

JONATHAN

BY C. D. MILNER

I have a friend. Yes indeed. We do not see much of each other, perhaps that is why if you follow me. Shall we accept his name as Smith? The ritual has been much the same for years; letters are exchanged in the spring to indicate that we are alive, and a climbing tour arranged for the summer. Moderately successful ascents have been carried through by a standing arrangement that whoever was on form, at the particular moment when form was needed, should lead. In recent years, the exacting standard required on rock in these islands has brought it home to us that we are not the men we were. The increasing frequency with which yellow tints had degraded the native hue of our resolution led us to the conviction that deterioration had not much farther to go before we should be compelled to spend our holidays in the Cotswolds, or other gently rolling uplands. Smith thought it would help if we could get a small monkey and train it to put loops on belays. He put the idea squarely to Huxley or Joad or someone, who said there was no doubt of the scansorial skill of these creatures but they would not be able to identify belays unless a selection of nuts was placed at each. Even so there was no guarantee that the monk would dispose of them suitably, and on an actual climb some loss of time would be involved in descending the selected route, to place the nuts. Gloom settled in, and we examined maps of the Cotswolds.

Then the clouds lifted. Smith remembered a young nephew at school in the Midlands. Jonathan—for that was his name—was reported to be of adventurous spirit and pleasant disposition, ideal raw material for the work we had in mind. Later information came through that he was fully house-trained, knew all about knots and making a fire with two dry sticks; in fact had badges for these accomplishments. He had already done a few simple climbs showing great agility and an exceptional contempt for the laws of gravity but had no badge for this. He was old enough to understand staccato sentences, such as 'I'm off' or 'Hold that rope tight.' This was excellent. Smith got to work on the parents with an offer of all expenses paid and a small *douceur*, but it really wasn't necessary. It was afterwards clear that the speed with which they agreed to the child joining us for a holiday should have aroused our suspicions . . .

He was supplied with a short course of reading; the Mountaineering Classics, 'Mountain Craft,' and such Club Journals as mentioned Smith or me in a not too unfavourable way. From time to time news was received of his drinking deep of this literary wine. A hitch occurred when a Jamboree was arranged in another part of the country for the dates we had chosen, an affair at which the boy was apparently an indispensable functionary as the only scout in his troop who could howl like a wolf. The elasticity of the British Banking System and the Higher Civil Service was stretched to allow a change of dates, and in due course we arranged a family party for North Wales, to include our wives, Smith's small daughter, and of course Jonathan. As, with my wife, I cycled up from Bangor, the discomfort of being hung about with equipment like a tinker's van was eased by a pleasant sense of anticipation. We could spend a few days in gentle walking with the little man to extend his small muscles gradually, pointing out now and again such scrambles as the Gribin ridge, which we might hope to get him over, roped, later in the week. Smith and I had determined to take a long term view, and to lay good foundations, so that by about 1950, when we reckoned all power of leading anything would have just about left us, Jonathan could take over to brighten our declining years.

Smith, surrounded by his family, greeted us at the farm gate. Jonathan was presented and looked down upon my sparsely furnished head with as much humility and awe as if our statures had been reversed. I think he even called me Sir. Later I tackled Smith about his size and he said it was amazing how children grew nowadays and perhaps he ought to mention that Jonathan was now a prefect with the makings of a strong disciplinarian. The evening passed pleasantly enough. Smith has a flair for apochryphal reminiscence in no way inferior to my own, and we allowed ourselves not unwillingly to discourse of gendarmes and antes. The general drift of our tale has been previously set out in the 1941 Journal. I cannot help feeling that had we been more discreet, the lad would have been spared the cynicism which darkened the later stages of his holiday.

In the morning we were collecting our equipment when Jonathan, handling a coil of line, said rather wistfully that he supposed some day he would be experienced enough to be allowed to carry it.

Smith and I exchanged rapid glances and said no, experience wasn't essential, and if he was really keen he could begin immediately. A few minutes later we noticed he had succeeded in bestowing about his person a very substantial quantity of rope, though where it all came from was never cleared up. Smith explained quite kindly the difference between climbing and deep sea fishing, and stripped him down to two coils. We went along to Tryfan to get the feel of the rocks after nearly a year's absence. I think Jonathan must have read the bit about 'Todhunter's gloved hand,' because we could never get him to stay at his appointed stances and found it most disturbing to have him pass us from time to time on parallel lines of holds. So we let him lead there and then, though his system of running out all the rope and forthwith bringing up the next man from a finger and toe stance with no belay roused me to ask him if he had heard of McSnorrt. Smith was a bit short about it too as he carries over thirteen stone now, and assured the nephew that no breach of Scout law was involved in using the bollards provided by providence.

After this debut, we thought a move to Idwal for the following day would be a change. It was a pure accident that we got him past the East Wall . . . Smith uncoiled the rope at the foot of the Ordinary but Jonathan muttered (in a most respectful way) something about chicken feed, and marched firmly left to the Tennis Shoe. He walked up it followed meekly by his elders, who used as much of the ordinary as they could. At the balcony he enquired peremptorily for the Holly Tree.

I told him what a purler I had come off the groove in '35 and begged him for his mother's sake to take a shoulder. He was kind enough to be impressed by this, and accepted the advice. But he simply swam up the groove and was well on the way across the traverse before we could tell him about the belay at the top of the first pitch. He came back reluctantly and seemed puzzled by the slowness of the rest of the party. It was at this point I noticed a distinct lessening of the deferential manner which had hitherto given me such an excellent impression of him, and realised what a tactical error it had been to mention my fall. I tried to explain that it happened before I joined the Club. He asked what Club and then said, oh yes, they went hiking didn't they, which was

doubless very pleasant, but his uncle was going to put him up for the Scramblers' soon as he was more interested in climbing. Words failed me for a moment. Smith grinned and waited for it. It came. I told him in set terms of the long years spent in acquiring a qualification for the Club. The best years of my life, gone for ever. Years of abstinence from marriage, alcohol and rich foods. Years which had resulted in the lost hair and shattered nerves which were now my lot. It could not be denied that some members of the Club did a little walking from time to time to stave off boredom. They were not a lot of ruddy specialists. There was a man called Thomas who had gone quite a way. I knew a member who had risen to high office in the Club solely because he had carried his (Thomas') boots from Kirkfell to Gable. Then there was a fellow called Brockbank who could do more in a day with a 2d. bar of chocolate and an old pair of rubbers than I could do in a week of large meals and high endeavour in the Cairngorms. Kiernan, now almost bedridden, had once been a mighty performer. I spoke of climbers, of Burton's caravans and their frontier smuggling; of Pigott and his grass-seed; and of Bower the mere mention of whose name in Chamonix was sufficient to get you run out of town under police escort. Of course there was nothing much to say against the Scramblers, except perhaps that his uncle was on the Committee, but it was only fair to mention they were still paying instalments on an electric kettle in order to use hot water bottles in their bunks. Though Smith denied this latter, Jonathan was a bit shaken at my wrath, and apologised. One of those conventional apologies. I could see the old illusions had gone. He kept me on a tight rope for the rest of the holiday and was pointedly careful about finding large solid belays.

We were by now at the top of the arête on the middle cliff, and Jonathan's eyes were straying towards the Clogwyn Y Geifr. He spoke of Edwards and asked for the Book. With great presence of mind Smith said he had lost it, and anyway the proper route from here was up the Padstone Slab and then over to the Central Arête. Things were successfully delayed on the upper ribs of the latter by my taking some photos so by the time we had got to the Kitchen the evening was well advanced. We professed great regret, yes, we'd just love to do it, but of course it was much too late. The ladies could not be kept waiting for dinner. Jonathan

is a well conducted lad and saw the force of this. So we quickly led him away down the valley, babbling of the Hanging Garden Gully and other clefts. We promised to look at them before the holiday ended, and took care not to visit Cwm Idwal again.

Days passed. Jonathan had us now well in hand. Remorselessly we were hounded up and down cliffs with inadequate time for a pipe or a cigarette at the top of each pitch . . . he was too young to smoke. Occasionally a welcome relief was obtained when we recalled our duty to our wives and took them for a walk or climbed some route suited to the sunny lazy days that came. Jonathan seemed restless, and on one or two occasions dismissed climbs as 'only severe.' . . . We were alarmed as to the sinister implications of such a remark. It appeared he had in his winter course of Theory been much affected by the more turgid writers on pioneering such as Abraham or Edwards. We shook our heads sadly and told him that he was about thirty years too late. Everything had been done. It was just possible something was left on the Black Ladders but it was too far for us to walk there.

Smith is an indulgent uncle, and the next day we set off for the Black Ladders. To mark the occasion I placed two pitons in my sack. Jonathan disapproved of them but I explained how useful they might be for lowering bodies—just in case. That shook him, but not enough. The day was poor and quickly went worse. Dank mists drifted about Braich Du as we crossed the ridge. Hungry sheep looked up and were not fed. Water squelched in our boots and dripped from the rims of balaclavas. We steered in the direction of the Ladders and after some time seemed no nearer. Smith and I were just beginning to get Jonathan reconciled to going home, when we chanced upon a fairly substantial crag. A cliff of unkempt surface, with small waterfalls spraying from various points, composed of the type of rock that looks like petrified plum pudding, and liberally decked out with ferns and leeks. The sort of furnishing to a mountain side that would bring joy to the heart of a painter of the old romantic school. Not so to mine. The youth stopped and regarded it carefully then in reverent tones said, 'it would be magnificent to conquer that.' It was all very unfortunate.

Smith, whose relationship to the boy seemed to have deprived him of all moral courage, thought perhaps we had better take a look round. The track along its base was not too bad as the cliff

overhung, and the water fell clear of us. In spite of the mist, a chimney was seen which seemed to attract Jonathan. Smith suddenly remembered he was *in loco parentis*, and for the first time, put his foot down, saying that climbing on herbaceous pitches demanded Experience, he made the lad tie on as last man. Jonathan, shocked at this unwonted display of firmness from one hitherto so amenable, did as he was told. After a few pitches of steep fern we left J. at a stance and went up a little farther to a small cave, where the existence of rock was more than a mere hypothesis. The sloping mud floor gave little security and I slammed a piton into the corner crack. The only exit lay up the left wall, a rich brocade of moss. To find out what holds were available behind this I produced the other piton and scratched a few pieces away to disclose some footholds. Jonathan seemed to think we were taking a long time, and complained of being hit by moss. We carefully explained that gardening was very necessary as part of the work and he must bear his lot with patience. Smith stepped off my shoulders and went aloft, over the wall into the next section of the chimney. It seemed to me that now was an opportunity to do some good. After one or two near misses with bunches of leeks I got the range and by toiling away with the piton not only got the whole cave much cleaner, but covered the immobilised young menace with several good layers of moss and gravel. The score was long and there might not be another chance. I worked with a will.

There was not much progress from Smith, who seemed to dislike the climb. He began to complain of poor rock and succeeded in getting one or two bits loose which clattered past the lower ranks of the party to lend support to this contention. I accepted the cue, and said very audibly that further progress was unjustifiable, and we must descend. Jonathan's curtain of moss quivered and a muffled protest emerged, but it was a formality only. By a series of vigorous movements reminiscent of the metamorphosis of a caterpillar he divested himself of his earthy cloak, and descended to the scree. Dusk was imminent and the hope of exploration on the Black Ladders remains a beautiful dream. It was clear that his keenness for virgin rock had perceptibly diminished and we drove in the lesson that picturesque crags are best looked at. Smith and I, in a mood of sober satisfaction, rapidly led the way home.

Our duty rota showed that the next day J. was due to look after the child, who liked fishing in the stream or wandering about the lower hill slopes. As a reward the following day, the last of our holiday, would be consecrated to Lliwedd, where Jonathan was to be allowed an opportunity of giving a grand final display of his virtuosity. He was the author of his own undoing. During his day with the infant his questing spirit and undue energy were canalised into the collection and consumption of the bilberries which lay thick on the hill. Morning found him quite unfit to get up. Stomach trouble. But in addition to this infirmity it seemed the lad was worried. Worried about us. We were summoned to his sick bed. He was sorry to let us down, and with a dirty look at me he exhorted his uncle to take care. He thought the Horse-shoe should be nice at this time of year. A spasm of pain crossed his face, and taking advantage of this we nipped out quickly without being committed to anything. We hastened to Lliwedd, quite light headed at being on our own again. I don't know how it happened but Jonathan's illness seemed to put new life into us. It was like old times. We went up Central and down Route 11, and malloried and gartered all the livelong day. Such was our exuberance as the evening drew near that we descended the Red Wall just for the pleasure of going up again.

Eventually we got back home very late for dinner, and found the boy still rather white about the gills pecking weakly at a bowl of bread and milk. He enquired anxiously what we had been doing. We told him.

But he didn't believe us. He never will.



