

Not Again – A Weekend with Arnis Strapcans by Martin Berzins (1974).

The week ended with the inevitable meeting at Manchester Chorlton Street Bus Station meeting with Arnis Strapcans who seemed about the nest of the climbers I had met after moving to Manchester. Arnis had a kind of Art Garfunkle look about him, and was already known for the boldness of his climbing and for the horrific accident that had killed his climbing partner Robert Brown when they both fell into the sea after a belay failed about 100 feet up. Arnis had wild eyes with a burning light behind them. His parents also came from the Baltic but unlike mine, had both committed suicide. Of course we were both immortal but lacking transport.

“We could have got on a bus to Matlock at seven.” I said

“I thought that you wanted to go to Stoney Middleton.” Said Arnis.

“I did, but ...”

“Well.”

“It is worth remembering for future reference.”

No answer to that. Silence that was interrupted as we were accosted Who by? Rather what by? A goblin that yitters and yatters ever onward gibble gabble gibble gabble endlessly on the bus.

“Psst” it says” can you score at the University?”

“Score what?” I said.

“Acid” it said.

“Well I have no idea.” I said, trying to hide my contempt.

“I took half a tab before I came out.” it said.

“Good for you.”

The Goblin was a typical Stoney Middleton Moon Pub inhabitant. We did it justice by filling it full of hot air emptying it and then filling it full again. There seems to be no way that we could stop the flow of gibble-gabble from its mouth. The bus stopped and we went into one bar of the Moon pub and it goes into the other. It was quiet and the warmth of the fire felt good, until the raucous barmaid accused us of trying to steal ornaments from the mantelpiece.

“I was only looking at it.”

“Well don’t touch.”

Devoid of any such intentions I choke up on guilt until we marched off into the night and scramble up the ledge that splits Windy Buttress – Windy Ledge - and is the bivouac for our generation. After the inevitable greasy Eric’s café breakfast we are back on Windy Ledge.

“I want to do Dies Iraes” said Arnis.

“Oh – all right.” Says me.

“Do you mind if I lead?” he said.

“No.” liar! Of course I did because then I would have to lead something harder.

Arnis went up ten feet and put a stopper in as the local gods Tom Proctor and Geoff Birtles walked by. Next go he raced up putting runners in with double speed. A quick spot of BS later I followed and found the sequences easy. A couple of layaway moves and then pulls on rattling hold led to a top wall that was not so much loose as fundamentally unsound. More than a bit chuffed we scrambled down and traversed across the Tiger Trot traverse where the ledge ends. Walking past Birtles and the thousand-strong spectating team to the foot of Special K we are told (by implication) that it is too hard for the likes of us. It took me a while to find the secret two finger pocket on the first groove but then it was a jug romp to the top with protection that seemed fine. Sitting at the top I watching a delighted Arnis leaping from jug to jug. Too hard - naw we shot it down in flames.

“What now?”

“Kingdom Come?”

But we couldn’t free it as it was 6b and we were only 6a climbers then. As the campaign had to continue I set off on the serious Boat Pushers Wall, following Mike Hammill’s chalk to the ledge. Climbing up to the break above I realized I had no real protection. A poor sideways number 4 hexentric had to suffice. I move up and the chalk stopped. The climbing looked hard. A move left and a weird move up and I stood just below the top.

“It looked hard.” said Arnis.

“Minimal protection.” I said thinking about the poor sideways hexentric and pulling up on a jug to reach for the top. A sound of exploding rock and a scream as I was sure the nut would never hold. Masses of loose blocks hurtled over Arnis’ head as he became airborne. Boing – we met fifteen feet of the ground as the unlikely nut held. We laughed it off and engaged in BS with the Stoney Middleton regulars. Amazingly we were ok. The gear was ok too apart from my rope that was a little strained.

“Lets do Alcasan.” Said Arnis.

“No, no” I pleaded “I am knackered – honest I am.” I knew the long girdle traverse would be too much for me in my tired state. Arnis relented and led me up Kingdom Come with the aid. This time he did not go quickly. He struggled and yo-yoed, but eventually did it. I came up, shattered, pulling in desperation to hear him say that his arms had been locking up. Thankfully he was no superman I thought. That was our climbing day over and down in the café we met a goblin friend who gave us a ride to Buxton from where we could hitch-hike out to the Roaches to meet the Manchester University Climbing Club the next day.

Buxton did not have obvious places for us to sleep out. We found a viaduct and then perfection in the shape of a public ladies loo (always much cleaner than the gents as a rule). We went and saw a movie (and slept) and went back to our super-doss. Much later we were awoken by a drunken young woman. “Oh” she exclaimed, looked in disbelief and then ran off giggling. Later still I heard the bark of a dog and thought it was the cops. I crawled deeper into my sleeping bag as the door opened and a nervous voice asked.

“Are you in here all night?”

“Aye – sorry there is no more room.” said Arnis.

“I’m jus checkin security for the council.” the voice said.

“Oh don’t worry we won’t damage anything.”

“If you are gone by morning I won’t tell and will forget that I have ever seen you.” said the voice.

“Goodnight then.”

Morning came and Buxton was closed. The clocks had gone back but we were unaware. On a cold miserable foggy morning we hitched a ride to the Roaches. We soloed a long “Diff” Black and Tans that was a Severe. Later still I groveled up another jug-pull that was Waleroo. The Manchester Mountaineering club arrived and we chatted to them. For reasons that did not make sense Arnis suggested that we solo an easy wide crack – Kestrel Crack. Arnis was in front and I was following behind. Then something happened. Not again I thought....

Twenty feet below a ledge broke my fall. Another fifteen feet later I stopped on the ground below. My helmet was broken and I was unconscious. Apparently the University medics had great fun and I ended up in the Neurosurgical Wing of Stoke Hospital. Really only my wrist was broken and not set with care as they were more worried about my head.

I remember nothing of the fall and woke feeling somewhat fragile.

“You will never use that wrist properly again.” The surgeon said a week later when they moved me back to Leeds. I never climbed with Arnis again as he had moved to Bristol before I got back to Manchester. Years later he vanished while soloing on Mont Blanc. I was much more clearly mortal.