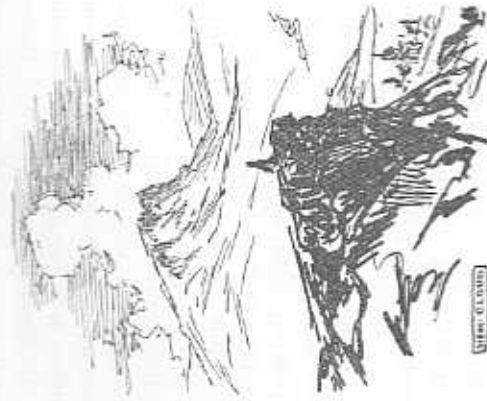


and incomparable benefits which the sport affords. I could speak of exalted feelings and sublime moments—moments such as that one experienced when the finish of the North Climb on Pillar by the hand-traverse was an accomplished fact, and Houghton and I lay, whilst recovering our breath, gazing upon that marvellous scene of valley and fell, of wooded slopes and craggy heights, of peaks that tower proudly into the blue of the sky above, and fall away with many a graceful fold to green pastures below—and beyond, the illimitable sea, warm and flashing in the sunlight.

But—I started out with a certain, or rather an uncertain hypothesis, and, like much cleverer people who start out on uncertain hypotheses, I was bound to rake in something to support it; and—well, there you are.



NEW CLIMB

A NOVEL CLIMB IN CAMBRIDGE.

By NOCTURNE.

Alice.—'I thought I'd find my way to the top of that hill.' . . .
The Red Queen.—'When you say "hill" I could show you hills, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley.'

Alice through the Looking-glass.

The wanderer among the mighty vastnesses of Switzerland or the Himalayas, when he once regards our humble British hills, sometimes feels involuntary contempt for these puny swellings of our green and pleasant land; and, similarly, the stadwart mountaineer of the Lake District or North Wales, when he hears faint rumours of an innocent pastime called roof-climbing, current among the more lighthearted of the undergraduates of our older universities, smiles a superior smile, and goes his way. It is, therefore, with some diffidence that I take my pen to describe the conquest of such a minor eminence as the Chapel Tower of St. John's College. But climbers will climb, be there only a rickety mantleshelf in the attic to receive their activities, and the east of England is as innocent of anything in the nature of rock as any dear old lady could possibly wish; consequently, the walls and roofs of Cambridge provide the only outlet for their atavistic tendencies.

For the benefit of those who are unacquainted with this branch of their sport, I would enumerate the principal difficulties encountered. These are:

Natural: The vertical nature of the faces attacked.

The scarcity of holds.

The treacherous nature of the rock.

Artificial: Porters, Deans, Dons, and 'Roberts.'

Darkness.

The desirability of silence.

It is these artificial obstacles that lend an entirely novel attraction to the sport, and though the scene lacks the austere grandeur of the mountains, yet the setting of the ancient buildings is one of singular beauty and charm.

St. John's Chapel challenges King's in the matter of height, though few would say in beauty, and far overtops all other college buildings. It is in the shape of an elongated T, a large square tower rising from the junction of the arms. Three ridges about this tower at a height of about 80 feet, and from there it rises sheer for another 70 feet to the balustrade. Fifteen feet above the side ridges, but only nine from the main ridge, a large overhanging ledge completely encircles it. Short square drain pipes, ending in cast-iron bowls 3 feet below the overhang, offer a nebulous means of attack from the side ridges. Above the ledge three pairs of louvered windows on each face provide promising going for the next 30 feet. After that an insignificant diamond-shaped pillar, and the inverted V mouldings above the windows, end in rosettes below the forbidding overhang of the coping.

The tower was first attacked by 'Jones' and 'Robinson.' Having attained the gutter by way of the hall roof, they reached the top of one of the side ridges by climbing the steeply sloping coping at its outer end, of which the topmost rib offers a continuous-grip handhold. From this ridge it was easy to swarm up the pipe to the bowl, but the negotiation of the overhang proved exceedingly delicate. It was necessary to work one leg over the serrated top of the bowl, which is only 9 inches wide, and flush with the wall, and then to rise to a standing position by the aid of a poor handhold on the ledge above. This, as it turned out, constituted the *mauvais pas* of the climb. Beyond the ledge they did not proceed, as the overhanging heights above appeared at the time completely impassable.

Circumstances prevented further activity, so that, having heard Jones express the opinion that the top part might go, if surveyed first with a rope from above, some of us decided that an investigation might be worth while. Accordingly we secured, by nefarious means, a duplicate of the key to the staircase which led from the balustrade to the top of the tower. Judge our joy when we discovered that the sloping overhang of the coping could be negotiated quite simply by the aid of some ornamentation on its underside, which provided an efficient handhold, so that one could

lower oneself sufficiently to grasp the diamond pillar. Once on this, it was tolerably easy to climb down it to a small stance on the capital of the pillar between the windows. Thence a sensational step brought the climber underneath the arch, and a circular window above the louvered offered a secure if constricted seat. The tower was ours! All that remained was to climb it!

But here the difficulties commenced. Expert rock climbers, when asked if they would join in the attack, paled slightly and enlarged on its danger and impossibility. But, finally, one summer night of the Long, three of us—the other two unacquainted with the uses of the rope—set out, armed with 160 feet of it. We decided to make the attempt on the side remote from the court, so as not to arouse the Dean or porters.

Arriving at the foot of the stone coping, the rope was donned, and I set off up the 70-degree slope. Jones may have found it 'quite easy,' but to us it came as the world's worst sweat; the hand grip is indeed excellent, though crumbling, but that is all that can possibly be said for it. The second man was so exhausted when he reached the ridge that he almost fell over the other side! The third man gave up half-way, and was lowered down. It was obvious that the team was not strong enough to proceed, so, in order not to miss the climb, it was arranged that the other two should lower a rope from the top. Scarcely had they reached the gutter, and the rope been thrown down to them, when the beams of a powerful spotlight lit up the chapel. It was a Robert patrolling Bridge Street. The danger was immediate, for were he to rouse the porters we should be trapped, for the gutter ended against the wall of the tower, and is easily reached by the porters by means of a staircase on the court side. For long the circle of light zigzagged here and there over the chapel, but it failed to pick out the cramped, motionless figure which sat shuddering on the sharp ridge. At last the light went out, but not for long. It reappeared directly below, and recommenced its search. But the others had gone, and, seizing a favourable opportunity, the figure on the ridge resolved itself into human

shape, and slithered down the coping at so great a speed that the smell of burning arose from what had once been trousers!

A few weeks later another attack was made, again with a novice—whom we will call Fisher—a horn climber, whose ability to hang on in unpromising situations gave evidence of the true spirit. This time we took the court side, judging porters to be less offensive than Roberts. Once more we found ourselves on the unpleasantly sharp ridge, and at last the drain pipe rose before us. But the mantleshelf problem of the bowl defeated us utterly and completely; for two hours we sweated and struggled in turn, a wary eye on the porters' lodge the while, but all in vain. Even assistance offered to Fisher from above only demonstrated the elasticity of 80 feet of Alpine rope. Crestfallen and annoyed at defeat by what had already been climbed, we retired as dawn was breaking, and set ourselves furiously to think.

Six months later our thoughts matured into action. The omens were favourable; a bright moon hung in a cloudless sky; the porters on duty were peaceful and fond of their beds; the Dean was reported to be sleeping more soundly than usual. Moreover, the key had been mislaid, so that there was now no easy way to the top; it was to be all or nothing.

We had conceived the idea that a stirrup rope might be contrived to supply the absent foothold below the bowl. The plan succeeded admirably, and on the second attempt Fisher attained the long-sought ledge. In a few minutes I had joined him, but without the aid of the stirrup the overhang proved as troublesome as ever, and it was only by the skin of my teeth that I avoided using the rope. Together we surveyed the scene from the narrow ledge. All Cambridge was bathed in moonlight. Below us the steep roofs of the chapel fell away to the black shadow of the courts, and the silver streak of the river could be seen winding its tortuous way among the trees of the backs. Above us rose for another 50 feet the face we had yet to climb, awe-inspiringly vertical. The whole scene was one of perfect, delicate beauty. Once more we continued the ascent, certain now that

victory would be ours. The louverers proved easy going, and I ensconced myself in the circular niche to bring up Fisher. It was only then that we realised the horrible congestion of the situation, which made it impossible to change positions in the niche. Consequently Fisher was forced to make the awkward traverse out to one of the capitals. As he did this move with perfect ease, I thought he might as well proceed. This was a mistake, as he had not done the climb before, and the first move off the capital is somewhat tricky and very exposed. His first attempt was a failure, so I traversed out to the opposite capital. The position was very delicate, for both of us had to make the traverse unheld; but all was successful, and with Fisher safely ensconced in the niche I scrambled up the last pitch. (The correct method of tackling this piece would be for the second man to lead up to the niche, and so avoid the change over.) The rosette at the top of the diamond pillar provided an effective belay for the last movement—the whole climb has an ample sufficiency of belays—and a few minutes later both of us stood on the windy lead flats at the top of the tower, the moonlit town spread out before us on every side. But the situation being chummy, we only stopped for a quick pipe, recorded the ascent on the leads, and then set about the return.

The descent was uneventful, though through a misunderstanding, when half-way down the first pitch, I had the discomfiting sight of the whole 80 feet of rope describing a graceful catenary to Fisher, ensconced in the niche below. And if Fisher, careless, fell when descending the louverers, what mattered it, for he was well held, and had not the chapel tower also fallen?

Thus, three and a half hours after our start, we were once more sitting round a blazing fire, consuming tea and chocolate biscuits, after the most remarkable climb we have, either of us, had the pleasure of tackling.