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notice that throughout this sequence the rope is not used to climb on, it merely acts as a safety line to hold a climber if he falls (which makes you wonder what the guy in the Marlboro ad is doing half way up a cliff with the coil of rope over his shoulder). Over the years climbing gear has improved, resulting in routes of greater and greater difficulty being mastered. Modern ropes, for example, have a certain amount of built-in elasticity in order to absorb the impact that a falling climber places on the anchors and on his body. Chocks made of lightweight alloys are available in a multitude of shapes and sizes. Specialized footwear is available to match the nature of different kinds of rock. But on that day, over twenty years ago, I was at the bottom of the second pitch of the Slab route, shod in secondhand army boots with nailed-on Vibram soles, carrying homemade pitons fashioned from scrap angle iron, a chock collection that included an assortment of ordinary machine nuts with the threads filed out of them, and 45 metres of marine hawser purchased at Sydney Ship Supply, the upper end of which had disappeared over a bulge in the rock above me and hadn't moved much in half an hour. After the first pitch Marcel had decided to continue leading but seemed to be having trouble finding places to put runners. The rope had moved upward a couple of times and then lowered back down. An occasional shower of pebbles told me that he was clawing away at something but he didn't seem to be making much progress. Every once in a while a fist-sized piece of rock went sailing by and I watched till it hit the rocks below and took off on a new trajectory. A split-second later I would hear the crack and the smell of broken stone wafted up on the breeze. "This stuff is awfully loose," he shouted as another piece plummeted by. "You'll cover up the lower part of the face if you keep piling rocks down there. I think there's some kind of regulation about altering the landscape in a national park." I knew there were sections of loose

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rock but I didn't remember it being that bad. I waited for a while longer. I was getting impatient because it was getting late in the day. But it wasn't boring, there was lots to see from up there: the coastal plain and the western edge of the highlands stretching away to the south, beyond the spire of the church in Cheticamp; the estuary and tidal channels of the river at Petit Etang; a goshawk circling over the Rig wash Valley; a raven's nest below me on the cliff. Little cars kept driving into the parking lot



and tiny people would get out, go over to the little square boxes in the trees, return to the cars and drive away. Some of them would stop long enough for the obligatory snapshot of the cliff. Occasionally someone would sit to admire the expanse of naked rock for a while and then you would see arms pointing up, binoculars would be brought out and a little crowd would gather. But most were unaware of our little adventure on the crags. Harebells growing out of cracks in the rock nodded in the breeze. Rare arctic-alpine plants had been reported on some parts of the cliff. Whether there were any on the ledge or not I don't remember, but in taking stock of the different plants that were trying to make a living up there, I noticed that I was sitting beside a small patch of poison ivy. I began to wonder if Marcel was off the route. Tying off the rope I backed up for a look. He was indeed lost and we hadn't even started up the most difficult center wall. It was getting late in the day, big black clouds were starting to roll in and I wasn't keen on having to spend the night on the cliff. He suggested that I take over the lead since I was familiar with the route. The wall is a wonderfully exposed piece of rock that starts about 30 meters up the cliff and rises vertically for another 30 meters, terminating in a broad ledge about two thirds of the way to the summit. By today's standards it would not be considered particularly difficult, but the exposure was great and it provided some exhilarating climbing. From the top of the wall the route went over some easy rock until it came to a steep inside corner or gully formed where two faces came together like the pages of an open book. With the sound of thunder reverberating off the surrounding hills we quickly set up a belay anchor at the top of the wall and I headed off for the gully. As I started up the gully, bridging the sides with my legs and balancing with my hands, violent gusts of wind started coming up from below, lifting my nylon jacket up over my face. I began to feel like a kite. Halfway up the gully the heavens opened up. Great big spatter drops of rain pelted my hard-hat and in less than a minute I was soaked to the skin. The only thing to do was to keep going. There was nothing to tie off to, the last runner was three meters below me and climbing down was out of the question. Just beyond the top of the gully I knew there was a spruce tree that would serve as an anchor. If I could make it to that we would be home free. I placed two chocks in a rather dubious crack and kept going. Three metres from the top of the gully I felt the rope draw taut. Whenever we were out of earshot, we communicated with tugs

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