

Shadows—Half Dome

JAMES BRIDWELL

C CHARLIE ROW PULLED HIMSELF over to the belay station, clipped in and undid his rappel set-up. “You look fried,” I said as he moved around me into his portaledge. His normal good looks were drawn and grayed with instant age from an extended bout with the toughest of Big Wall accessories: the indominable hammer and drill. “How many holes was it that you drilled?” I queried. Charlie swung his legs out over the edge of his new A5 ledge, leaned back against the wall and started to remove his fingerless gloves without answering.

“I don’t know,” he said finally, drawing some energy from a brief rest.

“It would be important,” I insisted. “We’ve drilled 35 holes on the last three pitches, broken six or seven drills, used six bolts and placed 29 machine bolts. I’m wondering how many more we have left since we’re only a third of the way up this stone.” I had been invited as a new recruit on the route after the first four pitches had been fixed and most of the gear carried to the base. Because of that, I had little knowledge of what had been brought. Pensive concern crept into Charlie’s face as he understood what I was driving at. “The top of this route looks somewhat sketchy to me,” I added. “It would be embarrassing to run out of drilling gear.”

“We have just enough rope to make it down to the ground. Before going higher, we should make an inventory in the morning.” The next day, after a quick gear count, we rearranged the ropes and headed down. On the slabs below the face, we stopped to survey our position on the wall and the route above. The pink fluorescent belay chair given us by Cripple Creek stood out like a wart on a pretty girl’s nose, but the climbing line was invisible without the Palomar telescope.

September rolled by while I worked on a movie being filmed in New York City. It was October before I could return to find that our third member had decided another route looked more appealing and had pulled his gear. Old friends Billy Westbay and Cito Kirkpatrick were visiting from Colorado and asked to come along. “Fine!” I said. “We’ll make it a party.” Four people? It seemed like a lot, but when we were last on the wall, it took both Charlie and me to haul the bag. With four, two could haul and the other two lead at the same time. In October, the days are short, making optimum lead-time usage important.

The weather was schizophrenic with storms coming and going like a woman’s perogative. We sat out one short storm on the valley floor, normally a boring



PLATE 38

Photo by James Bridwell

**Shadows Route on HALF DOME,
Yosemite.**

sequence of non-events, but we used the time effectively, sharpening drills and dialing in the other mundane bull. The clouds parted, beams of sunlight burst through and we made a dash for the dome before the weather could change. In the lead, Billy and I hoisted the bags we'd left from before while Cito and Charlie manhandled the new provisions. Optimism of leading another pitch gave way to realism as the last bag came up shortly before dark along with Cito. God, the days were short! Not only short but cold! The sun had paid only a brief visit to the wall in the late afternoon and even this sojourn was cancelled as storm clouds came marching in from the west, shrouding the face. I'd seen this scenario before: increasing afternoon clouds, precipitation starting at night or early morning.

Billy had led the next pitch, an awkward affair, around and through some large, white roofs. After Billy put in the anchors, I shot up and started the next lead while Charlie stripped the gear out of the last. Rattling flakes led up to a 20-foot blank section which I passed by only having to drill three holes. Above, an interesting series of discontinuous small corners and thin flakes brought me to a belay prompted by rope drag and a couple of good placements. Clouds circled the face, accelerating day's end and darkness. I slid down the ropes to the sanctuary of a sleeping bag and flat portaledge, leaving my pitch to be cleaned the next day.

In the morning, the weather looked a little better but still threatening. While Charlie and Cito went up the ropes, I yelled across the wall at a team of peregrine-falcon project helpers to use their Park Service radio for a weather report. "Increasing clouds, snow in the night down to 7000 feet." Calculating that we were at 8000 feet, Billy and I moved our bivouac up under the added shelter of the white roofs. I drilled a line of bolts under the roof where Billy had previously used pitons and started hauling the bags. He assured me that I need not apologize for drilling on his pitch, considering the weight that would have to be supported by the anchors. Above, Charlie was slowly working his way up the delicate china-plate flakes hanging from God knows what while Cito chattered the enamel off his teeth at the belay. I could see the peregrine-falcon team fleeing the wall. Our route ascended the middle of black streaks, the wettest part of the face, and they were climbing on the whitest rock where there are no water streaks. They were going down! Obviously, they were wiser than we. Clouds swirled around the wall and the temperature dropped. Cito and Charlie rappelled into the nest and we bundled up for a cold night.

The next day dawned cloudy but without snow. Billy shook the cold off by cleaning Charlie's pitch and readied himself for the next. We were in the heart of the blackest rock which camouflaged thin, flaky features. Mysteries were divulged only by the closest scrutiny and kept the adventure alive and vital. Sitting below, we could hear the membrane-like skin of rock on which Billy was climbing telegraph its ominous nature like an African drum in the jungle.

Progress was slow and painstaking. The next placement could open a rock plate without warning, dropping the leader a rude distance. With our slow rate of progress, any setback could be disastrous. Guessing the number of pitches left

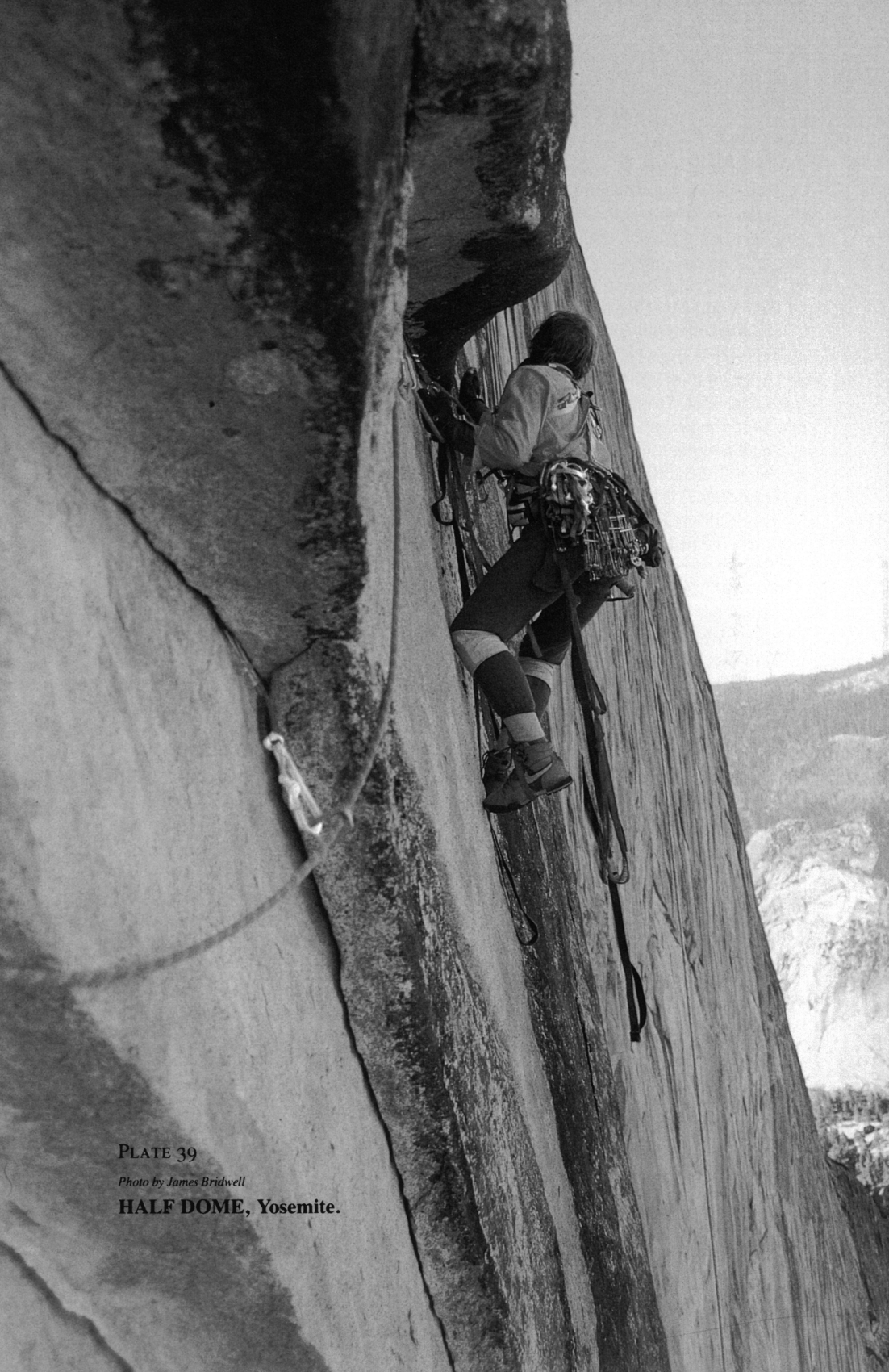


PLATE 39

Photo by James Bridwell

HALF DOME, Yosemite.

and our performance of one pitch a day, a long fall could mean an extra day. A day of hunger! Keeping warm in the cold was using up calories and we were already rationing food. Except for Charlie, we all had brought lightweight sleeping bags, and nights were fitful at best.

The next morning was clear and cold. I was glad it was my turn to lead. Warmth came and stiffness fled as soon as we jumped onto the ropes. It was also a moving day. Charlie and I would climb. Poor Cito, who hadn't had a rest day, would help Billy move the bags up three pitches to our new position. I led a short pitch to a small ledge 40 feet up, a better bivy location, and started on the next pitch. A long left-facing flake led towards a thin, horizontal roof that gave access to the upper features of the wall. I liked these thin piton flakes and corners. They were the last reserve of difficult aid climbing since the advent of copperheads and camming devices. Half Dome is noted for these flakes more than any other rock in Yosemite. Like a kid with a big three-dimensional puzzle, I toyed with each piece. Each wafer and plate, scale and scab, was its own adventure until all were linked together. Play ended and work began when blank rock summoned forth the drill. I punched a few holes, placed anchors and rappelled down while Charlie took out the network of gadgetry.

We were gaining noticeable elevation. Team Perigrine had returned and two other friends were starting up another new route to the right of Tisasack. The skies were crystal. We had slept well and Charlie was drilling the blank wall towards the long horizontal roof. With any luck, we should top out on schedule in about three days. Since temperatures were still chilly, Billy and I, who weren't climbing, stayed bundled up in our sleeping bags and took a cursory inventory of food supplies. Close to half the next pitch had been drilling and the other half was horizontal, a gain of only a meager 60 feet. "I guess we're four days from the top," I speculated to Billy. "That means a day without food unless we can move faster." Overhead, Cito swung like a monkey under the roof. His dedication to the job resulted in nearly total success, leaving only one device when the flake contracted, compressing the cams.

In the morning, we raced up the ropes for an early jump on the day. Lathered with sweat, I arrived as Billy finished a rampaging sort-out of the hardware. We poked and jostled each other until Billy launched himself into the next lead. Haste makes waste and soon he plummeted back toward Earth. Mission-control corrected, he readjusted his trajectory on an upward course. The pitch ended with some wild, steep free-climbing to a precarious stance which was our next rendezvous. After interesting cleaning gymnastics, I got to Billy's side and began to survey the next section of rock. It was not inviting. We needed speed, but a large, loose flake barred the way; we had to move the others up under the roof for safety. It was so late that Billy and I hauled up the non-essentials for a bivouac and descended to Cito and Charlie.

The next morning, there was a distinct hint of summit fever in the air as Charlie and I went up to the high point. I waited for the others to hide under the overhang below us and then started. The flake was very loose indeed and moved alarmingly under only the partial weight of a large camming device. After some

internal debate, I let the drill do the talking. One quick hole and I was hooking across the top of the flake. Safely above the monstrosity, I found the interesting challenge still continued. When Charlie came up, I pitied him as he discovered yet another large section of blank rock. He had had all the big blank parts, but I did not feel sorry enough for him to change his fate. The rest of the day was filled with the cheery sound of Charlie at work, broken only with our brief queries about the distance to the top. The summit overhangs were in sight and only a pitch above the end of Charlie's labors.

The following day, Charlie finished his lead and Billy began the final pitch to the summit. After a number of tremendous reaches through the summit overhangs, Billy stood at the top end of 165 feet of stretched rope shortly before dark.

We slept on the top of the great dome and ate the last morsels of food in the morning. We spent the rest of the day cleaning the garbage we had dropped and a lot more that had been overlooked by the American Alpine Club's annual clean-up just two days before. We loaded the cars at dark and headed for food.

Summary of Statistics:

NEW ROUTE: "Shadows," Half Dome, Yosemite Valley, California. Final push of ten days in October, 1989. Grade VI, 5.10, A5. (James Bridwell, Cito Kirkpatrick, Charles Row, William Westby.)

