

Earthquake on El Cap

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C LIMBERS, MORE than most people, seem to be aware of just how precarious their hold on this world is. When the wind is howling, and the rumble of avalanches pound a rhythm of terror into the very essence of your being, it is nice to think that somewhere in the sport of climbing there exists a haven to return to. For me that haven has been Yosemite. The warm, clean granite walls providing enjoyable climbing, with a minimal risk of being flattened.

As spring arrived, and the memory of frozen fingers and toes faded away, it seemed a good time to become reacquainted with my sun-soaked vertical playground. So with light hearts, and heavy haulbags, R.D. Caughron and I set out once again to try the Salathé route on El Cap. Suffering all the mental insufficiencies that allow the long addicted climber a particularly selective memory, we could only faintly recall the 105° temperatures that had driven us off the year before.

This time it was different. A cold wind slashed across the low-angle slab pitches, and dark clouds filed into the Valley. As we neared the middle of the fifth pitch there was a strange sensation, almost like an electrical current, that pulsed up from the rock. Several large boulders winged down from Middle Cathedral Rock, resounding each time they hit, and leaving small white puffs of granite dust to float down slowly in their path.

We knew what it was. An Earthquake . . . in Yosemite! Clipping into a fixed copperhead still there from the year before resulted in a near fall as it pulled, and a realization that what had been fixed before wasn't necessarily fixed now.

The next day produced marginal weather, and a horrendous struggle up to Hollow Flake, surely one of the most underrated pitches around. As the rain began to fall, we pulled up to deploy the tarp and wait till morning. Hollow Flake, a none-too-great bivouac spot in the best of conditions, was made even more interesting due to the fact that the loose rock behind the flake had shaken down about four feet, leaving black voids between the resettled rubble. Looking down into those depths,

PLATE 40

Photo by Ed Cooper

**EL CAPITAN from the Base of
Higher Cathedral Spire.**



one couldn't help wondering just what was holding that huge mass to the cliff and hoping that whatever it was would continue doing so.

Finally a clear day. Warm, still air had replaced the cold winds of the previous evening, and we began to pack the haul bag. Looking over at R.D., I noticed him absolutely motionless, and then I heard it too. Coming right up the Valley almost like a freight train, was another Earthquake. Hollow Flake began to shake, and across the Valley an entire wall of rock exploded outward, hung for a second, and crashed down behind the Cathedral Spires. There was noise everywhere. The gully to the left of Lower Cathedral Spire suddenly disgorged a mass of giant rolling blocks, which almost casually, and in slow motion, shoved over the full-grown pines that blocked their path. Strangely enough, I found myself waiting in an impersonal, detached way to see what bombardment El Cap would produce. A few fist-sized rocks whined down with that familiar frightening sound, and then all began to die away until once more there was only the faint murmurings of nature at peace. A cloud of dust hung around the Cathedral Spires.

There really wasn't any need for discussion; we had gotten the message. As we began our rappels, we could look across the face and see two other parties already on their way down.

Back on the Valley floor, the evidence of rockfall showed at various points, the bare white scars standing out clearly in the normally grey rock. Surprisingly, there had been few injuries, the most serious involving a couple swept-over by rockfall while on a hiking trail. Two friends report escaping only because they had stopped to make a minor adjustment while on the approach ramps to the Sentinel, and a huge slide passed over where they would have been in another minute or two.

As the actual event recedes back to become a still clear but no longer traumatic memory, one can begin to settle into a more comfortable posture that places such experiences into a niche marked, "unusual, and will not happen again." Order returns . . .

In November a giant rock slide swept down over the Upper Yosemite Falls trail, killing three people and leaving 600 yards of the trail buried under 12 feet of rubble. Unrelated perhaps, but it is none-the-less unsettling to find yourself looking over your shoulder as you approach your favorite spot, thinking that perhaps in the scheme of things there are not, after all, any truly safe havens.