

# Shot Tower, Arrigetch

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**A**LREADY we're making excuses. "You probably won't have to wait around too long," I tell Sharon. "We may back off right at the beginning." Ed Ward voices similar doubts; the tower looks hard. The date is only June 22, but it's too warm — hot, almost, at six in the morning. In the last few days, we have run into mosquitoes as high as 6000 feet. And I am worried about lightning: even as far north as the Brooks Range, you can get it on a warm afternoon.

The peak itself: for Ed, a discovery of that summer. But I remember Chuck Loucks describing it, as he'd seen it in 1963<sup>1</sup>; maybe the best peak in the Arrigetch, he had said. And I had glimpsed it, obscure but startling, from a plane in 1968, and again, from summits a few miles north in 1969<sup>2</sup>. Not an obsession yet; but something under the skin, part of my dream wilderness.

We take our time sorting hardware and food. Still down on our chances, we pretend to Sharon that we feel more casual about the peak than we do. At least I haven't had trouble sleeping the night before, as I have often in the last few years. And I feel-good about going up there with Ed.

We get started. The first three pitches initiate us gently: clean, easy pitches on a sharp-edged spine. Old plates of granite, covered with scratchy black lichens; then fresh-cut blank plates of almost orange rock. Sharp cracks, good for nuts and pins alike. Gradually we get involved, as we discover the quality of the climb. "Pretty fine rock," says Ed. "Yeah, the best we've seen."

For me, this is what climbing has become: a question, always, of how much of myself to give to the mountain. As I get older, it becomes increasingly hard to give, to surrender to the novelty of risk and cold and tiredness. You can't really give to the mountain itself, of course, to unfeeling rock in the middle of an empty wilderness. So the giving you do, perhaps, is to your partner, and that too gets harder as you grow older. Instead you hedge with easier climbs, or talk yourself out of hard ones,

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<sup>1</sup>See *A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2, pp. 315-319.

<sup>2</sup>See *A.A.J.*, 1970, 17:1, pp. 68-74.

or back off prudently. But now and then a mountain teases you into commitment.

On the fourth pitch things get hard. Ed leads it, and I can tell by how slowly he moves that it's tricky. "Not so bad," he shouts down. "It's neat." Above him, the rock stretches dully into the sky. Way up is the "Mushroom," the first crux, we guess.

I feel the first half-pleasant gnawings of fear. What if the next pitch doesn't go? What if I get psyched by all these left-hand flakes? And what if there's no good belay ledge? The sun is sliding around from the south. Soon we'll get it directly. My god, it's hot already — what will it be like then? To be sweltering here, north of the arctic circle — absurd!

The fifth pitch, my pitch, goes, but it is hard and devious. I overprotect it, and the rope drag makes me shaky. Standing on a skimpy ledge, I bring Ed up, and notice that my toes are starting to ache, my arms to feel tired.

The obverse of commitment — and this, too, I always feel — is doubt. About whether the whole thing is worth it. About why I have to do something artificial and dangerous to feel content. About whether I haven't used up the impulse — can anyone really go at it year after year, climb after climb, without deadening his openness to other things? And about the danger, pure and simple — I want to stay alive. I can't understand why I must eventually not exist: that makes no sense at all. But I can easily believe that I could fall and be killed.

Or that Ed could fall now, leading the sixth pitch. It looks as hard as mine. He pauses on an awkward move. A simple slip, a twelve-foot fall, a mere broken ankle . . . and then what do I do? Or if it happens higher, after we have gone further into this labyrinth of inaccessibility — what could I do for him? And supposing I had to leave him? Is it all worth it, and why do we both feel it matters so much?

In the valley below us flowers are blooming, hillsides of tundra creeping out from under the nine-month smother of snow. There are birds reconnoitering the willow thickets, and butterflies, and bumblebees — a beautiful part of the earth, wild, and for a month, all ours. Why is it not sufficient?

The climb eases off. A bit of lunch, but we are mainly thirsty. Sips from the water bottle, then, from a cake deep in a crack, a few blessed chips of ice. We are both tired, and it's well into afternoon. The clouds are building up in the southeast, over the Alatna valley; wasn't that thunder just now?

The climb gets hard again, harder than it looks, complicated. I lead the ninth pitch, all nuts in a left-handed crack. We're under the Mushroom, which looks especially rough. We talk about going straight over it — but a ceiling bulges ominously, and that new-cut rock on the right

is sheer and frightening. Ed leads left. We've brought a single fixed rope. Here's the place for it; no hope to rappel the delicate traverse he's doing now.

Little things preoccupy me. How many shots left on my roll of film? Should I save some for the descent? Do we have enough hardware? Already — I curse our clumsiness — we've dropped two pins and had to leave one. If the lightning comes, could we get off quickly? Or better to hole up somewhere? My arms are tired, my knuckles have raw, scraped places on them. How should I string out the fixed rope?

I realized that I haven't thought for quite a while about Sharon waiting below. The climb has indeed teased me into commitment. For some time now I have been acutely aware of each crack in the plated granite, of the grain of the rock under my fingers — and of little else in the universe. On the one hand, it is all so familiar; on the other, utterly new. This is the way the Romantic poets saw the world, it seems to me; no wonder mountains were for them so primeval a presence, comparable only to the open sea.

But just as Keats could not see a nightingale without seeing a Dryad, so, on a climb, it is almost impossible for us to encounter nature directly. We dare not descend to the simplicity, the banality of rock itself: we keep those touchstones of sanity safely packed in our minds — the awareness of time, and the abstract thread of a route. What becomes precious to us on a climb is not the mountain itself, in all its bewildering intricacy, but the things we bring to it, the cheese and the candy bars in our pack, the invaluable metal things dangling under our arms, the quarter-inch of rubber under our feet. More than fear, more than self-consciousness, it is thirty centuries of acquisitive, aesthetic Western culture that stand between us and any unfiltered contact with what is there.

Ed has done the pitch, bypassed the Mushroom. Seconding, stringing out the fixed rope behind me, I am absorbed by the delicacy of the pitch, the nicest yet. On the ridge Ed has found a platform. More lunch, a patch of ice to chop up and add to our water bottle. But above us the going, which we had thought would be easy, looks tough, and the vertical wall below the summit shines unrelenting in the afternoon sun.

Pitches 11 and 12 go slowly; meanwhile the lightning is flashing southeast of us. We're too high to get off fast now. If it hits us, we'll simply stop somewhere and wait it out. It's still hot, too hot, sweaty and weird. The 13th pitch uncovers an incredible "moat," a slash across the ridge, as deep as a chimney, with a long patch of ice for a floor. We suck greedy mouthfuls of water off its surface, while the thunderstorm passes just east of us. A friendly place, this moat.

Evening now. The real crux is just above us: a sixty-foot wall, quite smooth, overhanging by a degree or two. From below, a week before, I had thought I saw a bypass on the left, over the north face. Now it simply vanishes, was never there. Nor any hope on the right. A single shallow, crooked crack splits the wall. Ed's lead. He goes on aid, the first time we've had to. The pins are lousy, tied off, bottoming. He doesn't like it. I belay in a trance of tiredness. Halfway up, Ed says, "We just don't have the pins to do it." I know it, too, but I urge him to keep trying.

He climbs doggedly, nervily. Two tiny nuts in shallow rivulets of rock. A cliff-hanger, even, which he'd brought along as a kind of joke. A nut in an overhanging groove comes out; Ed falls three feet, catches himself on a lower stirrup. I'm not frightened any more; only afraid that we will fail.

Ed persists. Pins tied off, the wrong size, one in a hole like a bird's nest. He edges toward the lip of the wall. At some point I realize he is going to make it. I feel almost matter-of-fact; "Way to go," I shout, but not with the enthusiasm of half a day before. It is approaching midnight, Sharon has gone back to Base Camp, we are alone. We have 22 pins and nuts; I use one for an anchor, Ed uses 17 on the aid pitch, and three bad ones to anchor the top.

Cleaning is calm, pure, somewhere on the border between sleep and fear. We are at the pole of inaccessibility of our climb; it is the day after the solstice, and the sun hovers low and smoky in the north. The world is empty, alien, and we have never been more alone nor more self-sufficient. "Really fine, Ed," I say. "An incredible lead."

Two pitches to the summit, almost walking. A big place, unspecial; yet special to us, cozy in its barrenness. The best rock climb of our lives, for both of us. We look at each other, shake hands, self-conscious for the first time, as if we had not really known how little we knew of each other. It is almost midnight.

And all the long descent. Our tiredness builds, we seem half-asleep. The sun wheels east again, the heat returns. As we go down, the mosquitoes wander up to find us. It is even hotter than the day before. We have lost the edge of excitement; in its place is only wariness, carefulness. Rappels, especially: I hate them, would rather down-climb almost anything.

The going passes from tedious to oppressive. Our hands have become raw from so much grasping and hammering. Our feet are painfully sore. The heat and the mosquitoes conspire to make us miserable, and, in our ragged fatigue, urge us to the edge of carelessness. As I belay Ed below me, two birds land on my ledge, mocking, in their unthinking grace, our whole enterprise. I want only to be down, off the

climb, alive again. And it hits me now how indifferent the mountains are, and therefore, how valuable: for on them we cannot afford to be relativistic. The terms of our combat are theirs, and if we discover on them nothing we can take back to show others, still we discover the utter alienness of the Not-Self, of the seemingly ordinary world all around us.

Running short on pins; we have used too many for anchors. The rap-pels now are just reaching, our single 180-foot rope forcing us to stop on ledges we hadn't found on the way up. We are so tired: all our conversation, all our thoughts, seem directed towards safety. We rehearse precautions as if they were lessons we had half-forgotten: check the anchor, check the clip-in, check the bottom of the rope. I want only to be off, free, able to walk around unroped. My arms, fingers, palms, toes ache.

The mosquitoes are everywhere, horrible. But we are getting down. It is full morning, another day: at Base Camp the others have slept and are waking to wonder about us. At least we have the luxury of knowing where we are. Down to seven or eight pins, we descend the easy first three pitches. Never too careful; take your time; don't think about the mosquitoes. Something about it is hectic and petty; something else seems tragically poignant. At last I step off Shot Tower onto real earth, and belay Ed down.

We're safe, and again it is over — the whole thing in the past already, though our arms ache and our fingertips are raw. We take off our klettersshoes and wiggle our toes wantonly in the air, laughing as if we were drunk. Sharon has left us a full water bottle. We seem to be falling asleep with our eyes open, going off in short trances. Everything seems good, but the climb is over, and already I anticipate the long ordinary months stretching into our futures, the time to be lived through before life can become special and single-minded again.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Arrigetch Peaks, Brooks Range, Alaska.

FIRST ASCENT: Shot Tower, June 22-23, 1971 (Edward Ward, David S. Roberts).