

The Wall of Forgetfulness Lotus Flower Tower—Logan Mountains

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*"How sweet it were, hearing the downward stream
With half shut eyes ever to seem
Falling asleep in a halfdream!
To dream and dream like yonder amber light
Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on the height;
Eating the Lotus, day by day,
To watch the crusting ripples on the beach
And tender curving lines of creamy spray:
To lend our hearts and spirits wholly
To the influence of mild minded melancholy;
To muse and brood and live again in memory,
With those old faces of our infancy
Heaped over with a mound of grass,
Two handfuls of white dust, shut in an urn of brass."*

—Tennyson, *Lotus-eaters*

THUS TENNYSON describes the dreamy, languid feeling produced in Ulysses' men upon eating lotus. They lost all thought of home and wished to remain in the land of the lotus-eaters. Following is the account of a trip on lotus by more recent wanderers.

We met in Dawson Creek, British Columbia—dreamers, seeking the ultimate expedition. The Prophet, James McCarthy, had told of an arcadia of perfect weather and spectacular climbing in the Logan Mountains of the Selwyn Range, North West Territories. Known as "The Cirque of the Unclimbables," it sounded like Nirvana.

Loading our equipment into Tom Frost's Volkswagen bus, the Red Baron, we creep north, leaving the rich farms and paved roads of the Peace River valley behind. Fields give way to forest: aspen, birch, white spruce, lodgepole pine—the boreal forest—much the same across Canada, Russia, around the world. Dust, long miles, greasy food; the Red Baron finally reaches Watson Lake. It is raining so we pitch camp to wait for a plane.

They tell us it is snowing in the high country. Are all expeditions plagued by bad weather? Not this one! Next morning I peer out of my sleeping bag at clear blue sky. We load a mountain of gear into the DeHaviland Beaver. Jim McCarthy, Dick Williams, Paula Lehr and I perch on top of the pile. Tom and Dorene Frost will follow later in a second plane.

The pontoons seem to sink dangerously deep under our tonnage, but up we go—single engine pounding as we rise off the lake. The boreal forest slides away beneath us as we follow the Hyland River north. Two hours later Jim excitedly points to Proboscis, the great peak he had climbed in 1963. We circle Proboscis and fly through the Cirque of the Unclimbables, gasping at the vertical granite walls, now capped with snow.

The touch of the plane on Glacier Lake is imperceptible. We skim across the velvet water to the northwest end where an old survey camp has left a niche in the forest. The plane is unloaded and we watch it rise and isolate us in this northern wilderness.

Fairy Meadow in the Cirque of the Unclimbables seems very near. Perhaps we can make two loads today, though it is already noon. Pounds add fast as tents, food, stoves, and hardware grow into loads. We stagger across the boggy bottom and start up the slope leading to the meadow. We plan to traverse about a mile on the slope to keep out of the down timber and swampy ground in the valley bottom. We can then climb directly into the cirque. Going is easy at first and we make good time. Ah, but no worthy goal ever lies unguarded, prey of easy access or undeserved attainment! Evidently, we have angled upslope too soon. The brush, mostly Sitka alder, becomes almost impassable. As protection against the winter snow, the crooked, sprawling limbs bend down when weighted and rise when released, thus embracing the unfortunate intruder with scores of arms. After an exasperating struggle, we reach the meadow. Sun is setting. The giants (Mount Sir Harrison Smith, Huey Spire, and others) are standing comfortably in lush grass and reindeer moss. Flowers are everywhere. I lie back in the lush carpet and take off my hot boots, bury my face in a crystal stream, then pad barefoot into the interior. It is still; only the spilling white water sings its joy. Once in the meadow the stream, like me, meanders luxuriously in the soft green.

I find a cave under a huge boulder. We cache our loads and scrape up some nuts and candy for supper. Brush-weary we drop into the moss. Five A.M. greets my moss bed with a sprinkle of rain. I dodge into the cave. When we again awake, sun is lapping up the night's rain.

For the next load, I go almost to the bottom of the slope and find a better route. Tom and Dorene are just leaving the lake. I clue them in on the route. Ten more minutes bring me to our cache. I gulp down a jug of McLeans Strong Ale, that Scotch Amrita, and again enter the forest where I meet a moose and her calf. Cautiously we watch each other. She moves into the boggy stream bottom; I proceed along the slope. Going is slow; the load heavy. I munch on handfuls of ripe currants to cut my thirst. Mosquitoes make more than a moment's rest unbearable. Finally, uphill begins in earnest in order to reach a crossing on the main stream crashing down from the meadows. Here I am high enough to escape the mosquitoes. After a long rest I slowly climb the boulder field leading up to Mount Sir Harrison Smith and Fairy Meadow. During one of my frequent rests I happen to see a goat and her kid high on the ledges above. Soon four more goats follow. They seem to prefer these precarious ledges to the lush meadows below. I come upon Tom and Dorene also watching them. The goats disappear around a rock spur and we continue. We are tired. It is cool; the shadows are long; the stream is loud. The meadow beckons us upward. It is truly a sanctuary, nestled among snowy peaks and surrounded by towering granite walls.

Morning. The silver voice of the happy stream draws me out of the tent, into the cool reindeer moss and heather. From Proboscis, the rising sun sends a golden greeting to the dark walls of the cirque—dancing across Mount Sir Harrison Smith; pirouetting over Huey Spire; spilling into laughing pools of warmth in the meadows; flowing into a flood, a melodious swelling of our world.

We set out to reconnoiter. As we round Huey Spire, a great wall grasps our eyes and casts its spell. We move closer. It seems to withdraw, yet it does not get smaller. The closer we get the more beautiful it becomes—simple, elegant, yet gentle. We continue over the glacier almost to its base. Its power continues to attract us. Not surprising—"Lotus Flower Tower." We have tasted lotus. It was only with promise for more tomorrow that we were able to return to camp.

With a slowness I can attribute only to respect for the wall which has cast this dreamlike mood over all of us, we prepare for the climb, cross the meadows, and labor up the rocky snout of the glacier. The spell of the wall intensifies. It seems great, like the sky or the sea.

The shadows of afternoon are already long as Jim starts up. I marvel at his grace as he skims upward, hardly seeming to touch the rock. I follow and continue up a huge dihedral, then rappel as Jim cleans. The August evening is fading. All that had been crystal gold at sunset fades into the silver grey of evening. Icy cold seeps up from the glacier, yet

Crescent Peak, to the east, is still warm and pink in the setting sun. Jim is already starting down. We join Tom on a huge boulder, eat, and lie back, struggling with ourselves, the wall, and the night. Finally sleep.

It is cold. I turn to find Tom and Jim already up. They leave. Still half asleep, I pack the duffel and follow. What a morning it is! I am lost in the black shadow, while above me the sunbeams play like butterflies around the flower of stone. Jim and Tom are already at yesterday's high point. I watch Tom disappear around the first overhang, out of the dark dihedral into the golden sun. Jim follows. I hasten to catch them.

What a feeling to emerge from that gloomy dihedral! One is burned by the full light of day, immersed in the blue sky, blinded by the whiteness of the granite face. There is a great swelling in my chest. Tom helps me haul the duffel past the overhang. Silently we pull together.

Climbing, to our surprise, continues free and not too hard. In a rush of joy, Jim and Tom surge upward. I follow, bringing the duffel. Up and up we climb, until Crescent Peak is bleeding from its own blades of light. In the warm glow of setting sun, the meadow above our camp is sharpened. Shaped like a huge dragon, the meandering stream lies resting in the darkened moss and grass.

We pause in ecstasy. Tom does another lead. "Kowabunga!", he whoops. We see why in a few minutes. He has found a bivouac site fit for a king. Indeed it is a palace, a few square feet of the meadow perched in the sky. Here, we tower over everything: Glacier Lake, the forest, the meadows. Across the way is Huey Spire. To the east are Crescent Peak and Mount Sir James MacBrien. We break out our best German salami and Edam cheese to celebrate this luxurious bivouac, then settle into our private dreams on the lush moss.

A clean wind sweeps up the grey face and prods us out of sleep, frisks among our packs and ropes, and sets a silvery spider web swaying. The day is again fine.

Happy to have escaped the duffel, I climb a short dihedral. It widens out. I bring up Tom. There is a strange moment of chill. I do not know if it is the shadow of the dihedral or the long, long crack hanging straight, like a thread, from the very peak of the tower—the Great Line. A quiver runs through us. The ring of Tom's first pin brings me back to reality. He looks down at me. "Spooky" is all he says. Trembling, I pass him for the next lead and know what he means.

I pause a moment; this is a path which must be tasted. The climbing is not difficult. Its greatness is its esthetic purity. All day we creep up this line. By dusk it steepens. Tom is high above me. He pauses beneath a

small roof. Drowsy shadows are catching us. The wind is cooler. I shiver in my sweater. Suddenly, Tom surges upward as if he cannot tolerate this roof of stone between him and the sky. The shadows wrap around his feet, entangling him as if to hold down his advance. Another piton and I feel a soft warmth—he is over. In silence he brings me up. I pass him and traverse right to put in pins for our hammocks. Jim brings the load up from below.

Lead after lead—the whole blue and golden day on the Great Line until now we seem next to the stars. We lay out Jim's and my hammocks. I am on the bottom. I tie myself snugly into about twenty separate pins and ease into luxurious comfort. Tom cannot find his hammock. A few moments of panic as Jim paws through the duffel. The thought of standing in slings must have jolted Tom's memory, for he finally finds it. While Tom was putting his up, Jim was—exercising, I think. Yes, that must have been it. He exercises a lot. He seemed to be using his hammock as a trampoline. I cowered beneath him as his bottom appeared on one side, then the other. "To dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free. . . ." Finally there was a tremendous leap—evidently the finale to his act. At least it was the end of his hammock. The sound of parting seams was drowned by Jim's cry of anguish. At least he was in. Ping! "There went another stitch!", Jim wailed. We ate and Jim serenaded Tom and me to sleep with his slowly disintegrating hammock and curses.

He must not have enjoyed this pleasant bivouac because he awakened Tom and me at the first grey of dawn and urged us to get up with some excuse about "changing wind." Indeed, the sky was formidable looking, but Tom and I knew only perfect weather could be ours. Soon it was clear again.

The first lead is Jim's. Near the top he moves out of the Great Line for a couple of pins, then back in. Sadly I leave it for good on the next pitch, thus ending a-day-and-a-half of climbing a single crack. Here the free climbing begins. One more fairly difficult pitch and a little scrambling puts us on top.

It has been a beautiful crack—a beautiful climb. We lounge in the warm sun and savor the peaks around us. We have eaten lotus and known its power on this Wall of Forgetfulness. We linger long before descending the back side. From the notch someone estimates three or four more rappels. We rappel again and again. Maybe this thing is pretty big! After swallowing a myriad of rappel anchors, it finally lets us go. Welcoming friends and the smell of hot soup draw us down the glacier.

Other lesser adventures followed during succeeding days, yet always they were under the dreamy spell of Lotus Flower Tower. It was with great difficulty that we again packed our loads and descended to the lake. As we left, the peaks withdrew, shrouded in cloud and storm. As Tom said, "It was the ultimate expedition: good friends, good mountains, good weather."

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Logan Mountains, Selwyn Range, North West Territories, Canada.

ASCENTS: Lotus Flower Tower, second ascent and new route, Southeast Face, August 10-13, 1968 (Bill, T. Frost, McCarthy).

Proboscis, third ascent, August 15, 1968 (Bill, T. and D. Frost, Lehr).

PERSONNEL: Sandy Bill, Tom and Dorene Frost, Paula Lehr, Jim McCarthy, Dick Williams.

