



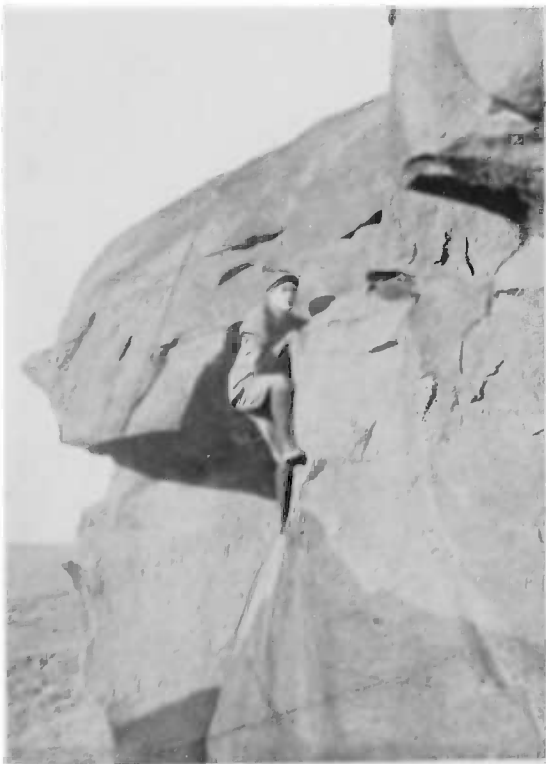
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Author: C. E. Benson

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(FRONT VIEW.)



(BACK VIEW.)

**THE MANTELPiece (Low Man).**

THE

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## ALMES CLIFF CRAGS.

By C. E. BENSON.

(By PERMISSION OF THE EDITOR OF THE "YORKSHIRE POST.")

[About twenty minutes from Weeton Station, between Harrogate and Leeds. By road from Leeds 12 miles; from Harrogate about 6.]

MANY strange beasts came out of Noah's Ark; and out of Noah's Ark (a farmhouse close to Almes Cliff) on Saturdays and Sundays, and even Wednesdays, issue a modern development of the *familia homo*, to wit the *Scansor Eboraciensis*, with kindred scansores from other counties, on scrambling intent. (N.B.—It is contrary to custom to go through gates; the correct procedure is to climb the wall.)

Almes Cliff Crag ("Great Almas Cliff" of the Guide Books) are a happy hunting ground for lunatics, nuisances, and qualified nuisances, *i.e.*, climbers, tourists, and trippers who throw about glass bottles. The tourist regards the scrambler as a lunatic, the bashful scrambler looks on the curious tourist as a nuisance; for a terse and comprehensive expression of opinion as to the third species, you are referred to the scrambler who has just met with a good, satisfying

handhold in the shape of a broken lemonade bottle. I write as a scrambler.

Lunatic though the scrambler may seem, there is method in his madness. To the uninstructed and unenterprising Almes Cliff Crag appear two insignificant outcrops of millstone grit, at no point exceeding sixty feet in height, standing on the brow of a small hill overlooking Weeton. To the climber they are full of interest. He wants practice to keep himself fit for more serious mountaineering, and, if he knows how to look for it, he can get all he needs on Almes Cliff. Without effort, I can recall more than fifty problems, all offering sport, and some calculated to tax, and indeed to overtax, even the very best.

About the stiffest thing on the High Man (the upper outcrop), and possibly the hardest climb on the Crag, is a double chimney, shaped something like the section of two overgrown extinguishers, one on the top of another. It is on the side that looks towards Wharfedale (the south-west, I fancy), and cannot possibly be mistaken, and, so far as most men are concerned, cannot possibly be climbed. Indeed, I believe it has only been done twice, its original conqueror being Mr. William Parsons, of the Yorkshire Ramblers, who is reputed to have accomplished everything possible and impossible on the Crag. In my opinion, Parsons' Climb, as it is called, is the most impossible of all the possible gritstone climbs I have ever seen.

I was present at the second ascent the year before last, on a day when I was very much off colour. Last year I happened to be singularly fit. "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, Are of imagination all compact," and I was lunatic enough to imagine I was equal to tackling the problem. I mentioned my intention to a wise man, who very rightly pointed out that, without a rope from above, the climb was unjustifiable for anyone, and that therefore, from a mountaineering point of view, the ascent was merely a useless gymnastic feat. For two days I preserved my sanity. Then I yielded. I had just conquered, as I conceived, the first difficulty, when I came

off, and, but for the rope, in another second I should have been on the ground "in a fine phrensy rolling."

That is the worst of gritstone; you never know when it is not going to let you down or throw you off. Ordinarily a gritstone Edge is merely a great chunk of glorified, petrified sandpaper. Of course, such material plays mischief with one's skin and clothes, but, as compensation, there are few other kinds of rock you can hang on to by your waistcoat and the seat of your breeches whilst you are feeling about for hand and foot-hold. Then, all of a sudden, without decency or warning, the roughness changes to an absolutely smooth bevel; of course, entirely to your disadvantage, affording no possibilities for either grip or friction. Or else the rock bulges out unexpectedly and knocks you backwards. It has a vicious habit of doing this just at the end of the climb. Three inches will suffice. There is a humorous little problem of this kind on the low rocks at the Rigton\* end of the High Man. It is not more than ten feet high. Its aspect is mild, but its disposition ferocious. There is a splendid right hand-hold, a pocket you can grip with all your fingers and as much of your palm as you wish, a left toe-scrape, and in a moment you are up; that is, you have both hands over the top. True, there are no holds, except a sprinkling of broken glass, which is not generally commended, but you friction up on your palms and forearms until your head and shoulders are above the edge. Then the "shameless rock" maliciously bulges out, hits you in the chest, and throws you on the back of your head; and, unless you are safeguarded by a rope, you will hurt yourself.

Close beyond this, on the proper left of the wall with a small gate in it, is one of the best climbs for a lady the Cliff affords, the South Chimney. It is a nice, straightforward climb of 40 or 50 feet, with a resting place half-way up. The

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\* Tea, ham and eggs, milk, &c., may be obtained at the farms, but the nearest "house of call" is at Rigton, and far enough off at that. Like all other houses in that detestable—I mean estimable—estate, it has only a six-day licence, so that total abstainers will do well to take their whisky with them on Sundays.

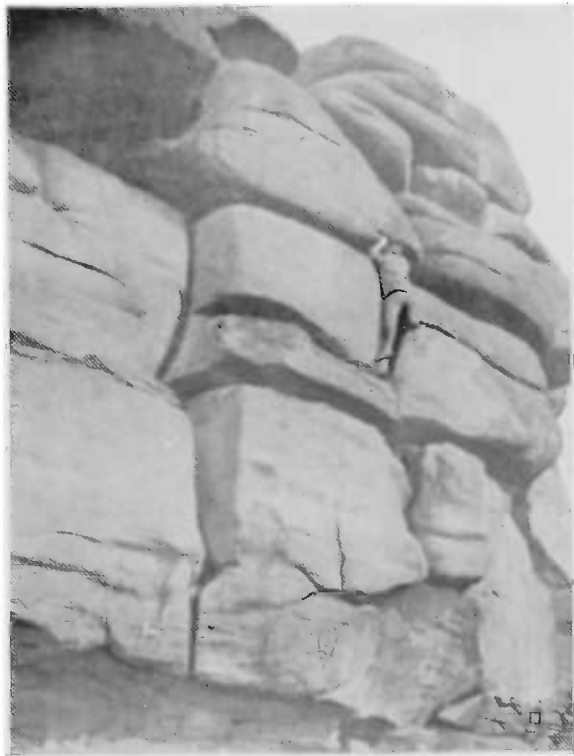
finish is a tight squeeze, and beginners are reminded that in chimneys it is advisable to wear the knot of the rope on one side and not plumb centre. The pressure of a lump of rope the size of a child's fist on that region of the body known as the "mark" is not conducive to comfort, and does your wind no good.

Over the wall is the Three Chockstones, an ideal scramble for novices. I think the orthodox way of tackling the first pitch is to work up with the back against the proper right wall. To suggest how to negotiate the other obstacles would be an impertinence even to a cripple. The direct finish is the most interesting, and perhaps a little difficult to a man with a short reach. I put this forward tentatively, because I am blessed with the reach like a spider monkey, and consequently am not qualified to speak with authority.

The patter of rain on the window reminds me that gritstone, like all rocks, becomes more or less beastly when wet. Almes Cliff is peculiarly abominable in this respect. It would seem that the rocks are covered with a minute vegetation, invisible in dry weather, but, in the wet, execrably in evidence in the shape of a nasty, mossy slime. This may seem strong language, but it is nothing to the expressions I have heard applied to the stuff.

I have no intention of going round the rocks inch by inch; I shall take any climbs I like, and in any order I like. I also give notice that henceforward "right" means proper right, and "left" proper left.

The most genuine climb on the whole cliff is on the southwest face of the High Man, to the left of Parsons' Climb. It is some fifty feet of genuine back, knee, and foot work, and consequently is called the Sixty Foot Chimney. All you have to do is walk into the cleft right shoulder first, and wriggle up till you get to the top, a process not so simple as it sounds. About fifteen feet up the work becomes severe for some six feet, and often drives the exhausted climber to an exit, thoughtfully provided half-way up the back of the chimney.



**THE STOMACH TRAVERSE.**



**THE GREAT OR SIXTY-FOOT CHIMNEY.**

A little further down the slope, close to the south-west wall, is the Cup and Saucer Climb. There are at least three ways of mastering the first pitch, and quite three dozen of coming off in the attempt. The Cup and Saucer Climb takes its name from a leaf of rock, more like a gigantic mussel shell, concave side up than anything else, that projects from the right containing wall. Whether it is the Cup or the Saucer I have up to date failed to ascertain. If it is the Cup, the puzzle is to find the Saucer, and vice versa. The correct and orthodox method of passing this obstacle is to catch hold of the edge of the Saucecup, then, standing on very little, to press your other foot against something less, shoulder high, and, making use of a finger-hold for balancing purposes, by a vigorous wriggle to assume a sitting position on nothing whatever. Using this as a pivot, you turn round and clutch hold of something else, and you find yourself at the foot of a short crack leading to the top of the pitch.

The second variation starts much like the first, except that, after pirouetting twice on the substantial foundation mentioned above, you traverse to your left, leaving the Cup'cer on your right, and scramble up on to the top of the right buttress. This process, as may easily be gathered, rather turns the pitch than climbs it.

The third route is the hardest. It merely consists of catching on to the Saucecup'cer, and swinging along on your hands, upwards, ever upwards, until you can get a good purchase for your right foot against the left side of the gully, when it is necessary to give a heave and a push, and "there you are." Where "there" is depends. It may be on the top of the leaf of rock; it may be on the rope; or it may be flat on your back at the foot of the pitch. The dangling attitude is the most common, if not the most popular.

After the first difficulties have been passed, the simplest plan is to scramble up some rounded boulders and walk out at the other side of the Crags. This, however, is not "playing the game," and the containing walls of the gallery kindly provide plenty of sport. First, on your left, comes a nice

little crack ; next, a pocket climb, short but severe—when a gale is blowing it is as well to finish this climb without thinking about the wind—and next, a balancing problem. My own attempts on this have hitherto been confined to stepping on to a small ledge with extreme deliberation, and off again with extreme rapidity, the minute interval between the two movements being filled by frantic gropings for holds. I once met a wasp there. A wasp is no earthly use as a hand-hold.\* I have never seen this bit ascended, though one man I know has managed to get down. Since writing these lines, the problem has been solved by the Rev. Harold Firth, Y.R. I gather that the method is simplicity itself. You merely throw your thigh round a buttress that isn't there, and so friction up till a respectable hand-hold comes within reach.

Opposite this problem is a short pitch surmounted by a big chockstone, which gives some pretty hard work. One of the main difficulties is that the top of the pitch is chiefly coarse grass, and it is not orthodox, to say nothing of being most unsafe, to trust the grass holds. On your left, a short, deceptive crack provides an unexpectedly difficult finish to the climb.

Since writing this, three fresh impossibilities have been detected and climbed in this gallery.

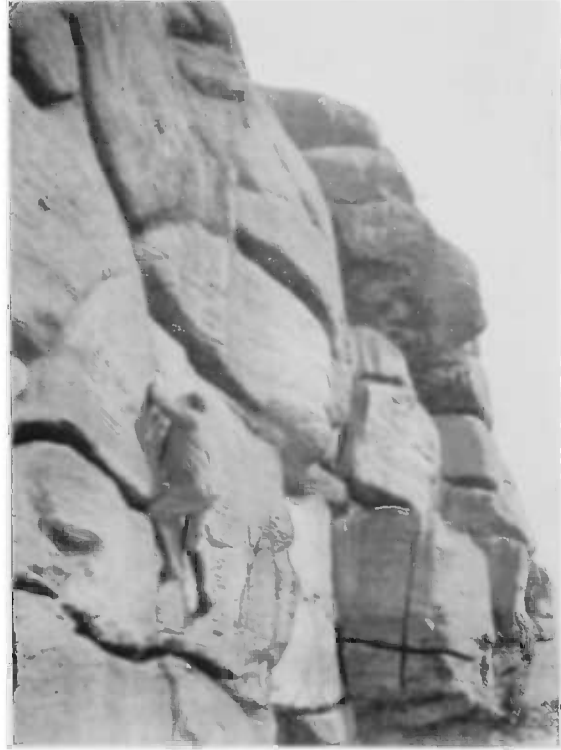
On the Low Man the Fluted Pillars give a really interesting scramble, a model in its way, as the difficulties increase continuously. I believe the finish to be difficult. It appears that it is necessary to wedge yourself with your left arm and knee whilst the body is levered up till a small pinnacle comes within reach. Unfortunately, I did not know this, and, disregarding wedging and pinnacle, shot out, as my companion

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\* On page 131, Vol. III., *C.C.J.*, Mr. H. V. Reade writes of these crags—"A curious feature of the place is that several of the chimneys have been carefully filled up with masonry at the bottom, as though to prevent the sides from falling in." The real object of the masonry is to keep badgers, foxes, &c., from using these rock recesses as "holts." I am glad of it. I conceive a badger might provide an even less satisfactory hand-hold than a wasp.



**THE LEAF CLIMB.**  
(The hard way up.)



**THE BIRD'S NEST.**

said, an extra foot or two of hand, and came up quite easily—which is highly incorrect. I shall know better next time.

Close to the Fluted Pillars is the Square Chimney, a wholly detestable place in a wind. Almost at the start it is necessary to turn round, by a delicate effort of balancing, and that moment is invariably selected by the air to rush down the Chimney like a young tornado and blow you out. Another execrable problem, under similar conditions, is the Leaf on the High Man. To the left (proper) the ascent is easy, but the narrow right crack between the Leaf and the main cliff requires balance, wedging, and muscling up. Just at one point there is considerable likelihood of being blown off. I had rather almost anyone but myself had a fall just here. Once the Leaf is vanquished, the climber may scramble straight ahead through a cleft in the rocks, traverse out to his right to the finish of another climb, the commencement of which is of extreme difficulty, or go right up the edge of the cliff on his left, by far the most sporting route. The most difficult wedge and balance problem is the Bird's Nest on the High Man, to the right of the three Chockstones, though, oddly enough, immediately on the left of that climb there are two severe little tests of the same kind, which lead to a very sporting traverse.

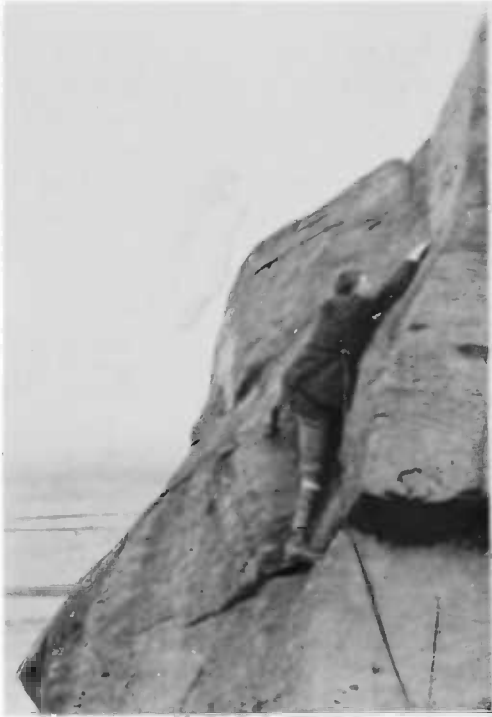
To hark back to the Low Man! Divided from the Square Chimney by the Pulpit Buttress is the V-shaped Chimney. The proper course is to attack the problem on the left side, and then to turn towards the Pulpit, after which it is usual to finish on the broad of one's back. It is more satisfactory to complete the climb by a wild struggle upwards. From the top of the Pulpit a most sensational traverse, which would be impossible, on almost any rock but gritstone, leads across the face to the right and out to the top of the Crag.

Further to the left, and beyond the Fluted Pillars, is a direct face climb, which is only possible for a man with a long reach. The difficulty consists in holding on to a minute undercut asperity with two finger tips, balancing oneself on the tips of one's toes, and reaching over to a small jammed

stone, the gritstone all the time bulging out and hitting you in the wind in its usual mean way. It is decidedly not an immediately-after-lunch climb. The difficulty can be turned by a slanting crack a little to the left.

The bouldering of Almes Cliff is second to none. The very first clump of rocks you meet on your way up from the farm provides a ridiculously easy chimney, an exceedingly difficult chimney, a nice little traverse, and a crack that won't go at all. One of the most sporting boulders is the Split Block (in the vernacular "The Pair of Trousers") that stands by itself in a field Hubwards. I know the village of Huby. I spent an hour there once, like a newly paid bill, being receipted, or reseated, after a struggle with the Sixty Foot Chimney, which, in mean, petty revenge for defeat, turned and rent me. The Split Block can be ascended in eight, possibly nine, different ways. By the Split, from either side there is little difficulty. The north angle is just nice, the north-east face is just nicer, and the east angle is just nicest, a rare grind for the arms and wrists. Whether the east face has ever been climbed I know not. I fancy a genius might make it go. All the other climbs, which face south-west, are not nice. They entail sprawling on what J. M. Barrie calls "Little Mary," and wriggling up by friction, finger-holds, and the moral support of the rope. I don't know quite what moral support means, but, on the occasions I have officiated from above, I have a suspicion amounting to a certainty, that if the twelve-stone morally supported had been suddenly changed to twelve ounces, the rope would have flicked back over my head like a casting line.

The most terrific boulder problem is the Virgin Peak. It really is quite imposing. The Virgin Peak is a huge chunk of rock just below the Low Man, and is ascended thus: First, you traverse along the base on the Low Man side, like a Gecko lizard, till you can reach the angle of the boulder. Then you swing off and round the edge on both hands. Then holding yourself chin high with your left hand, you reach up to a pocket with your right, after which, by a com-



**THE VIRGIN PEAK.**

prehensile pull and wriggles, you effect a lodgment for your toes on a minute ledge. Then the difficulties commence.

The problem consists first in reaching a small hand-hold which is only just within reach (7ft. 8in., I think the distance is), the second in utilising it. The face against which you are plastered is almost holdless, the foothold precarious. In fact it is a climb, as the Irishman would say, on which you never know which moment will be your next.

This is the easy way up the Virgin Peak. The difficult way is for all but very tall men, who are blessed with a most accurate sense of balance, impossible. It is directly up the side that faces the Low Man.

The Kleine Matterhorn close by is very severe, if climbed direct to the highest point. The usual way up is by a crack that is said to provide good practice in finger-holds. Here was another instance of what may be lost to a man who is not of a sufficiently enquiring turn of mind. Instead of wrestling and balancing and frictioning up to the hand-hold of salvation, I laid hold of it right away and lost myself a great deal of sport.

In fact, one meets nail-marks everywhere. I should think that almost every yard of cliff and boulder has been tried at one time or another. Some of the methods are not altogether commendable. The run-jump-scramble-and-grab may be very good fun when failure only entails a slither of a few feet on to nice soft grass, *but it is not climbing*. Still, it achieves its purposes. There are one or two other little dodges which, in my humble opinion, are not good enough. For instance, if you came off at the start of a face climb, close to the Leaf, I do not see how you could help breaking your arm. The only way up is to jamb the whole of your left fore-arm in a horizontal crack, and if the whole weight of your body were to come on it, as it is not unlikely, for the problem is severe, "jiu-jitsu" would not be in it.

To attempt to describe other climbs would be tedious. They are easily recognisable by the nail-marks. One last thing it is, however, very necessary to say, in the event of any

tyro scramblers being attracted by the manifold fascinations of Almes Cliff: "Never neglect the safeguard of a rope from above until you are assured by frequent tests that the climb is well within your powers." There is nothing creditable in getting injured, or even killed, on Almes Cliff: to say nothing of the discredit such a silly proceeding would bring on a very fine sport.

"Of a fool and his folly there is no end," may be generally true, but I am afraid there will be an end of some fool some day at Almes Cliff. If, however, he only gets the six months hospital he deserves, it may perhaps be even a good thing for the sport. Example, we all know, is better than precept. All the same, for the purpose under consideration, I personally intend to confine myself to precept.

