another struggle would certainly have ensued on the plateau. On all these occasions a compass was used on the plateau.

Beware of the usual easy approaches to bothies, for here, too, traps can be sprung and they will take you even more by surprise. Here they are least expected. In November 1962 it took McArtney, Wyness and myself two hours to cover the Derry Road. The reason was the onset of a blizzard, deep snow and a gale. In March 1962 Robertson and I took two hours to cover one and a half miles in Glen Slugain due to an enormous accumulation of snow. The last twenty yards could only be covered by throwing our rucksacks ahead of us and using them as stepping stones.

In these struggles I have never really doubted that safety would eventually be reached. Only once have I felt certain that we were fully ensnared. This was in the Dauphiné Alps in France.

With Robertson, I was enjoying an excellent first season in excellent weather. It was a holiday which gave us five good peaks within seven days. On our second peak, Le Rateau, we had a nasty experience. We left the Chatelleret Hut at 3.30 a.m. on a cloudless night and cramponed steadily up 3,000 feet of snow to the summit ridge, covering a further 2,000 feet to the top by 9.30 a.m. Here we had our first rest. Our intention was to descend by the long east ridge and so complete what seemed an excellent traverse of the peak. At the start of this ridge a distant thunder-clap should have warned us to descend by the normal route, but we took no heed. The ridge although extremely exposed was of an easy standard, but, alas, it was very loose, more like stacked playing cards than rock. Although we moved steadily we seemed to cover no ground, a common belief on long alpine ridges. Whilst still at 12,000 feet, we found ourselves in the centre of a thunder cloud. We hastily stacked our metal gear and took shelter by a rock slab from the heavy hail which was now falling. At this point we smiled at our good fortune of finding ourselves experiencing such a rare phenomenon, but not for long. Each charge built up in our axes with a loud eerie buzzing—when the buzzing stopped, a few minutes silence was followed by a deafening thunder clap. Invisible hands brushed our hair.

We pushed on until the ever-increasing violence of the storm halted us in a small gap between two gendarmes on the ridge. Here we began to appreciate the full extent of our plight. It was nearly 4 p.m. We had a long way to go to reach the hut and the storm was worsening. We were perched on the knife ridge, and our clothes were wet. In fact we were the perfect lightning conductor. It was clear that the

ridge must be abandoned without delay. We were forced to abseil on to a hanging glacier on the north and opposite side of the ridge to that of our destination. This glacier would have to be traversed to the end of the ridge, the Brèche de la Meije crossed, and the descent made to the Hut, a long way away. The descent to the glacier was dangerous and I particularly remember moving down a steep snow ridge composed of slush lying on hard ice. There was no possible belay and certain disaster if either of us should slip. On this ridge I received two painful electric shocks in the tips of my fingers. The situation was un-nerving.

Finally, the storm abated and in the dusk we crossed the Brèche de la Meije and began the long descent to Chatelleret Hut. On this descent fatigue gave rise to the amusing hallucination that I was wearing kletterschuhe and I had constantly to look down at my feet to drag myself back to reality. We reached the hut at 9.30 p.m. We had been climbing for 18 hours with a maximum allowance of one hour for stops. We were saved by our fitness, having spent the whole summer climbing in the remoter corries of the Cairngorms and covering large distances on Friday nights with heavy rucksacks. Our winter experience in the Cairngorms was also invaluable. Without this training the story might have had a different ending.

I have defined the cause of the struggle and spoken of its demands on the climber, mentioning my own, perhaps rather tame, experiences and those of Buhl and Bonatti, but what is the value attached to the fight for life. The answer is easy. Each struggle leaves behind it a wealth of experience which can be rewardingly used if similar circumstances arise in the future. They bear the true meaning of mastery over oneself and nature which is the basis of mountaineering and they give us a great love of life which makes us appreciate this gift more perhaps than the sedentary man. Perhaps this is why climbers are often accused of being too carefree in their attitudes towards the everyday duties of lowland life.

Above all they give us an enormous respect for mountains, a respect which should be present in every climber. I did not seek these experiences and will never be accused of doing so in the future, but without them I would indeed be a poorer man.