

Jam-Crack Joe

By Herb Conn

Oh, 'twas on a lone-ly moun-tain top I first met Jam-Crack
He was tall and lean and lan-ky and his face was wea-thered

Joe, On a peak where there was hard-ly room for one;
brown, And his clothes must have been slept in for a year;

— We were miles a-bove the gla-ciers and the snow-fields and the
— With his two-weeks' growth of whis-kers you'd have thought he was a

storms, And I found him there a-snoo-zing in the sun.
CHORUS bum, If you had-n't seen his brand new climb-ing gear.

— That Joe he is a climb-er from his head down to his
heel; His at-tack there is no rock can long re-sist.

— He is so tough and cal-loused and his mus-cles so like
steel That he ham-mers in his pi-tons with his fist.

Oh, 'twas on a lonely mountain top I first met Jam Crack Joe,

On a peak where there was hardly room for one;

We were miles above the glaciers and the snowfields and the storms,

And I found him there a-snoozing in the sun.

He was tall and lean and lanky and his face was weathered brown,

And his clothes must have been slept in for a year;

With his two-weeks' growth of whiskers you'd have thought he was a bum

If you hadn't seen his brand new climbing gear.

Oh, he had a first rate climbing rope of fine Italian hemp—

It was banging 'round his neck just like a wreath;

A bewilderment of hardware was suspended from his belt,

And he held a six-inch piton in his teeth.

As I neared his eyes came open. "By the crags of Teewinot,

You're a climber, too," he said in eager tone.

"Oh, 'tis Fate that crossed our climbing ropes upon this lonely spot,

For 'tis criminal, I'm told, to climb alone."

"Take the load off your tricouni nails and harken to my plan,

If you'd care to join me in a bit of fun.

There's a knife-edge leading west from here to yonder jagged peak—

It's a route, I think, which never has been done."

Chorus:

That Joe he is a climber from his head down to his heel;

His attack there is no rock can long resist.

He is so tough and calloused and his muscles so like steel,

That he hammers in his pitons with his fist.

'Twas already afternoon, but he said we could cross 'ere dark;

I forgot my doubts and tied into his rope.

And his tenor voice boomed loudly in a song of carefree joy,

As my friend belayed me down the summit slope.

You can talk about your monkeys; you can talk about your goats—

You can tell me how they scamper to and fro.

You can tell me of the lizard—how he crawls upon the rock—

But I've never seen the one could equal Joe.

'Twas a privilege to watch him as he eased along behind;

There was magic in his balance, in his stride.

Then the summit was behind us and we stood upon the ridge,

And the mountain fell off sheer on either side.

But ahead a sawtoothed edge of rock leapt jagged into space;

Crossing peak to peak it found a slender bridge.

'Til the day I make my last rappel beyond that Great Divide,

I will not forget our traverse of that ridge.

Chorus:

As it happened I was leading when we reached the first gendarme—
High above our heads a single rocky jang.

I could find no route around it—both its sides were sheer and
smooth—

And above me was a bulging overhang.

"We could try a tension traverse," I suggested to my friend;
But he said, "Oh, no, we have no time for that;
What is more if we can't bundle such a simple bit of rock
Without artificial aid, I'll eat my hat."

He was eager to attempt it, so I let him have the lead;

I belayed him through a piton from the rear.

And I marvelled at the confidence with which he started out,
For 'twas not a route I'd care to pioneer.

Oh, he edged out on the precipice, the silkiest doggone wall

Where I've ever seen a human try to go;

With his fingers wedged in crannies and his legs a-dangling free,

And a thousand feet of nothing down below.

Chorus:

Then he vanished 'round the corner, and I payed him out the
rope,

As I felt him jerk it on from time to time;

And I prayed that I could hold him in event that he should fall.

Then he bolted, and I knew he'd made the climb.

I could hear his cheerful whistling as he drove a piton home;

Then he told me I could climb—it was a walk,

So I tightened up my bowline, and I screwed my nerve up, too.

And unsnapped the carabines from the rock.

Yet a thousand doubts assailed me as I slid out on the face,

And I tried to find the route where Joe had led.

As I tried his finger traverse, then with certainty I knew

That this was the spot where angels fear to tread.

Oh I might have stopped to ponder on the life that I had led,

To repent my sins, but now my chance is gone.

I forgot the drop below me—I forgot the angels too—

It took all my concentration hanging on.

How I made that little traverse, I will never, never know—

Every step I took I thought would be my last;

Joe was laughing at my efforts, and his chiding spurred me on,

'Til I reached his side, the gendarme safely passed.

Chorus:

So we climbed on as the afternoon slid speedily along;

Oh, a dozen times I thought we were stuck.

We were still upon the knife-edge with our goal a mile away

When without a warning note the blizzard struck.

Stormy clouds blew out of nowhere and the air was full of sleet;

Icy wind tore at our naked hands and face.

Visibility was zero, but somehow Joe found the way,

And I needed all my strength to match his pace.

There was snow upon our handholds, and our fingers numbed
with cold;

There was ice on every foothold where we tread,

As I stretched each foot before me, groping for another hold,

I could only guess at what might lie ahead.

We had covered little distance, through the storm when darkness
fell.

And the day turned into black and stormy night.

Oh, my spirits sank within me, but still Joe was up ahead,

Seeming worried not at all about our plight.

I could barely make him out, though he was scarce ten feet
away;

He had halted, and he cried for me to come.

I approached, and found, as he had, that the ground dropped
sheer below—

Straight beneath was only fog as thick as steam.

Chorus:

I was heartily discouraged, but said Joe, "A free rappel

Might well bring us onto solid ground below.

On the other hand it mightn't so we'd best not take the chance.

I will see if, as a climb, the thing will go."

So he rubbed his hands to warm them, and I anchored in the
snow,

To provide him with a solid hip belay.

Then he dropped below the edge proclaiming, "There's a jam
crack here—

It's the first real climb we've come upon today."

He took several yards of rope, and then his progress downward
stopped—

There were problems there with which he could not cope;

For he shunted load to make me bear above the howling wind,

"It's no go—bang on! I'm falling in the rope."

Oh, I gripped the rope securely as his weight tugged at my hips,

That event my memory never will erase.

For the snow gave 'way around me, crumbling where my feet

were propped,

And the rope snapped taut and yanked me into space.

I don't know how far I tumbled, but I landed on my feet

In a snowbank, and my friend was by my side.

We surveyed our situation; we were shaken but unharmed.

On a ledge no more than twenty inches wide.

We were fit for no more climbing, so we waited out the night,

Lashed to pitons, fighting just to stay alive.

There we huddled as the freezing wind and snow ripped through
our clothes,

And it seemed that morning never would arrive.

Chorus:

But at last the day dawned cold, while snow still fell from
overhead,

Though the wind had somewhat slackened in its speed.

We were stiff and cold and weary as we started on our way,

And my hopes of getting through were slim indeed.

We rappelled into a saddle; then the way became straight up—

'Twas the farther peak whose top we'd hoped to win.

Up above us was a chimney, gaping open at its base;

"With a courte eobelle," said Joe, "I'll put you in,"

With my hobnails on his shoulder I could reach a decent hold;

On this rock for moments all my weight I put.

Then I wedged into the chimney, just before the rock came
loose—

Hurling down, the fragment landed on his foot.

For a while I did not realize just how badly he was hurt;

I climbed up to find a good belaying stand.

With my body locked between the chimney walls I belid his rope,

And he belinned up the rope band-over-band.

Chorus:

So I led the way until we reached the summit of the peak—

With his arms and one good foot he limped along.

Then the sun broke through the storm clouds, and the fog blew
clean away,

And with soaring spirits Joe burst into song.

For an hour we feasted on the top; I bandaged up his foot.

We decided I should leave him and go down.

I was far too weak to help him, and the rest would do him good—

I could send a rescue party from the town.

From his rope he made a pillow, and he chewed a piece of snow;

He said happily, "Our traverse now is done.

Oh, I told you we could do it. 'Twas a splendid piece of work."

Then I left him there, a-lying in the sun.

Rescue parties never found him, though they scoured the

mountainside;

In the snow they found his tracks down from the peak.

But they lost him where the snowbanks petered out on barren

rock—

There was nothing more to tell them where to seek.

They supposed that he had slipped and plunged into the gorge

below;

But though he's considered dead by other men,

They are wrong, and still I look for him upon each mountain top—

For I know I'll climb with Jam Crack Joe again.