Moroccan Odyssey

DENNIS GRAY

(*Plates 60–63*)

Guide us on the straight path, the path of those to whom thou hast been gracious; with whom thou art not angry, and who go not astray.

The Koran

Mustapha

I was frightened, not for myself but for my companion Mustapha. We were climbing up smooth waterworn slabs, set high in a gully above the Ourika Valley. Our objective was to reach a small summit, set on a grassy ridge high above us; this, we hoped, would be a good viewpoint from which to see Toubkal (4167m), the highest mountain in the Atlas ranges.

In Marrakech, that most wondrous of Moroccan cities, there is, at the side of the Koutoubia mosque, a Cheshire Home. It is one of many scattered throughout the world, founded by Leonard Cheshire who, having been a British observer in the 'plane which atom-bombed Hiroshima, was so appalled by the suffering caused by that deed that he subsequently devoted his life to helping others. The Cheshire Home in Marrakech, underfunded and terribly overcrowded, looks after boys who have been stricken with polio, many of them Berbers from remote villages. Polio is rife throughout North Africa and only now, with the help of the World Health Organisation and charitable foundations such as Rotary International, is a mass vaccination programme under way. I defy any hardened cragsman to visit the Home in Marrakech and remain unmoved. Children have to sleep three in a bed, two at the top and one at the bottom, but despite all there is cheer and song to be found there.

It was there that I had met Mustapha who was 18 years old and, unlike some of the other boys, he was an Arab. The population of Morocco is made up of Berbers and Arabs, with the former in the majority. Mustapha had been stricken with polio when he was 15 and, as a member of a large family, had been abandoned to his fate, reduced to begging in the streets of Marrakech until he was taken into the Cheshire Home.

He was very intelligent, of medium height with the upper body of an athlete, his skin a deep brown as were his eyes; he had flashing white teeth and black wavy hair. His great ambition, I learned, was to climb to the summits of the Atlas Mountains. This I had found incredible, for when I first met him he was sitting in his ancient wheelchair, which nevertheless he had used to good effect in taking part in the recent Paris marathon.

He badgered me to take him with me into the mountains, and by way of inducement he acted as my guide around Marrakech, taking me into the souks, the Saadian tombs, introducing me to the Gnaoua trance musicians and dealing with the hustlers in the Djemma Square, surely only surpassed in their craft by those found in Tangier. Mustapha was on these occasions swinging along on crutches; he moved so fast that I could not keep up with him, and in the tropical sun he soon had me gasping for a *thé à la menthe.*

Two days later we left by bus, first to the village of Dar Caid Ourika, where it was market day; then we managed a lift with Berber tribesmen to Setti Fatma, high in the Ourika valley, running up into the high peaks of the Atlas, about 70km south-east of Marrakech.

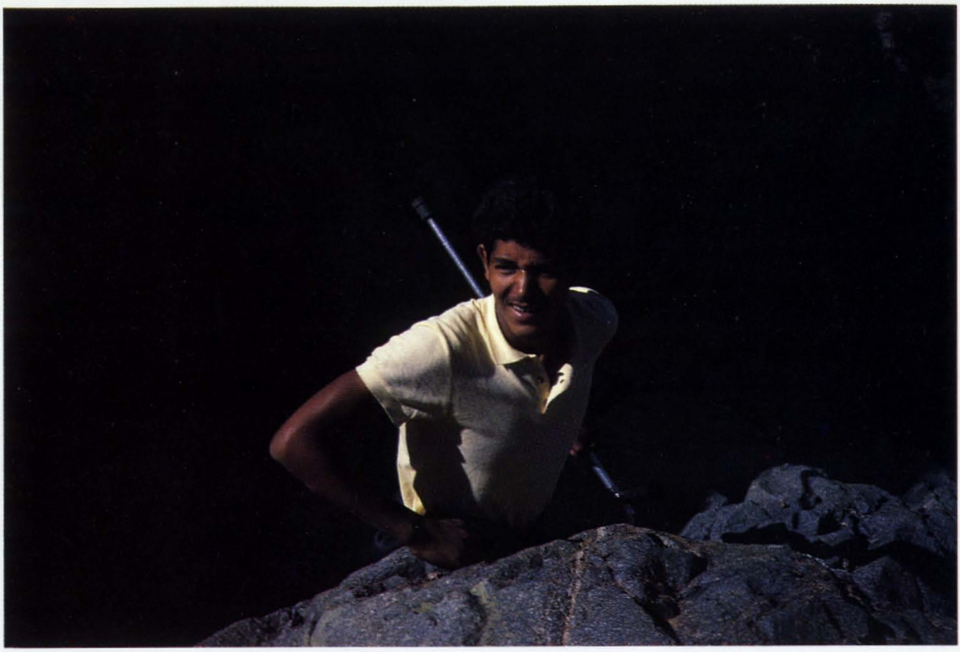
We slogged up the valley in the heat of the day, a superb October afternoon, surrounded by greenery, waterfalls and granite boulders, following a cool clear stream – such a contrast to the dry, arid plains which surround Marrakech.

From afar we had spotted a gully leading out of the valley and up on to the summit ridges; it seemed an easy means of ascent, with its entry about 300m above us. From below it looked wide and easy angled, and as we climbed the first steep slopes I marvelled at Mustapha's dexterity. The slopes were as steep as Cwm Glas, but he kept right on my heels, balancing on his crutches. All had seemed well when we reached the gully, but above us – hidden from below by a jutting spur – was a difficult section: a barrier of rock-slabs right across the whole route. On arriving at its base, in the lead, I had stopped, wondering what to do. Could we avoid the slabs by traversing out of the gully? Or would we have to retreat? We were dressed in track-suits, had trainers on our feet and no climbing equipment and, although the slabs were easy, they were nevertheless technical climbing.

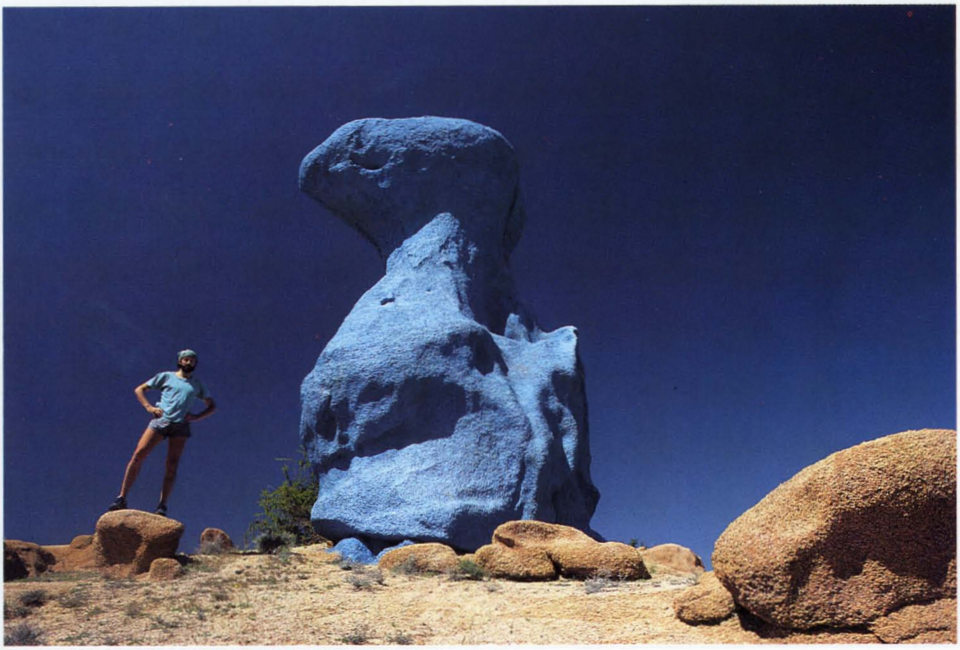
While I was wavering Mustapha took the decision for us: he swung past me and started to work his way up the rock-face. I held my breath and watched, fascinated. His left leg was atrophied and useless; his right could take his weight but could not be moved unaided. Somehow, using his crutches as bridging devices, he climbed; when this ceased to work he used them as hooks; and when this technique began to fail he simply mantled on them. It mattered not that he had never been on a mountain before in his life, he knew intuitively how to climb.

After about 40m he had to stop; the effort had been enormous and he was lathered in sweat. I climbed past him, anxious to see what lay ahead, and I was worried by the fact that the slabs steepened at their top into a head-wall. Only a few metres high, but quite an obstacle, and on reaching it I found it hard to climb, what with the altitude, the heat and my inadequate footgear. It might have been Very Difficult in standard. I tried to imagine what it would be like on crutches and shuddered: a fall would mean serious injury, and we were in a remote mountain area.

I waited at the top of the obstacle as Mustapha climbed bravely up to join me. My heart went out to him and I started to climb down and grabbed hold of him. I was astonished at his reaction, for he spat at me! He cursed me in French: 'Don't touch me. I am free, I am nobody's slave!' Somehow he dragged himself



60. Mustapha climbing in the Gully, in the Ourika Valley. (Dennis Gray) (p 125)



61. Painted Rocks, Tafraoute, Morocco. (John Beatty) (p 125)

up to join me, the muscles bulging in his forehead. He did allow me to take one of his crutches, and how sorry I felt. I was helpless, and if he fell he would be badly injured because of me. I need not have worried, for the strength of his upper body saw him up, and he managed to crawl on to the ledge at my feet above the difficulties.

We struggled up the rest of the gully together in silence, my mind in a turmoil. I had hurt and offended Mustapha, for clumsily I had not realized how proud he was. But, when we finally reached the elusive summit ridge – which, as on all mountains, kept receding away from us – he swung over and held on to me for a moment, to show his gratitude. The view was magnificent, we could see so many mountains including Toubkal, but I was too choked with emotion to take it in.

'Can we climb Toubkal, *mon père*?' Mustapha pleaded. I was sorry not to be able to grant him his wish, for I was flying back to London the next morning. But here was a true climber and I felt I owed him a promise, one that he could cling to once he was back at the Cheshire Home, often in black depths of despair at his predicament. 'I will come back next year and together we will somehow get to the top of Toubkal, Insh' Allah.' 'Insh' Allah,' Mustapha cried happily.

Six months later, sitting in a café at the Tafraoute Oasis, watching television with several Berber tribesmen (the world is shrinking fast), I was looking at a telecast of the Casablanca marathon which had been run that day. I almost jumped out of my chair when one of the first to cross the finishing line appeared on the screen. It was Mustapha in his battered old wheelchair!

On the Buses

Away from the tourist fleshpots such as Tangier, Agadir and Fez, Moroccans are both friendly and courteous. They can also be very proud, as I found when climbing with Mustapha. Their country is a wonderland, the nearest to Europe that is definitely different! I travelled thousands of miles at Christmas and New Year 1987/88 by bus, and saw many interesting sights. Taroudannt, the magnificent walled city, the Valley of the Dadès with its kasbahs or fortified villages, and the huge Todhra Gorge. This is set to become a major climbing ground; inevitably the French have been here, but so far they have not truly realized its potential. Imagine Gordale Scar, only three miles long and many times the scale in height, a gorge through which you can drive a car because its stream-bed is like a rough road, but which is narrow enough to hit the walls with a stone thrown from either side at its entrance. In several places French climbers have tried to climb the walls on both sides of the gorge, but it appears from the abseil slings in places that they have so far not succeeded. You can see how far they reached by looking at the end of their line of bolts. In the entrance they have completed some short routes and it is sad, very sad, to see these lines of shiny steel bolts all the way up the rock-face. Somehow they have no place for me in Africa, for Africa and Morocco are about adventure.

In the south of the country I did have an adventure. Kif is still grown in huge quantities in Morocco, particularly in the Rif Mountains, and of course it is a part of the populist hippie past of the country, but now dealing in the drug,

or possessing it, are illegal. The penalties for a tourist who is caught are severe: a massive fine, a jail sentence, or both. I met a French youth who had been caught and who had spent some time in jail; his stories would have put off any would-be cannabis commodity dealer.

I had been running in the desert outside Tiznit, and as I jogged back through the town two young Berbers joined in and followed me back to my hotel. Moroccans are very keen on sport, particularly soccer and athletics, and you never get jeered at when running as you sometimes do in Britain; there are always shouts of encouragement. Just round the corner from where I was staying was the public *douche*. Contrary to the beliefs of some, Berbers and Arabs – if given the chance – are very keen on bodily cleanliness. The Berbers followed me into the shower and I had to physically stop them from trying to get into the cubicle with me! When I came out they were still waiting and insisted I went with them to their father's hotel, which was the barest and cheapest I have yet seen in North Africa. After many glasses of mint tea I was allowed to depart, but only after promising that I would return later that night for a special dinner that they would prepare for me, for they knew the importance to us Christians, us Nazarenes, of Christmas Eve.

Surprisingly, despite the Spartan nature of the hotel, the meal was delicious. Conspiratorially, my young Berber acquaintances insisted at its end that I accompany them upstairs. There, waiting for us in the corridor, was the most evil-looking fellow I have yet set eyes on, one-eyed, unshaven and wearing a turban and djbella. It transpired that he was a Kif dealer from the north of the country. My young Berbers wanted to give me a Christmas present, and from the man they obtained a carrier-bag full of the stuff and handed it over. I had not understood their whispers in French, Arabic and Berber, but now I felt in great danger. I had been told how the Kif dealers set tourists up: they unload a pile of the stuff on to you, then go off and warn the police who jump you. If you are caught in possession you might be fined a large sum, the drug dealers get a reward and it is rumoured that they get the Kif back to start all over again. '*Je ne fume pas*', I stammered as I returned the gift. The two young Berbers looked amazed, then a hurt expression came into their faces and they tried to make me take it, but I refused again. They then became agitated and annoyed and ran off down the stairs, leaving me blocked in the corridor with old one-eye. In a few minutes they were back, this time clutching a much smaller bag; evidently they thought I had refused the Kif because there was too much for me to smoke all on my own! Travelling alone can be quite a trial, and I now realized that they were genuine and that I was not being set up. Berbers are marvellous friends but terrible enemies; no one has ever 'conquered' them and, when they are annoyed, they can be quite frightening. I accepted their gift with trepidation, thanking them from the bottom of my sinking heart, praying they would not insist that we all start smoking the stuff there and then in the corridor, but even they obviously felt that this was too dangerous for me and let me go back to my hotel where, I assured them, I would get liberally 'stoned' behind locked doors.

I bade them farewell next morning with real sadness. That they do not think or feel as we do might be no bad thing, but in truth they meant me nothing but kindness. I spent the next four days travelling on buses and wondering how I

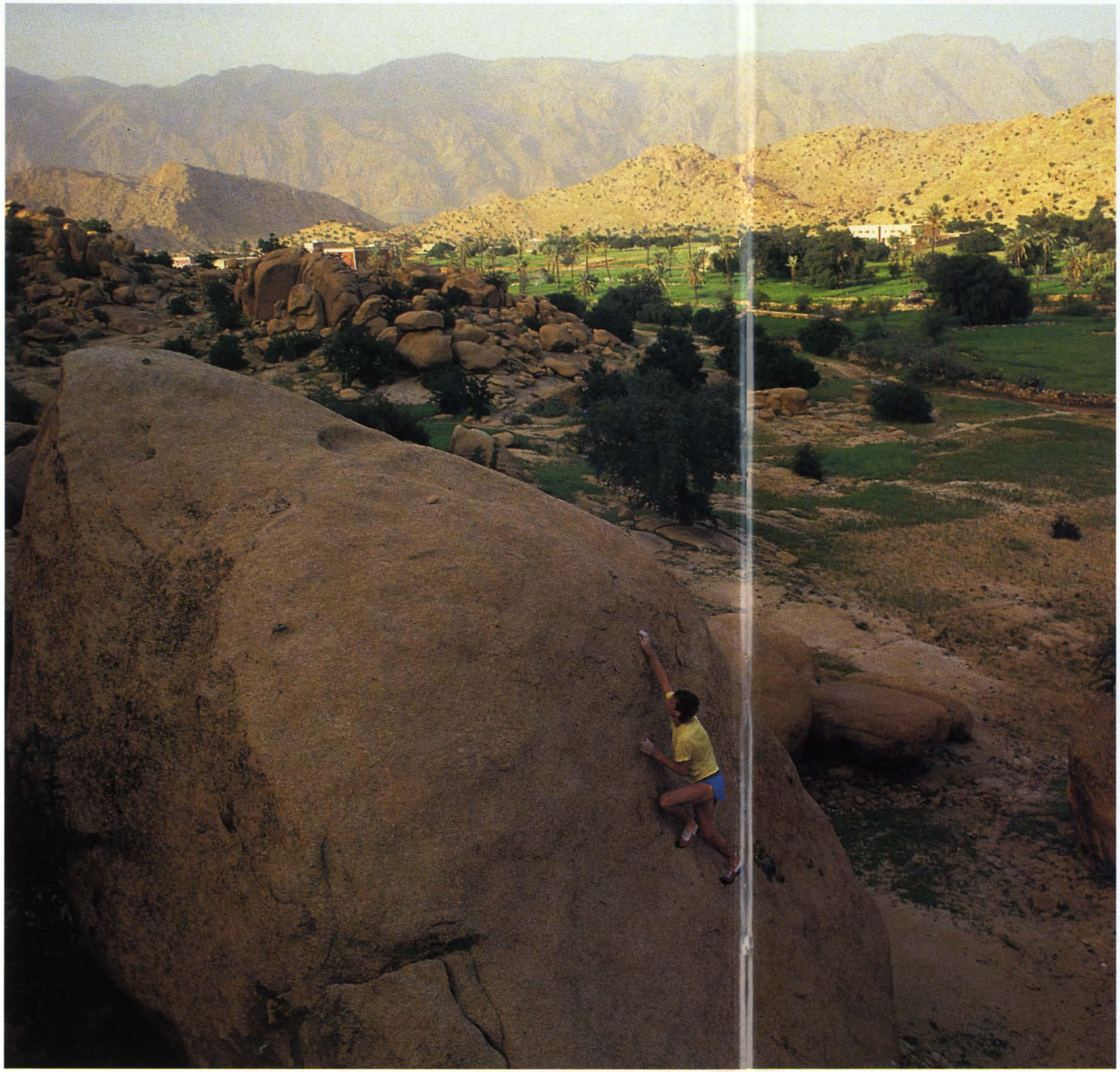
could ditch the Kif. I kept putting off the evil moment, for I was seldom on my own – you rarely are in Morocco – although the only time I spoke English in three weeks was when I met a Scot who had been travelling for six and a half years around the world. On the fourth day, down at Tinerhir on the edge of the desert, in stifling heat, the bus was stopped by a police road-block. This almost caused me a heart attack, especially when they climbed aboard – and of course, as I was the only European on board, they made a beeline for me. I was travelling light with only a sports-bag which I normally took everywhere with me, never letting it out of my sight. But on this occasion, as I boarded the bus in Ouazazate, the driver had insisted that it go up on the roof, the same as every other passenger's luggage. After a spirited argument I had given way, and now, up on the roof and wrapped inside my towel, was the bag of Kif with enough cannabis for hundreds of joints.

'*Passeport, bagages*', they demanded. Fortunately, like all good bureaucrats, I had a briefcase with me and thrust this into the gendarme's hands. He searched this again and again, shaking his head. 'Oh, god,' I thought, 'they have had a tip-off.' '*C'est tout?*' he demanded. '*C'est tout!*' I replied, feeling sick, remembering that my French acquaintance had been caught in similar circumstances and had then spent six months in jail, unable on occasion to lie down so crowded was the cell. The policeman smiled at me. '*Bonjour, monsieur*,' and he got off the bus, still shaking his head. I could guess what he was thinking. 'What a strange people the British seem to be, out in the middle of nowhere, with nothing more than a camera and a briefcase . . .'

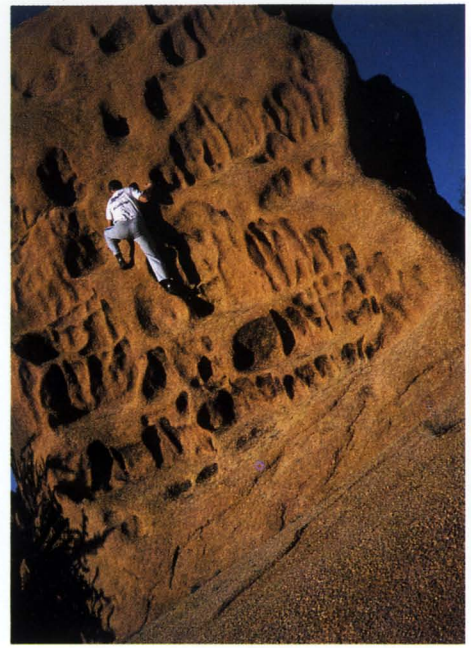
On arrival at Tinerhir I walked into the backstreets looking for a barber to have a cut-throat shave. I badly needed one and, like so much else, they are very cheap in Morocco. I found a barber, a very kind and friendly man who, when he had finished, refused any payment. I was the first Nazarene he had ever shaved, and he was very happy to do this for nothing. On an impulse I took a quick look outside his shop; nobody seemed to be about or waiting, so I picked up my sports-bag, opened it, fished out the Kif and pushed it into his hands. He looked at it for a moment absolutely astonished, then he smiled and stuck it away out of sight in a drawer. '*L'Hamdullah, l'Hamdullah, Shokran.*' I grinned and quickly left him, still wide-eyed in amazement. Truly there is adventure to be found aplenty on the buses in Morocco.

The Oasis

I lay on my back watching Ron Fawcett edge his way up the middle of a smooth slab, set on a boulder above the Tafraoute Oasis in Southern Morocco. It was a perfect March day, just like the preceding five days. The temperature I guessed to be around 90°F, and though this was too hot for me to enjoy climbing, Ron with his massive dedication was up there and fighting. I had known him from his boyhood and had followed his progress from the time when he had first emerged as a local star of the Yorkshire outcrops, then on to the national scene and finally to the late 1970s when he had established himself on the world rock-climbing stage; for a while he had then been on a pinnacle ahead of the whole damn pack.



62. *Ron Fawcett climbing at Tafraoute, Morocco.* (John Beatty) (p 125)



63. *Dennis Gray setting out to rescue Ihad, Tafraoute, Morocco.* (Dennis Gray) (p 125)

His tall angular frame, without an ounce of surplus fat or any sign of the ageing process, carried him on up the slab and I heard a little squeal of delight: 'cracked it'. I marvelled at his enthusiasm, for he was as keen as ever and had been out climbing almost since our arrival, sunrise to sunset.

My other companion, equally dedicated to his art, was John Beatty. He was here to take pictures, have a well-earned rest and take yet more pictures. For as it grew dark, or as the sun rose, he would be setting forth into the desert. A desert so different from its appearance at Christmas for, after the heaviest spell of rain which anyone could remember, every hour that passed in that hot sun brought it more and more into life, a life of greenery and blossom. Almond trees, orange trees, with flowers like a carpet stretching endlessly into the sand. A land full of milk and honey, with flocks of birds stopping off on their way back to the spring of Europe. It was psychedelic!

A year before I had been reading some of the writings of the American Paul Bowles, who lives in Tangier. He had written: 'The area around the Tafraoute Oasis is like the badlands of Southern Dakota, only writ large, with fingers of granite, and high peaks all around.' It is an old Foreign Legion post in the sub-Sahara, situated on the south side of the Anti-Atlas range. I decided to check it out and, arriving there on Christmas Day, I was unable to believe my eyes, for I had never seen so much granite in one place before. For miles and miles around the Oasis there were boulders and crags, some of which were hundreds of feet high, set on a plateau with a backdrop of the Anti-Atlas mountains rising to almost 3000m, above the Ameln Valley to the north.

On my first day there I had walked out into the desert, a desert not like Hollywood Beau Geste movies with large dunes but flat, sandy and stony. I went first to a rock above the village of Agard Oudad, a large pinnacle hundreds of feet high with real climbing potential, known as the *Chapeau Napoleon*; then, with the help of a Berber tribesman, I had 'found' the painted boulders!

These were right out in the desert: a Belgian artist had recently spent months there, painting the rock-faces in bold, primary colours. At this first visit they were staggering, for the scale is huge. Imagine the cliffs of Poll Dubh painted orange, red or blue, or the Unconquerables at Stanage purple. Some of the painted surfaces are 30m high, while some of the detached boulders are painted all over, without an easy route to their summits. This painter must be some climber, and I wondered if he had received a grant for his work from the Belgian Arts Council? When I asked the Berber who was with me what he thought about it all he simply shrugged his shoulders and murmured, '*Labass*!' ('It's okay').

I returned to the UK uncertain what to say or do about Tafraoute. It is already much visited by tourists, for it is truly a classic oasis site, with palm trees, the lot, but as far as I could ascertain from the local people no one had climbed there before my visit. It is, I suppose, to be compared with Joshua Tree in the USA, but as I was there on my own, climbing solo, only wearing trainers, I found it hard to assess its true worth as a future rock-climbing centre. It is incredibly beautiful: the light is so bright, the views are breathtaking and some of the sunsets made all the others I had seen seem weak in comparison. I had some minor epics out in the desert, bouldering. On one occasion, having set the

self-timer on the camera, I jumped on to a face of a large wind-eroded granite boulder and started to climb. It was about six metres high, and just below the top I became stuck. I could not get down, and the top was all rounded. Imagine the surprise when suddenly, over the top of that boulder, appeared a hand as if by magic, for me to grab. It turned out to belong to a Berber out herding goats. He had seen me, but I had not seen him (you never will unless they want you to); he had scaled the easier opposite face of the rock.

Tafraoute is a paradise, especially up in the hills around the oasis. In the latter you can live very cheaply in a simple hotel, and my initial idea was not to tell anyone in the climbing world about the place, but to keep going back there and to enjoy myself in my own way. The locals had never seen anyone climb before, and they thought it crazy. Good things, however, have to be shared with one's friends, and in the end I told John Beatty; he talked to Ron Fawcett, and the next thing I knew Ali Baba (the name by which the former became known in the oasis because of his beard) had the three of us organized to go to Tafraoute in March 1988 via a charter flight to Agadir. This was a cheap and ghastly experience, herded in with all the package-tour victims on their way to the beaches. Tafraoute is easily reached in a full day from Agadir via Tiznit, if you can get the buses and taxis right, and we were to enjoy an idyllic week there.

It was the boulders which captured our party's imagination. There are many square kilometres of them, in all sizes, some as high as Stanage Edge, others only a few metres. The granite is mainly bad, but there is some superb rock as well. Everything we touched was unclimbed, although now there are one or two test-pieces and I vividly recall one near the painted rocks, climbed by Ron: a wall climb where I only succeeded by jumping for the top, and nearly had a fit when, grasping it, I found it as smooth as a parrot's cage! It was about five metres off the ground, with an unusually bad landing; it is frightening climbing with such a giant.

Not just the immediate area but the whole plateau is climbing territory. John Beatty and I one day had a memorable time, traversing across rockfaces high up at the head of a valley, set above a Berber village to the south of Tafraoute, off the Tiznit road. We found incredible wind-eroded formations, one like a huge elephant, trunk and all. Afterwards, comparing notes, we found that, although we had been on separate excursions, we had almost dogged each other's footsteps, yet we had never seen each other. There is nobody about up there but the tribesmen and, as I have already mentioned, they will only let you see them if they wish it.

The weather at Tafraoute can almost be guaranteed, but in the summer months it will be much too hot to climb, the temperature reaching 50°C on some days. The late autumn, the winter and early spring are all superb, although it may rain around November or March. You can live in a rough and ready hotel for about £2 a day, including food, if there are two or three of you sharing costs, and the major expense is getting there. It is possible to get a hire-car in Agadir, and this would enable one to explore much further afield. Out to Ait Baha there are many cliffs that I saw at Christmas 1987, and many of these would be worth investigating. Be warned, though: the local bus has only just been restored, having previously gone off the road, killing everyone. If you go on it, you will

soon see how this could happen, for the drops are Himalayan! I will be going back to Tafraoute, for I like it so much there. It is another world, a third world where the locals are most friendly and where climbing is fun. Its greatest appeal for me is that it is all unspoiled – the oasis, the people and the rocks. I hope we in the climbing world can help to keep it that way.