

Hands

By Ian Wyatt

Ersatz tree roots, fingers with swollen joints that look pained with arthritis, but not yet. Thick finger pads as tough as gardener's gauntlets but sensitive enough to read the texture of rock; after a hard day we feel sore, creaking, these are someone else's gloves. So worn my phone doesn't recognise me.

Grit, a sadomasochistic joy to touch, all of me pressed on curvaceous features, friction on flesh. I turn a few degrees up, down, left or right; add a little pressure from a middle or first finger searching for the optimum position to enable progress. A haptic conversation between rock, epidermis and vestibular system; an internal vision of possible movement. Then darkness, I am formed into a half fist, plunged and locked into

place, immovable and solid, intense pressure against my flat back and knuckles, crystals biting into flesh bearing the weight of a moving body. If placed with care I transmit the heat of the sharp biting with only a little discomfort, but beware because if I am not well-seated you will feel my pain as the rock chews deeply leaving a sanguineous leak. Then returning to the light, all of me on the edges of the crack until only two fingers can be used, but which two? Definitely middle but ring or index as its partner? Testing and probing until a pair of middle phalanges and second knuckles are fixed into place. This doesn't have to hurt, but if not placed with determined confidence they can easily rip out as the rock flies upwards.

More movement, more caresses and pressure from palm and fingertips on sharp edges. All the mass of movement is pulled through a crimp, an undercut, a layaway, a jam, a finger lock, a gaston, a sprag or pressed out through a palm. Between finger pad, the distal phalanx, and core the centre of gravity is found, the drive for up and not off. Dynamic imagination, commitment, co-ordination and a targeted leap of faith are required in the complex calculations of body, mind and gravity to leap, land and stick a deadpoint. An almost magical collection of elements that should never work but does; palm and fingers become one with the rock.

All my power is behind me, upstream in forearms which do not feel the texture of the rock but respond to the shape of gravity. But if not prepared and warmed up, too much too soon will result in the hot, solid feel of a flash pump and a temporarily useless limb.

At times only one of me has contact with the rock while my partner searches, eyeless, around collections of metal and nylon fixings to match a void in the rock with metal, I feel the reassuring 'click' as the colourful snake, that follows us upwards, is dropped into the smooth, cold oval. Now we can relax with greater security. Then follows the warm stroke of fibre pile and the comforting dry crunch and dusting of white, the excess blown off with an air kiss. I am soon back in action, under great pressure.

All of this is but part of one climb, on one day, on one type of rock. By the end of the day patches of bright red dermis glow through holes in epidermis and ground-in white dust; cracked and bleeding knuckles, cuticles frayed like denim with holed fingertips are accompanied by a few scraps of tape forlornly offering the promise of support and protection. At rest your hand thinks it's still gripping, just like Action Man's. When you get home and shower you discover that water can burn like acid.

Hands are not simple blunt tools by which we just grab a hold and pull. No, there is much more going on. Through our hands we decide how much pressure, which fingers, which direction. We feel the friction and 'see' the movement with our hands, but if this sounds too fanciful or poetic how often have you (or someone nearby) practised a problem on the



Hold on tight! Utilising friction at Slipstones, Yorkshire. Photo: David Simmonite

ground trying all the moves with a bit of air yoga? Building up muscle memory, with a hand in this position, move a shoulder here, pull, lock, move left foot... a constant dialogue between hands, rock, body and gravity.

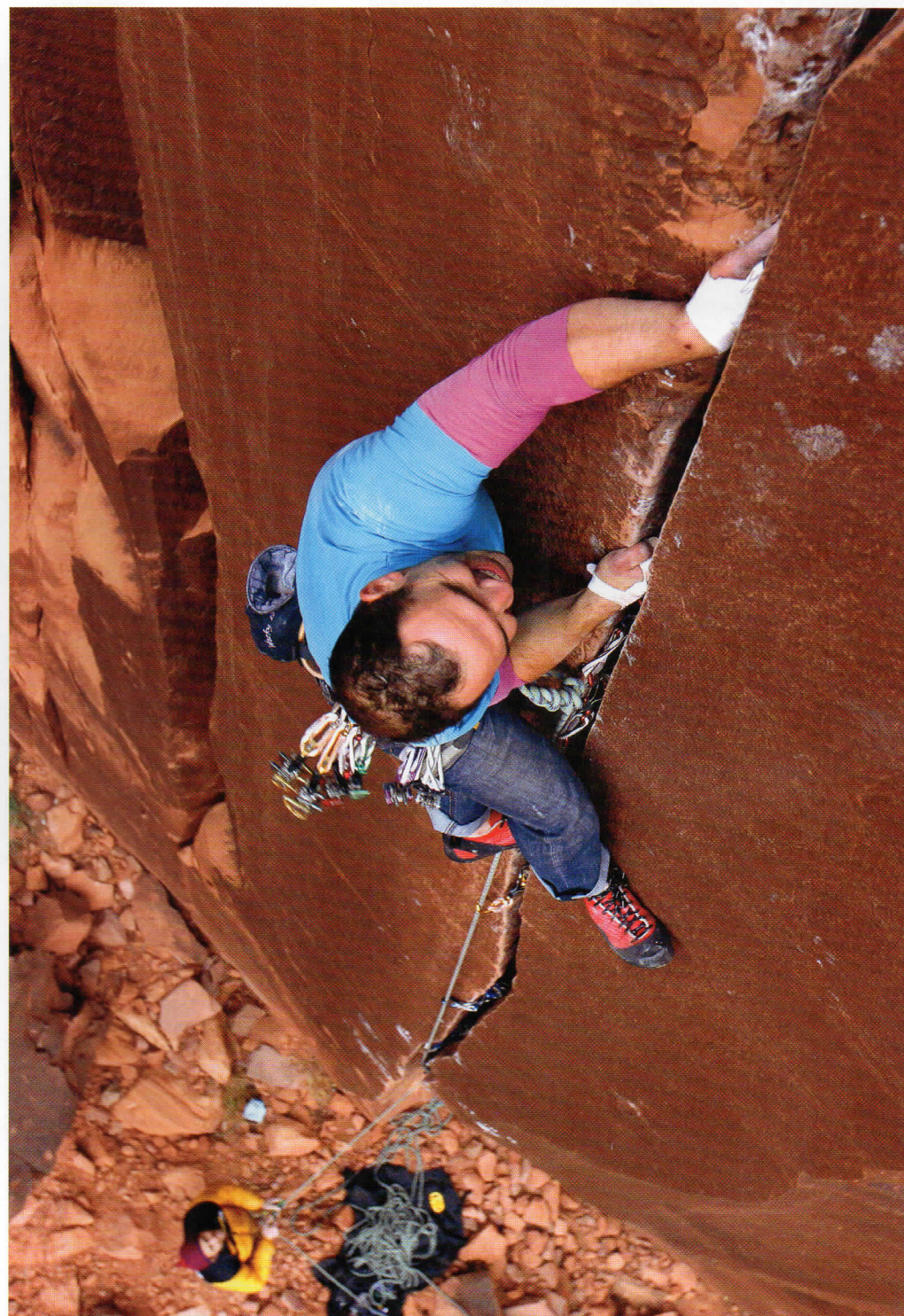
In their preface to the *First Folio* (1623), Condell and Heminge say of Shakespeare that:

'His mind and hand went together'.

So it is with every climber creating routes with their hands and bodies as they climb, writing upward motion in the interplay of aesthetics, geologic puzzles and gymnastics. Our hands, with instinct and training, guide our responses to the flat razors of slate, the five o'clock shadow of grit or the sharp teeth of Cornish granite. All of the shapes and textures of the world's rock require no knowledge of chemistry, geology or biomechanics because we feel direction through our hands and create our ascent up the rock; an act of physical, emotional and intellectual creativity, between rock, mind and hand.

But we are poor masters of these fine tools. Listen out at the wall for discussions about A2 or A4 pulley ruptures and unstable flexor tendons from extremely high loads put through the joints of us not quite mainstream humans. Rest is the only real answer to injury but we are reluctant, self delusional in our optimism we resort to tape, that sticky fabric of hope and often misplaced reassurance. You can see at any crag or wall a plethora of white wedding bands demonstrating the triumph of hope over experience but rarely actual recovery. Drive and determination all too easily tempt us to push across the Rubicon of injury management into abuse and folly. One month's rest becomes three, six or more of restricted activity because of the impatience to achieve. However, broken bones are mercifully rare with the boulderer occasionally paying over the odds with the full-on pain and lay-off from a distal radius fracture or the shorter term and less painful, but nevertheless inconvenient, broken carpal or two.

In winter, hands are kept wrapped up and cosy in the dark warmth of Polartec or Thinsulate, at least in theory. Until, that is, the cold gets through but is suddenly pushed away by the heat of exertion or climb in ambient temperature, then follows the nerve-jangling, tear-generating, screaming hot aches. An intense sensation with your hands at the centre of a universe of pain for a short while but promising ease and



warmth to follow. As the very tip of the axe pick tests the quality of ice, the balance on a rock edge, the torque in a crack or the delicate brutality of a Stein pull, information is transmitted and assessed through gloved hands. These warlike extensions to the winter warrior's upper limbs are mediated and interpreted through hands that with practised instinct incorporate the extra reach of metal on nature into the solution of the upward motion-gravity equation.

Don't be like Lady Macbeth, somnambulistically scrubbing your hands whilst regretting your actions. Be awake, be alert, be aware of your hands and take good care of them. Books, magazine and the internet are littered with information on how to take care of your hands, from looking after your skin with creams, lotions and potions to using good training and climbing techniques to avoid injury, especially those pesky A2 and A4 pulleys. Go on, you know it makes sense, give your hands a hand. ■

Fully taped hands buried to the hilt, just the ticket for Moab cracks. Martin Kocsis climbing the brilliant steep and sustained *Nima* (5.10) in Long Canyon, Utah, USA. Photo: David Simmonite