

The South Face of Snowpatch Spire

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*Sometimes I think I'm much too high to fall;
Other times I'm so low down I'll never get up at all*

—Bob Dylan

DIRECT or not direct, that was the question; a question which precipitated a decision — causing a crisis which has seldom been equalled, even in the long history of indecisive projects of the Vulgarian Mountain Club.

“Hey, let’s do the direct-direct.”

“Sure is a classic line, but dig the weather.”

“Actually the third class is pretty direct.”

“Well, depends on the angle that you look at it.”

“Maybe we should follow the natural flow of the rock. Besides the easy way is good mountaineering.”

“The direct-direct sure is pretty. Of course it means a day of pounding and I’ve done that part of the climb before.”

John Hudson, Ants Leemets and I stood at the base of the south face of Snowpatch, discussing the best line to try. It was already dusk and no decision seemed forthcoming. Our friends who had helped us pack our necessary and some unnecessary gear to the foot of the wall had headed back to Boulder Camp. The main decision in route-finding was whether to spend a day nailing directly up the center of the face to a ledge 800 feet or so above the snow or to reach the same ledge by walking a few hundred feet to the east and then scrambling up and to the left on broken ramp systems. The nail-up had been done by Millikan and Abrons and later by Hudson and Geiser the summer before, but neither party had reached the summit.

By now it was getting dark and the discussion continued: “Who cares? Let’s just stop talking and do the climb. OK?”

"OK! But by which route?"

"Let's see how it looks in the morning."

We walked, ran, jumped and glissaded back down to our little Hobbit hole in the rock. Since we had not brought a tent, we had been very thankful earlier that day to find the cave under Cooper's Boulder unoccupied. Unfortunately the cave was not as ideal a home as it had been in other years. The picture window now looks out upon two extremely ugly fiberglass huts (possibly called "igloos") erected last summer by the Alpine Club of Canada.

We agreed to get up at four A.M. but did not wake until seven — ee gads — seven A.M. — what the sam gamgee happened? Of course we had no mechanical alarm clock and so we could only blame it on our mental ones. We looked at each other disgusted. Anyway we hurriedly ate some sort of a breakfast and were off to the base of the face, where the "direct-direct" and "direct" talks continued. At an unbelievably late twelve noon, after scrambling up some 800 or so vertical feet, we were at the "direct-direct" from the "direct."

Ants eagerly led a mixed fifth and sixth class pitch through some loose rock up to the top of the prominent buttress in the center of the face. At last, straightforward climbing! And just below the lower of the two major crack systems. Ants then led a moderate jam-crack and began direct aid, following the lower of a pair of diagonal cracks past two overhangs to a belay in slings.

While he led, Hudson and I happily exchanged tunes and quotations from popular songs written by Bob Dylan, the Beatles, etc. "Help, I need somebody, anybody! — Hey, Mr. Tamborine man, play a song for me. — Please help me, I'm falling — like a red rubber ball — black is black — paint it black — 10,000 dollars at the drop of a hat — my baby does the hankey pankey — yes, I'd do anything in this God almighty world if you'd just let me follow you down — yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free — everybody's hustling, just to have a little scene.

John cleaned the pitons out and I had fun prusiking up to Ants. It was beautiful and we felt good and nervous. I was looking forward to the next lead only a little and moved on past a triangular overhang and a weather-beaten rappel rope from one of the previous attempts at the face. On the next lead John had the fun, first climbing up and left above us and then further left and below us to the base of a large inside corner. This dihedral faced right and arched at its top to form an overhang.

It would be dark shortly and we did not particularly look forward to bivouacking in slings. "Hey, what about going up here . . . or there . . . or maybe penduluming over there, etc. etc." Anyway it was Ants' turn to lead and John and I were glad, as it was the first of the three most difficult pitches on the climb, with dirt-filled cracks and strenuous and difficult piton placement. After being peppered here and there by dirt and pebbles and almost wishing we had hard hats, Ants reached a small ledge. Cheers!

We were in a hurry now. It was getting pretty dark. I prusiked like mad and John cleaned the pins as quickly as he could. The ledge was not fit for three people. Fortunately we had a hammock, which I set up several feet above the ledge.

It was dark and our hardware was everywhere; we would have to wait for sunrise to straighten it out. After eating gorp, meat, carrots and lemons to fill our bellies, Ants and John settled on the ledge and I reclined in the hammock. It was a beautiful starlit sky, unbelievably; unbelievably and fortunately for us the weather was holding.

Morning finally came, showing the terrific exposure and lighting the beautiful scene before us. The light began on the summits, spilled down the snow slopes and glaciers and finally filled the deep river valleys. The "ACC Motel" alone stood out, incongruous in its surroundings. We wondered at this sight and after some thought came to hate it. We groped for a term to express our contempt: "toadstools, flying saucers, pimples, pop-art mammillaries. . . ." Words proved inadequate.

That morning we were pretty warm and comfortable. After a mercifully brief discussion, we ate and were climbing by six. I was almost eager to lead. It began with easy direct aid, but after a moderate fifth-class move, leading consisted of strenuous and difficult pin placement. Finally a jam-crack led to a sloping ledge. John prusiked quickly up to me. We discussed the various possibilities for the next lead while Ants cleaned. The weather was creeping in like smegma, but we tried not to get too nervous. A second but shorter up-and-down, see-saw type pitch led left to a large rock-and-dirt-filled ledge, the bottom of the "bowl". Above, several more crack systems led upwards. Ants took the one farthest left, an inside corner facing right, which avoided the overhangs on our right.

Then hail fell and increased our fear factor. "Lemons man, it's the acid you know; good and tasty it is; we likes it, we does; it's good for us, yes it is, yess!!!"

Ants led the good, but not so good looking, pitch to a ledge. After nervously climbing past a large loose rock, he reached a belay on good-sized ledges. I prusiked up and continued for one pitch fourth-class to the

base of a huge block with an inside corner facing right. After the others had come up, I traversed left at the base of the block and climbed a chimney with a chockstone. Two crack systems met at the top of the block and mixed fifth and sixth class climbing in the right-hand crack took me to huge ledges and the first of the false summits. From here we continued third and fourth class up and up and over and back until we began to wonder where the bloody true summit was.

As we reached a point where we could see the summit, we met our friends, a party of four that had climbed the standard (Raffi Bedayn) route. After filling in the statistics in the summit register, we all rappelled together down the McCarthy-Kraus route on the west face to the snow-fields below.

Once back in our little Hobbit hole safe and sound, we had another great meal and retired to our dreams and to tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. . . .

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Bugaboos, Purcell Range, Canada

ASCENT: First ascent of the South Face of Snowpatch Spire, July 21-22, 1966, (John Hudson, Ants Leemetts, Richard Williams).

TECHNICAL DATA: NCCS V, F7, A3.

