

Astroman

by Mark Hudon

A whole year of psyching-up was finally drawing to an end. We had only to climb the last pitch and we would have done it; climbed Astroman.

But that last pitch! Steep face climbing with poor protection above a ledge was not a pitch I'd care to lead in the condition I was in. Eleven pitches of constantly difficult climbing had brought us to this ledge; and as I racked for the last, I couldn't decide if I felt happy to finally have done Astroman or sad because the adventure of getting psyched, training, and climbing the route was close to its end.

"Watch me, Max, I'm going," and with that I moved up to a fragile flake, pinching both sides, underclinging and liebacking at the same time, climbing further out from questionable protection, a crumbling foot hold, a flaring finger lock. A few more moves, a few more rotten - top of - Washington - Column - flakes and I was on top.

"All right! Let's go, Max! Come on up! We have a party waiting for us!"

As usual, Max climbed it in flawless style and upon reaching the top, "Good lead," was all he could say in between an ear to ear grin. We shook hands, packed the bags and, since it would be dark soon, spent no more time on top.

At camp we were greeted by good friends with congratulations and cold beer.

It's really not till afterwards that a climb becomes real or enjoyable. After waiting a whole year it takes time to realize that the climb is finished and that we had finally done it. As the climb gets filed into the "climbs done" section of one's brain, the epics and difficulties of the day become the jokes and casual pitches of the night.

Well into a drunken state, I began

to think about the route that, for me, had been the ultimate rock climb. The beer, clouding my mind, my toes still aching, my neck still sore from a heavy rack and looking up at Max leading the third and crux pitch. Suddenly Max had fallen off, "I don't think I can do it," he yelled down. I felt a lump in my throat; to fail so close to the ground, even if we manage to get up it, I thought, we would probably not have the strength to go on.

I need not have worried, as soon as Max was finished speaking, he jumped back on the rock and fired the rest of the pitch!

"All right! That's what I like, determination!"

The sun moved out from behind Half Dome as I led a 5.7 chimney. For some reason I was getting all the "easy" pitches.

Max's next pitch was a fun 5.10 fist and chimney job. I followed and, to save time, did not stop at the anchor; Max just clipped the haul line to my waist as I climbed by. The pitch involved liebacking a sharp flake and then up a low angle crack. It ended below the "sinister Harding slot" and, while belaying Max, I wondered if he would be able to squeeze through. I arranged my belay seat to remain as comfortable as possible — I wanted to enjoy the show!

Max came up looking concerned, said nothing, grabbed some nuts, and moved on. The Harding slot hangs out in space and a fall from its bowels would be spectacular, not to mention scary! Max didn't look happy leading the upside down 5.11 lieback into the slot and the mumbling and cursing I heard while he was in it made me laugh. I knew Max was quite barrel chested and I, being considerably smaller, would have no problem.

After much moaning and groaning Max yelled down that he was off belay and couldn't decide which was harder, the 5.11 or the 5.8 squeeze!

I followed the pitch with as much effort as Max, totally unable to figure out how he fit through.

Finding a pitch that is unrelentingly difficult with no rest spots is unusual to begin with and to find one eight pitches up on a grade five was terrifying! The first moves rounded a small bulge, a steep crack proved to be unprotectable, a lieback had no beginning, fixed pins where I couldn't stop or let go to clip in, the pitch was long and I had no nuts on the rack when I reached a ledge, exhausted; luckily there were two bolts.

Max came up and nearly collapsed on the ledge. We sat down, took off our boots, and talked about the climbing we had done so far. We had four more pitches to climb but were totally exhausted. We had climbed since dawn and if the pitches above were as hard as those below we knew we would have to spend the night; in the middle of October with no bivy gear we did not like the idea.

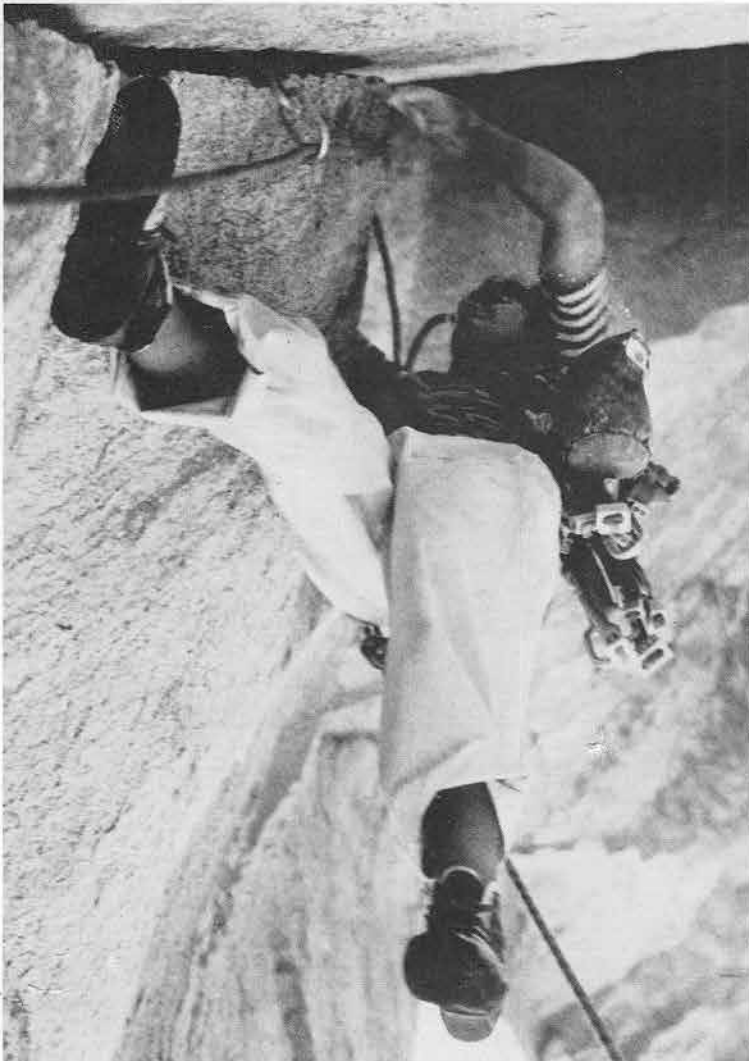
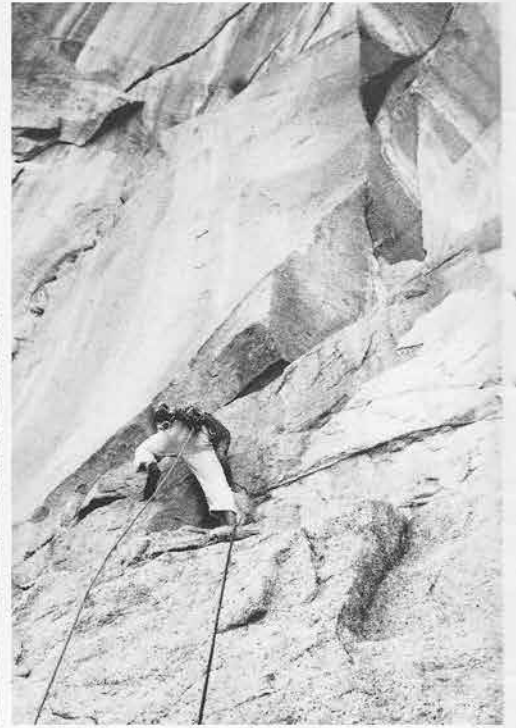
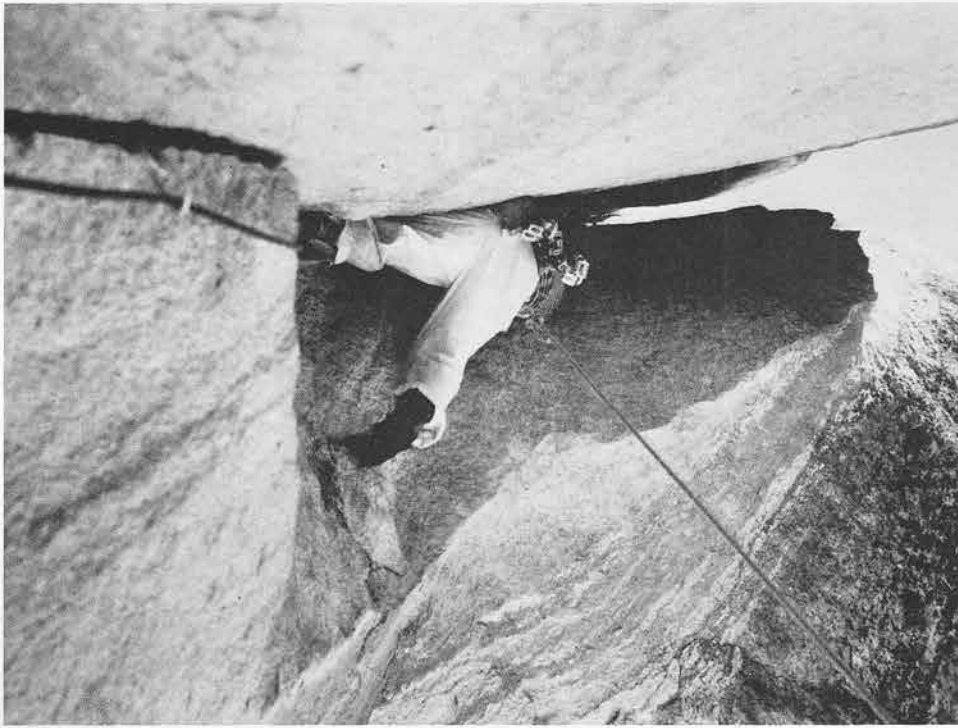
I have always thought that the best routes are long and sustained; demanding sight leads of every pitch, big-wall efficiency and determination. A route that when halfway up it would be uncertain if one could go on. We were on such a route.

We sat there, ate peanuts, drank water, and relaxed. Max had one more 5.11 pitch to lead and I had the weight of the last pitch on my mind.

Eventually Max generated the necessary energy to lead. The 5.11 mantel and thin crack pitch was next; all the way up we had wondered what a 5.11 mantel could be. It turned out

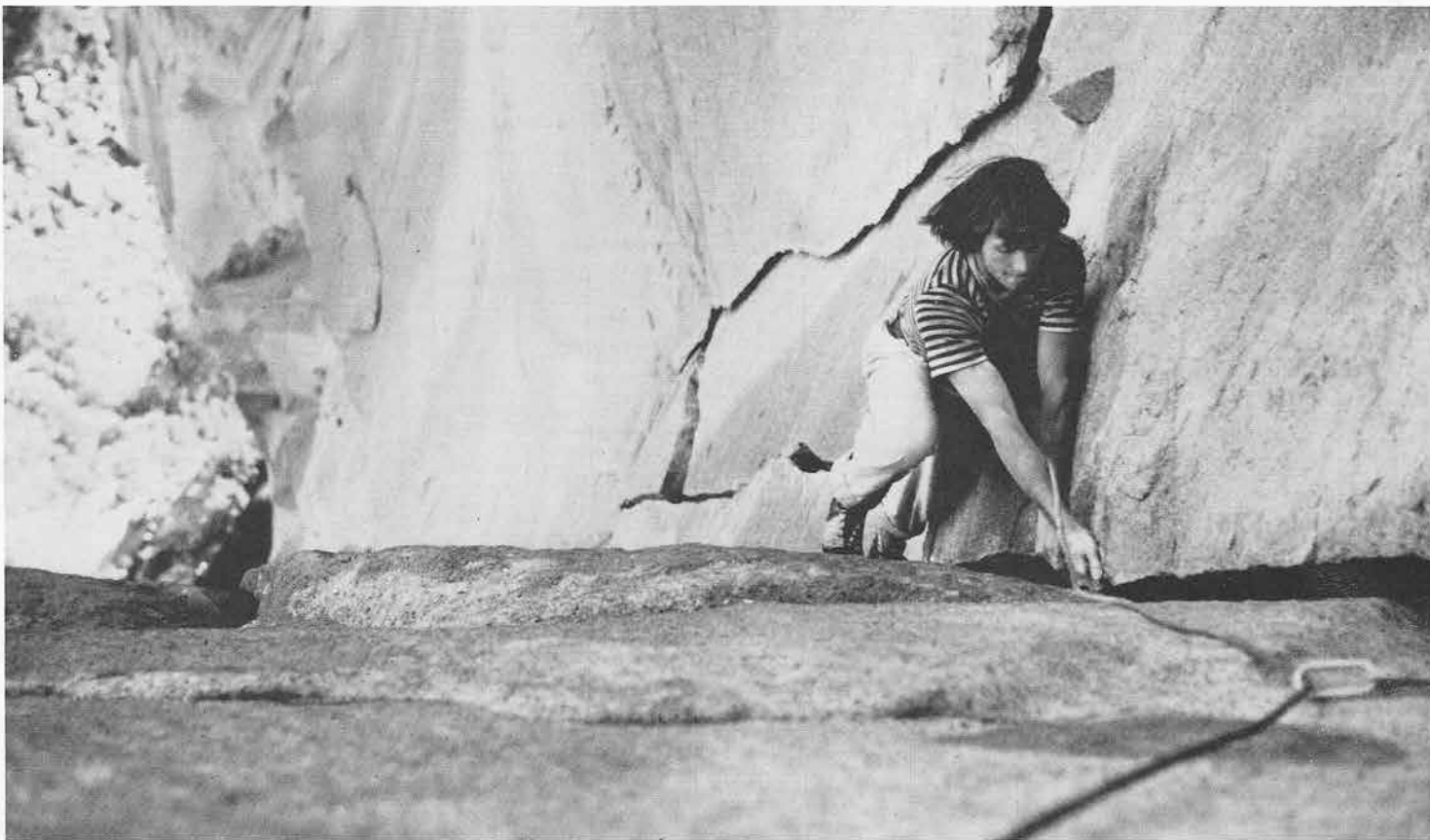
The author following the crux pitch. Photo: Max Jones.





Scenes from the ascent of Astroman. Below: Hudon leading the pitch up to the Harding Slot. Photo: Max Jones. Left: Jones leading the "sinister Harding Slot" (5.11 plus.) Above: On the 5.11 mantle. Right: Following a desperate 5.9 pitch with cramped hands (after that many 5.11 pitches, even 5.9 is desperate.) Photos: Mark Hudon.





to be a throw - your - foot - above - your - chest - and - stand - up - on - it move. The thin crack section followed and Max took most of two hours to get over it. While following I had the frightening experience of both hands popping off the rock and the rest of me staying on! I commented to Max that I didn't think I could have led it.

Max was having trouble opening his hands and I was starting to run out easier sections to avoid hanging around placing protection, I was saving my strength for the last pitch!

I started leading up another pitch when my hands began to sweat, instinctively I went for my chalk bag. It wasn't there! I was at camp celebrating.

I asked for another beer and after a few gulps, was back to Astroman, this time floating out in space watching two climbers on the last pitch. I could feel their scraped and bruised hands, aching, their feet in tight E.B.s, hurting. I began to wonder about the rewards of such an experience, why take the risks? Why make the sacrifices?

I was suddenly aware of the complete contentment within themselves, was this a form of confidence? Confidence in themselves and in each

other? A state of being at ease with the world? Was this climb a means to that confidence?

I saw them reach the top of Washington Column and Astroman, then shake hands a moment too long for a casual friendship.

I was disturbed from my dream again and found I was back at camp. It was late, the party was fading out. The stars shone in a clear cold sky. It had been a search for personal peace, and yet, more, it had also been a search for a real friend. Turning to Max I asked, "What do you want to climb next year?"

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