

Far Away and Long Ago

Lydia Thomson

This is the diary of a visit to the Drakensberg Mountains in southern Africa in 1981. The Drakensberg, or in their Zulu name Quathlamba, Barrier of Spears, lie on the boundary between the South African state of Natal, and the tiny independent country of Lesotho. In the most spectacular central section, a sixty-mile escarpment facing north-east rises steeply from the plains of Natal (at 4,000ft) to jagged peaks of around 11,500ft. The escarpment is backed by a high grassland plateau at around 10,000ft, sloping gently to the south-west, and often snow-covered in the southern winter. Anyone interested in learning more about mountaineering in the region should seek out the classic *Barrier of Spears* by R. O. Pearse. On this five-day trip in December more than twenty years ago, my husband Ken and I joined two South African friends, Paul and Janet Fatti. Paul is a distinguished climber and mountaineer, who some years later became President of the Mountain Club of South Africa.

Day 1 December 27th 1981

We left Johannesburg on the night train, gazing enviously at the lamp-lit windows of the luxurious Blue Train parked beside us, before retiring to our more basic couchettes. I woke with a jolt at 4.30am to find we had stopped at an exceedingly anonymous station. Was it Estcourt? Eventually a dour railwayman divulged that it was Ladysmith. Twenty minutes later, just on time, we steamed into another station and were about to leap out, only to discover that the train was late, and we still weren't there yet. Finally at about 5.30 we made it to the arms of the welcoming Fattis and tea and rusks in their car as we drove off to the mountains. There was lowish cloud and drizzle (just like Scotland!) as we set off, first over metalled roads, then on red damp tracks.

After some inspired navigation we reached Isandlwana police station at about 7.00am. There was no sign of life, save a few Africans waiting patiently under the dripping hedge, and so we drove a little further until we were faced by a semi-impassable section of road. The caravan unloaded by the trackside, gourmet meals were divided out, and the three of us set off while Paul took the car back to the police station. At first we took tracks past little groups of inkpot huts standing on the bluffs above a wide valley - all neatly thatched, and a few bothy-shaped. All disgorged smiling children, asking for sweets. We passed the last shop, a corrugated iron shack, and dropped down to cross the Thonyeland river, knee-deep, following two African ladies with sundry cauldrons, packs of potatoes etc. on their heads. They were concerned to help us, but found it difficult to understand why Ken carried my pack across! Paul's giant pack

finally hove into sight, as we enjoyed the long slow walk following paths along the Mnweni river, past spectacular pink candelabra flowers, and wild arum lilies, moving a hundred feet or so above the river as it got gorgey. At one time we were overtaken by a running African - these valleys had a reputation for feuding tribesmen, linked to the problems reported around Durban.

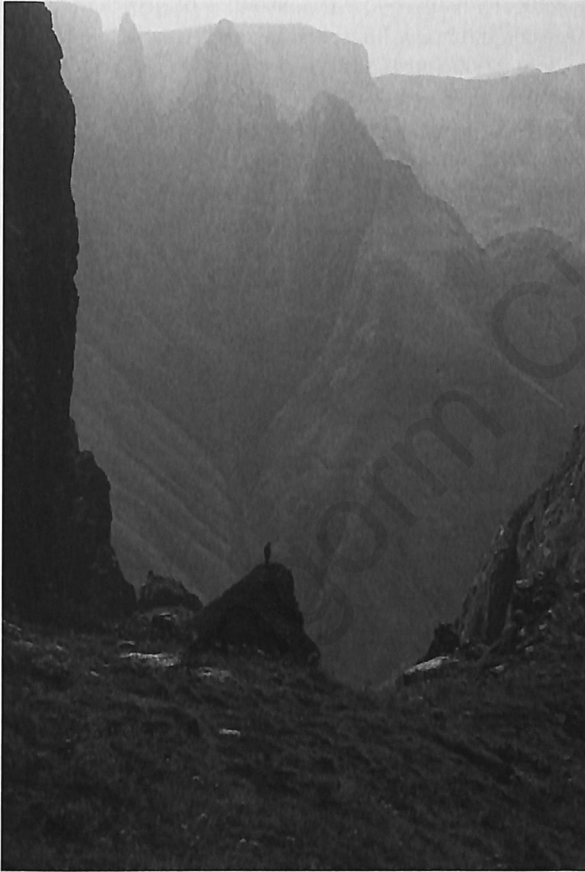
Everywhere there were little groups of huts, six or so, some decorated with black and white spears forming a sort of stockade. Where there were some small flat plots beside the river, maize was being grown - at this season only tiny seedlings. Lunch by the river - fresh tomatoes and cucumber, though the avocado pears remained stubbornly hard. Then on along the stream, past the last kraal, the valley sides steepening and the path quite high up. Cuckoos were calling, and African ladies with piles of fire wood on their heads were going home on the other side of the valley. The little footpaths of beaten earth - like ones through English fields - are through trading-routes, and continue for miles. As we rose higher, the grassland flowers became more spectacular - orchids, hellebores and lots of others that I couldn't even guess the families. Finally we dropped down through shrubby thickets and boulder hopped across the still quite large river, walking upstream on shingle and boulders a little, to camp on a grassy river-bank by large rocky pools, at approximately 4,900ft. While we cooked our fresh steaks, the mist drifted lower and lower, and we retired to the tents in a steady drizzle, with cicadas going off like burglar alarms all around.

Day 2 December 28th

We woke to blue skies, and the mist replaced by towering yellow rock walls cutting off the head of the valley, with complex valley systems wriggling steeply up between them! After porridge for breakfast, and swims for some, we rediscovered the path on verdant slopes dotted with trees - just like an orchard - and progressed further up the Mnweni, passing the junction of the Setene, where we saw our first cycad, and a little further along, Shepherds' Cave. The Drakensberg caves seem to be mainly rock overhangs, with a breastwork of stone wall built against them, straw-covered floors and, at the lower levels, are often used by herdsmen.

After about two and a half hours we crossed the river and for once the footpaths led us the wrong way. Only a bit of nifty map and compass work got us back into the correct main valley. The spurs between valleys are so steep that mistakes are not easily rectified. We found the main path again, marked by an inconspicuous cairn, and continued up the true right bank of the river, now mainly through scrub and razor sharp grass, that together with sunburn reduced winter-white thighs to raw red lumps. Progress through the thickets was scratchy, sweaty work.

We were climbing all the time, and Janet became overcome with exhaustion. Paul administered water and glucose, while Ken and I reconnoitred



On the Ascent

the path, up a steep gully and then round the shoulder of the last ridge, where it launched out in lovely zig-zags up the spur, leading 2,500 feet higher onto the top of the escarpment. Janet made a miraculous recovery, helped by a lunch stop on a tiny saddle, with the path to the heights on one side, and the depths of the valley below on the other. There is no glaciation here, so the erosion causes extremely steep V-sided valleys. We progressed up and up on the clearly defined path, past spectacular crumbling pinnacles, the other side of the valley, also pinnacle decorated, seeming only a stone's throw away. In the last hour or so it rained, and a little thunder rumbled back and forwards among the towers.

What a contrast when we reached the escarpment - rolling grassy hills with a few rocky outcrops, quite reminiscent of the Cairngorms, except for the

flora. There were fields of yellow iris, swathes of grey and yellow bachelor's button type flowers, little pink lilies, and big green and white lilies. The plateau lies between about 9,000 and 10,000ft, dropping very quickly at the escarpment to 6,000ft, and then more gradually. (We had started at the police station at 4,000ft.) The cap of the massif is of basalt, and this is what forms the amazing vertical walls, towers, pinnacles and needles. Below this lies a sandstone layer, and lower ridges of this run out forming the 'Little Berg'. While there was little water on the steep climb as we were high above the baby Mnweni, once on the plateau there are many little streams, draining south and west with the tilt of the land. We camped beside one - the source of the Orange River - on a grassy sward, and went to bed early to keep warm in the thin, chilly air, lulled by the frogs, which didn't croak, but tinkled like gently running water. One monster frog lived in a pool nearby, and many of the little pools had tadpoles.

Day 3 December 29th

There were herds of cattle and wild horses grazing on the plateau, and a lone horseman, wrapped in a blanket, passed during breakfast, and a second with his dog was striding out to the head of the pass and the long descent to the valley. We set off about 9.00 - lovely open walking across to the head of Rockeries Pass, bordered on one side by a fantastic jumble of towers, neatly sliced off across the top. While Janet painted, we made a detour to see the Mpungwan cave, spectacularly sited just over the lip of the escarpment on a little apron of grass before the plunge to the valley below. From it there was a spectacular view over the iThonvela valley to the Mnweni and out to the plains beyond, and close at hand the magnificent Mpungwan tower, which stands detached by a deep cleft just in front of the cave. We continued along the edge of the escarpment, past a spectacular little cut-back, that most definitely was not a pass, as the walls fell sheer for an amazing distance. Then we crossed the plateau, climbing to 10,100 feet and then dropping down to the Nguzi Pass, which lies to the west of the spectacular North Peak of the Saddle, and then to the river, finding an idyllic spot, with small cascades, smooth flat rocks, and crystal waters for sweaty feet. We were joined for lunch by a trio of Basuto herdsmen, dressed in blankets, underpants and wellingtons, and aged from about 10 to 16, and their dogs. Big grins, finer featured faces than Zulus, and no English. Bigger grins when presented with cheese and Provita, and when posed for their photographs.

Then there was a long haul up the river, past bulls, horses and foals, and very hot, up to the Saddle, probably the highest point of the trip at 10,200ft. We followed the ridge down, past a couple of little rock steps, to the plain at the head of the iThoyelana pass, arriving about 5.30 with big blue thunder clouds piling up behind us. We christened this campsite the Elysian Fields, from the beautiful turf, with its carpet of little white and pink flowers (later identified as

the alpine *Rhodohypoxis*) amongst the streamlets. An idyllic evening - the clouds drifted away, and we admired the sunset and ate our supper. The stars come out, slowly at first, Venus brilliant and a crescent moon, and then millions and millions, the Magellanic clouds, Orion upside down, balmy crisp air, and far below the lights of the little villages on the distant plains.

Day 4 December 30th

A very different day, and difficult to write about. Everything started well, though the weather was obviously no longer set-fair, as clouds started to build up early. We were up at 5.30, and off by 7.00, climbing diagonally up, past the two square-tops, to the pass at the neck of the long spur which stretches out from the escarpment to Cathedral Peak, over the Twins, the Mitre, the Chessmen, the Inner and Outer Horns, and the Bell. The plan was that Janet and I would spend the day at Twins' Cave, while Paul and Ken traversed the ridge, climbed the Bell and traversed back again.

We dropped down a steep grassy gully, along 100 yards, and then slipped back left through a cleft in the ridge and round the corner to the cave, a massive high overhang, with shelters huddled along the wall at its base. After a quick snack and repack (not a very effective one, as we turned out to have the compass and both the maps), Ken and Paul set off at 8.30, leaving Janet and me to pass the day until their expected return about 6pm. We pottered around, moving round the corner of the ridge to a second spectacular cleft separating the Mitre from the Twins, just in time to see our men scrambling over the skyline. There were spectacular views to both sides, north to the Amphitheatre and Devil's Tooth, south to Cathkin peak. We were looking right along the line of the escarpment, with layer upon layer of subsidiary peaks running to the skyline. But mist was beginning to build up and stream up the gully.

While Janet painted, I went back to the cave to discover that the crows, who had been craftily perching on a high rock watching us leave, had raided the rucksacks. They had pecked mine open, dragged out the revolting bag of semi-solid margarine, wrecked the rubbish bag and scattered debris far and wide. They had also investigated Janet's pastel box so there was chalk everywhere. When I went back to the gap after clearing up the mess, I was just in time to see the view before the mist swallowed it up, and a little later we ran back through a short sharp thunderstorm. The camp was now enveloped in swirling mist, though it soon cleared.

The day wore on, reading, lazing, and a group of four scouts plus leader arrived and pitched their tents further along. After several cups of tea, the clouds piling up along the escarpment suddenly descended, and we could see very little. As far as we could judge it was now about 5.30 (we had no watches) so it seemed likely that we would all spend the night at the cave. We squeezed the tents up under the overhang, having been warned of rapacious mice, and

Janet decided to cook supper. I made a couple of trips to the cleft, which was quite difficult to find through the mist, but there was no sign of the others. It became darker, and then began to rain. Just before it got completely dark, the weather cleared for about a quarter of an hour, and I could see the Mitre from the cleft, and signalled with the torch, but there was still no sign.

By now both Janet and I were pretty depressed - the rain was getting stronger and the mist thicker. We retreated to bed as the only sensible thing to do, rather panicky and disorganised, and after a frustrating search for the candles. By now there was thunder and lightning. We lit the candle and lay and talked, about how Janet had met Paul, and how I had met Ken, about how Janet feels when Paul is on expeditions, about how she has learnt to suffer in silence when he returns very much overdue, with the innocent Fatti smile, wondering what all the fuss is about. As the rain and wind got heavier I broke down and wept, so we held each other for comfort. Eventually we decided that we might have to cope with a worse situation in the morning, and so we should try to sleep. So we both lay there, listening to the drips from the overhang, and the snuffling mice. I was feeling pretty emotionally drained, and heavy headed, but shivery and tense, running through my mind what we should do in the morning, and picturing bleak futures without Ken. Every now and then there were noises as the group in the next door tents turned over and snored, just enough to keep me alert and listening.

Eventually I did fall asleep, though I don't think for very long, and woke up with a sickening jolt to the continuing nightmare over which we had so little control. I don't think Janet had slept at all, and finally we lit the candle and talked on. By now it had almost stopped raining, and the clouds cleared and the stars came out. Gradually it got light, until we could see the hillside from the tent door, and it was clear, although there was a cloud layer below in the valley. Just as hope was returning that those benighted would be able to set out, a wisp of cloud blew past, and in a few minutes the mist was a thick as ever. Deeply depressed we discussed whether we should send a message down to Cathedral Hotel at the foot of the escarpment, with the scout group. The timing was difficult as they were planning to leave at 8.00 and we didn't want to raise a false alarm, nor to be left at the cave with no means of communication with the valley far below. If anything had gone wrong, to organise a rescue would take time, and they had already had one night out, no bivvy sack, light clothing, no map or compass, not much food, no water.

Janet got up to check that we did in fact have both maps, and to talk to the scouts, and I said I would get up and make coffee. Suddenly I had a strong feeling that I should go to the cleft and check again, so dragged on boots and clothes and set off. It was still misty, though not quite so thick, but there was no view of the Mitre when I reached the corner. Feeling pretty hopeless, I called out "Paul," and a yodel came back through the mist. I felt I must be dreaming

it, but called again, and Ken replied and there were other voices saying they were alright and were coming to the cave. I started to run back to tell Janet, but pretty soon could hardly breathe - running in boots at 10,000ft is surprisingly hard. I staggered back to the cave and fetched her out to the cleft. She called - no reply, and I began to feel I must have imagined everything, but the strong wind beginning to blow up the cleft and to clear the cloud must have carried her voice away. I moved to the left and called again and this time there was a reply. We were so pleased we were grinning all over our faces. I rushed back again to the cave, put on a billy of water and collected some warm clothes. Then back to the cleft, while Janet went back to supervise the billy and get some more water.

So I sat on the rock with the little cairn on it, and watched the mist gradually being torn away until the Mitre was clear, and I could see figures, still high up, and coming down very slowly, but coming down, two red ones, Ken and Paul, and three others. Ken, of course, was carrying someone else's pack. I sat on my rock in the sun, with a sea of cloud below me, and to the right and left the fantastic peaks of the escarpment floating above it, and experienced one of those moments of pure bliss, so intense that you burst outside yourself, and I could see myself sitting on my rock in my blue and green anorak and rucksack. Janet came back just as they disappeared from sight in a gully, and we hugged each other with happiness.

After that a there was a slight anti-climax, as we lost sight of their route, and rushed all over the place trying to anticipate their reappearance, so that Ken actually got back to the cave before me. It must have been about 7.15 - anyhow late enough to move on to:

Day 5 December 31st

There followed much brewing of tea, cooking of stew and porridge, and eager discussion. Paul and Ken had climbed the Bell successfully, but Ken had lost his glasses on the climb, and this had slowed them down. Route finding had been difficult when the mist came down, and they had spent the night under an overhang, miraculously with a sleeping bag that they had discovered dropped in a gully. This turned out to belong to the other party of three, also benighted, though in a tent pitched on some precipitous slope. They had met up, and rounded the corner of the Mitre about ten minutes before I called out. Ken looked a bit grey, but Paul seemed as bouncy as ever - of course Janet wouldn't have been worried!

Gradually things simmered down, and we began to pack up for the march out. We left the cave at about 9.00, on a glorious morning, and climbed up the gully, still with magical views of peaks above the sea of cloud, then dropped down to the Elysian Fields, where we stopped for a brew-up. Then, with the cloud drifting up to the lip of the escarpment, we slipped down over the



Ken on the Summit of the Bell

edge into the iThoyelana pass, a steep, stream-fed defile with a zig-zag path, and a hanging garden of alpine flowers, spectacularly beautiful. Lower down the path turned to the left to contour the hillside, and we passed a caravan of mules grazing before the last pull-up, and two horses, one being re-shod.

The good path wriggled along the hillside, over little passes, by one of which Ken saw a Berg adder and Paul finally used his telephoto lens, painfully carried so far, to photograph a spectacular gladioli growing out of the rocks. We then dropped down a long ridge into the valley, most of the way in thin mist, but towards the bottom we began to see the ridge from Cathedral Peak to the Twins, high above us. At the first river crossing we had a marvellous naked swim, and lunch with the much-travelled avocados, finally ripe enough to eat. It was amazing how heavy and sticky the valley air seemed after the high plateau.

Estimates from the map showed eight to twelve miles still to go and so we set out at 2.30 on what was to turn into an interminable slog. As we trudged along the river bank, Ken turned his ankle, and was in some pain. Eventually we reached the junction of the path leading up to Rockeries Pass, crossed the river and after a brief stop started on the last lap, up round the slopes of Scramble Kopje. We were high above the main valley, and could see how well

settled and prosperous it was, and could look back at the Saddle, the Mnweni Needles and Mopungwana, and watch the afternoon thunder clouds play among the peaks. At last at 7.30, in the gloaming, we reached the road, and Paul gallantly went the final mile to the police station to fetch the car. The air was blue, the clouds had gone, the incredible escarpment was pasted a deeper blue along the horizon, from the Saddle all the way along to the Devil's Tooth. We were very tired, but very happy.

The Cairngorm Club