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BIRKNESS CRAG CHIMNEY.

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BIRKNESS CRAG CHIMNEY AND GULLY.

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CLIMBERS on their way from Buttermere to the Pillar or Gable must often have looked up admiringly at the rocks which crest the hollows on either side of High Stile ; but with the exception of two gullies in Bleaberry Combe (the one nearest Red Pike) which were climbed many years ago, they have received little attention. Those, who have enjoyed the delightful walk along the ridge of this group of hills, will probably have divined one of the reasons for this neglect, and may have had any previous eagerness to climb these cliffs dissipated, for the rottenness of the rock in many places where the ridge approaches the cliff edge is very apparent. Projections, looking like good holds, can be pulled right away, and large blocks, in plenty, are severed without having fallen. The man who enjoys hurling rocks down steep places might indeed often be provoked at their immovability, but still the climber dare not place confidence in them, and though the rash might find an added zest of risk, for others there is not much satisfaction in such sport.

The first suggestion I had of more trustworthy climbing ground hereabouts was given by a threatening cloud, which a party of us returning from the Pillar watched droop over the

ridge between High Stile and High Crag, and pour down a scree gully, in doing which it revealed a commanding rock-face, not unlike the Church Door Buttress in Glencoe. At Gatesgarth we were told it was known as Eagle Crag, a name of good omen to the climber, and it was set down forthwith for exploration on some future occasion.

The opportunity came this summer. Several family picnics up in Birkness Combe, under its shadow, in addition to a somewhat novel fox-hunt round it, made us familiar with the look of the Crag. It has a short side towards High Stile rising from screes which extend to the top, and a longer one facing Gatesgarth cut off from a comparatively poor continuation of the same range of rocks by a gully with a fine overhanging final pitch. My boy had been taken up two of the Pillar climbs a few days before, and was very anxious to try his powers of chimneying for the first time in this gully: it was evidently in places more than twice as wide as his height so I discouraged him, but I wanted to try it as much as he did. We marked out four good climbs: one up the angle of the Crag, a very steep face climb of 300 feet or more; a long central chimney a little to the left of it, imposing in its almost vertical straightness, but needing to be cleared of a great quantity of grass to make it enjoyable or safe as a climb; another chimney (not quite so steep but with more interesting looking rock-problems) branching off the gully aforementioned; and lastly the gully itself.

The branch chimney seemed to offer most sport and I decided to explore it first. It was rather disappointing at the outset, to find that the first three pitches could be avoided by scrambling up the Crag alternately to right and left of the chimney. There is always something unsatisfactory about a climb of this kind: even Moss Ghyll (in many ways an ideal climb) would be improved if there were no chance of evading the lowest and uppermost pitches. However, it was inspiring to see that the upper two-thirds of this chimney must perforce be climbed direct; also that the rock was sound and the pitches following close on one another.



BIRKNESS CRAG CHIMNEY : 4th Pitch.

The same evening Dr. Sheldon arrived for a last week of Lakeland climbing with me, before leaving England for some years, and we set out for Eagle Crag the next morning. We found the chimney to be one of continuously increasing difficulty and interest up to the sixth pitch. The first was quite simple—merely a steep grassy angle—then came a 20 feet wet rock chimney, followed by another rather wetter one of 30 feet. There was no avoiding the water here, for the lower part had to be backed up against a streaming wall, and in the upper part we had to apply ourselves to, and pull over, an equally streaming slab, while a shower bath was bestowed by the chimney's left wall which bent round, overshadowing us. From this we emerged dripping on to a grassy terrace and found a wall of rock facing us with a 25 feet chimney on its left. Sheldon chose the latter; I preferred the wall, which, though vertical, has capital little pockets for foot and hand holds. (Having tried both routes, more than once, both up and down, we can recommend the wall in ascending and the chimney for coming down). Above this there was just standing room for the two of us and the fifth pitch followed immediately. This is a crack only a dozen feet high but rather stiff. We found it best to thrust a hand in the crack and then clench it to prevent slipping out.

Luckily the bed of the gully just above this was not quite so steep or we would have had little chance of success, for the sixth pitch is the great difficulty of the climb, and it was necessary for me to be well placed, close to the leader, in case of a slip. The chimney ran up for about 20 feet into a cave formed by a large overhanging mass of rock which projected from the left wall and made progression on that side impossible. High above our heads on the right side it left an almost vertical shallow groove, to enter which was the problem before us. Some time was taken in making up our minds about the best way to attack the difficulty and in hunting for anchorage, water from the walls and roof finding its way all over us meanwhile. No belay was to be found, so I jammed myself as tightly as possible at the top of the cave, while Sheldon worked

outwards to clear the overhanging rocks. He used both sides of the chimney as far as he could ; then the walls separated and the only thing to be done was to push off from the left wall and make a spring for what seemed a handhold on the right. Was it a handhold however? That was an important point, for the foothold on the right wall was only good enough to trust to for a second while making the spring, and if it turned out to be a sloping ledge up above Sheldon would be likely to descend in an undesirable way. We decided that it was too risky to attempt without first seeing it from above, and we descended to our rucksacks by the stream at the base of the Crag.

Surely one of the chief charms of Lakeland is the ever-plentiful water on the hillsides. Up above, while it was trickling down our necks and bubbling out of the tops of our boots, we weren't perhaps very enthusiastic about it, but on a warm sunny day (even though you are soaked through) it is a delicious luxury to be able to fill the cup between the courses from a mountain stream, or to plunge the face down amongst the freshening foam of a little fall. The summer was the wettest on record, so perhaps water has left more vivid images than usual on the memory, for the pictures which have come up most frequently of late before my mind's eye have been of brimming pools and mountain-sides laced with silver torrents. Of course there is none of the rich gold and amber which are the glory of Highland rivers, coming down from the peat, but just as lovely in a different way is the succession, in Lakeland, of fall after fall (luckily without name or fame), plunging amongst grey rocks into blue-grey pools, to rise from the shatter and conflict in the most delicious of turquoise and emerald foam. Where we sat the water came gurgling down out of sight beneath the stones and welled out of a mossy hole beside us ; lower down bits of tossing spray shewed where the falls were, which we had enjoyed and lingered beside on our way up. I say "we," but I'm afraid Sheldon doesn't understand the enjoyment of rest mingled with toil. He is one of those energetic spirits who are never happy unless they are

conquering something. I believe he would like to eliminate the milder delights of reaching the climb—the walk through the woods, the tramp up the hillside, with all their attendant visions and incidents—he would have a long day's rock-climb starting straight from the hotel if he had his way, I fancy. I don't think he even enjoys rock-climbing as he ought unless he is leading up something difficult, and then I know of no one who enjoys it more. While I lay in the sun he brought out a revolver from his rucksack and improved the time by preparing for tiger shooting at close quarters, but he was impatient for the chimney again, and as soon as he had used up all his cartridges I had to shake off my laziness and make for the top of the Crag.

We soon found our chimney's exit and went down far enough to see that the handhold we were doubtful about was just good enough. On the other hand we found that the groove we had been trying to enter was also difficult enough to make us question whether or not the climb was justifiable without a good belay.

What factors determine the unjustifiableness of a climb? It is a question that many must have asked themselves. Not difficulty, considered apart from other circumstances. One of the most difficult problems I have seen is the top pitch of Walker's Gully, but though the climb is on an overhanging wall with a tremendous drop below it, if the rope is threaded as it should be there is nothing to fear. Neither, in my opinion, does danger by itself, make a climb unwarrantable. The ordinary way up the Central Gully on Lliwedd passes over many dangerous places, where, if the leader fell, the second man would have very little chance of saving him, owing to the scarcity of belays; but no one with a little experience in climbing would be any more likely to fall in these places than the average man would from say the path on the top. But as soon as the leader feels that the climb is taxing his powers, in a place devoid of anchorage, to go on is to allow discretion to give way to daring. It is a matter of capability; a climb may be safe for one party and almost suicidal for another.

The result of our deliberation was that no more was done in the chimney that day, beyond climbing back to the top, but we returned two days later with an ice-axe which we hoped to arrange as a belay. We reached the cave much more quickly this time. Our ice-axe had been the occasion of some chaffing down below; it was a nuisance on the way up; and now we had got it up we couldn't fix it firmly. However, I used the pick to root out all the moss and loose stuff from a small crack at the back of the cave and at length found a stone, not more than an inch in diameter, jammed fast high up in it. Behind this, after a number of fruitless attempts, we succeeded in threading the rope, after which I could hold it from Sheldon's level, lower down, and give him some assistance until he got his upper half into the groove. It was comical to watch his feet dangling below the overhanging block, making an occasional futile effort to scrape up on the wall and very slowly disappearing. After some minutes he reached a place of safety and hauled up the ice-axe and our coats, weighty with water again, for the chimney was if anything wetter than when we first tried it, and we had been nearly an hour in the cave finding anchorage. I followed with great difficulty, especially after getting my shoulders into the groove, which was covered with green slime and had to be ascended by a most uncomfortable kind of chimneying—elbow and hand. When once the foot was high enough for edge nails to grip in the groove it was simpler, and a good pull over a chockstone at the top completed the sixth pitch. The seventh was another of 20 feet up a broken vertical wall at the back of the chimney, with occasional use of the sides, the eighth and last was quite simple. The aneroid gave the total height of the chimney as 240 feet, which agrees fairly well with our estimate of the separate pitches.

While we were up at the Crag top it seemed worth while preparing the way for an attempt on the gully out of which our chimney branched. From below this had very much the aspect of Walker's Gully on a small scale, and was similarly surmounted by a funnel-shaped scree-shoot, which poured its

superfluous contents over the topmost boulder. We sent down some hundredweights of loose stones which were perilously near to going without our aid, and then returned lazily to enjoy the comforts of the valley.

There were several climbs which Sheldon wished to try during the week—he vowed that some of them would be nightmares to him in India if they were left unconquered—and in consequence it was our last day when we returned to attack the gully.

We found it merely a walk up for some distance beyond where the chimney branched from it ; but the upper boulders began to look threateningly thrust forward as we approached them, and, happening to glance up while roping, we noticed that the top, 150 feet above, was overhanging us, a thing I don't remember to have seen in any other Lakeland climb.

We started chimneying inwards with back and knee and soon reached a mossy cave. From here we worked straight up for some distance, partly back and foot, partly on the right wall, passing at the back of some tempting stones, which were rather doubtfully jammed, and which we refrained from using. Until getting near the top the pitches were very indefinite : in one place we were spreadeagled on the bed of the gully, here covered with a thick coating of almost dry moss. At another place, where the holds were scanty, we threaded the rope. After a while we found ourselves in a cave within 12 or 15 feet from the under side of the crowning boulder, and on a level with another huge one which bridges across the gully some distance out. The best method of procedure here is for the leader to stay in the cave while the second man traverses out on to the bridge, from which he can climb up into a higher cave, immediately under the top boulder. This latter has imprisoned several large blocks beneath it, and behind one of these the second man should thread the rope, for the top pitch has very poor holds, and, though not excessively severe, it would be extremely dangerous without this safeguard. The leader can then go out on to the bridge and from there finish the climb by small ledges on the vertical right wall—chiefly a test of balance.

It is a gully to be recommended for a wet day : while we were in it a storm came on which blotted out first Grasmoor in the distance, then High Stile close at hand, streaking the Combe with sheets of rain, but until we came to the final piece we were quite dry and sheltered.

The difficulty is not much greater than that of the "Oblique" or "Doctor's" on the Gable. The chimney branching from it is much stiffer : Sheldon thought it equal to the Doe Crag Central Chimney, but without the risk of the latter. With dry rocks it should prove simpler.

Why the names which head this paper, it may be asked ? Well, of course, "Eagle Crag Gully and Chimney" would have been more to our minds, but then there are so many Eagle Craggs in Lakeland (the one at the entrance to Greenup naturally comes first to mind) and there was already a gully of the name on Glaramara ; so we pressed into service the name of the Combe of which this Crag is the finest feature. The 6 inch Ordnance map has it "Burtness Combe," but a better authority on this point, Mr. Nelson of Gatesgarth, assured me that the proper name was "Birkness," and gave me some interesting information about it. The birches which occasioned the name have almost disappeared like the hazels from Hasness on the opposite side of the Lake, but in both places, at times, when the upper soil has been removed by a water burst on the hillside, he has found traces of great numbers. Many of the names in this valley have lost their significance : bleaberries and ling are both now more abundant in Birkness Combe than in the two neighbouring hollows named after them, and, of course, eagles have long since disappeared from Eagle Crag. There are some compensations : magnificent Scotch firs and larches have taken the place of the birches and hazels, but climbers on the Crag can hardly be called good substitutes for the eagles.