MOUNT WHITNEY BY THE EAST FACE

by Robert L.M. Underhill

OUR party had been gradually decreasing in size as we moved southward to more and more ambitious objectives. We had begun, most of us, up in the Yosemite as part of the Sierra Club Outing of 1931. At the close of that trip, nine, under the management of Francis Farquhar and the invaluable counselorship of Norman Clyde, had moved down to the region of the North Palisade where we had culled a little bouquet of new climbs in spite of four days (believe it of the Sierra or not!) of bad weather. Shifting southward again for our culminating effort, directed upon Mount Whitney, we finally found ourselves a little remnant of five.

At Farquhar's invitation and under his expert arrangement of program, I was enjoying a first climbing season in the High Sierra. The unclimbed east face of Mount Whitney had been in both our minds from the start. True, whenever the subject came up for express discussion Farquhar was wont to observe with a chuckle that the face was pretty much of a precipice; but this seemed to diminish in nowise his estimate of the value of paying it a visit, and I eventually became highly stimulated by his view that sleek verticality was merely the normal terrain for rock-climbing activities. Clyde, when he joined the party, gave a guarded confirmation of the topographic point, by judging, from his more intimate acquaintance with the mountain, that the face was "pretty sheer." However, he showed himself completely indulgent to the enterprise, and gave us the immense benefit of his practical knowledge, without which we should have lost much time in coming to grips with our problem. The other two members of the group—Jules Eichorn, of San Francisco, and Glen Dawson, of Los Angeles, young natural-born rock-climbers of the first water—had never seen the mountain; but neither had they seen any up and down the Sierra that they could not climb, and they were all enthusiasm.

On August 15th, then, we started up the Mount Whitney trail from Lone Pine. Here I discovered that the best way to obtain a pure enjoyment of mountain scenery is by all odds to entrust the concomitant task of making elevation to a mule. However, we had to reassume operating responsibilities ourselves, and thereby give up all but a practical interest in the scenery, at a point somewhat short of the usual base camp, and strike up the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek. Relieving the pack train of its load, we here shouldered outrageously heavy knapsacks (Clyde's being an especially picturesque enormity of skyscraper architecture), and worked up the side canon via a high southerly shelf discovered by Clyde upon a previous occasion. Ripe currants, or at least the opportunity to delay while eating them, seemed to be a great attraction to some along here. The shelf at length debouched upon a knoll, on the farther slope of which, above the stream, we found the most beautiful campground I had yet seen in the Sierra. It lay at an altitude of about 10,500 feet, with the eastern escarpment of the whole Whitney group high and clear before it. In recognition of the fact that Clyde had discovered the spot, at least for mountaineers, and had hitherto been the only climber to use it, we hailed with one accord Farquhar's suggestion that it be christened "Clyde Meadow."

As we contemplated our mountain, in the evening light, I felt that it would be a mighty hard nut to crack. Certain vertical black lines, indicating gullies or chimneys, were indeed visible, but the questions remained whether they were individually climbable and susceptible of linkage together into a route. Every rock-climber knows, however, that such questions as these can be answered only at very close quarters; in particular, the broadside view of a peak, at any distance, is wholly non-committal or misleading. One feature, indeed, impressed us greatly. The northerly section of the east face stands forward from the remainder in a great square abutment, terminating above in a shoulder that lies some hundreds of feet below the actual summit. The object was clearly to gain this shoulder, and Clyde informed us of his own experience (for he had once descended thus far from the top) that the ascent from it to the summit was easy.

Somewhat before seven o'clock the next morning, August 16th, we left camp. After the prolonged bad weather, we were treated to something more than what is considered, in the Sierra, an ordinary good day, and would rate as a perfect one elsewhere; even the Californians did not succeed in remaining impeccably *blase* about it. (I observed that they took to exclaiming, later on, over the hundreds of miles of clear visibility into Nevada and southern California.) Clyde led us down across the brook meadows and up along an "apron" of granite on the other (north) side to the floor of the next higher basin, thus neatly avoiding a long talus-slope in the line of more direct ascent. Crossing the brook again to the south, we now mounted the heel of a ridge which ran directly west into the mountain. This ridge rose in several steps, and at the top of each we paused a few moments to scrutinize, from ever higher and nearer, the problematic face. And it continued to look, I must confess, downright unclimbable. We had rather grown into the

feeling, in the Palisades, that every Sierra mountain-wall could be climbed, if only one tackled it properly; but at the present juncture I personally found myself becoming shaken in this conviction and wondering whether we weren't at last up against the so-called exception that proves the rule. I took to mapping out a route up the couloir to the south of the mountain in lieu of one up the face proper.

Our ridge now ran level for a bit, then sank slightly, preparatory to joining Mount Whitney itself, up which it swung for a distance in the shape of a steep but broken rib. At its low point it formed the barrier of a subsidiary cirque to the north (i. e., to the northeast of Whitney) that contained a little lake. On the shore of this lake, just under the peak, we gathered for a final intensive bit of observation. Suddenly I saw what seemed a just possible route, and simultaneously Dawson and Eichorn exclaimed to the same effect. It turned out that we all had exactly the same thing in mind. Through the field-glasses we now examined it in detail as well as we could, noting that much of it seemed possible, but that there were several very critical places. Rating our chances of success about fifty-fifty, we were eager to go ahead with the attempt.

To our extreme regret, Farquhar now decided to leave us. Not having had as long a period of training as the rest of us, he felt that his presence might delay the party at critical points, and for the general good he renounced a share in the climb. After watching us for a while he set out alone, at his own pace, by way of the gully to the north, with which he was familiar through having descended it with Clyde m 1930.

Leaving at the lake everything we could spare, we left it at 9:30 and proceeded up the rib already mentioned about five hundred feet over loose rock, past one small tower on the left and to the foot of another, where the rock steepened and became firm. Here we roped up (10:00), Dawson and I together, and Eichorn and Clyde. (I might remark at once that the whole climb was a thoroughly cooperative enterprise. At times one rope would go ahead, then the other; and each rope shifted leaders several times.) The first problem was to get from our position on the outjutting rib back to the true face of the mountain, to the left (south) of it A direct rising traverse along the left flank of the rib looked inviting at first, but when I had climbed up here some distance I didn't like the looks of the remainder and suggested that Eichorn and Clyde try around to the right instead. This latter proved to be the preferable way: climbing some seventy-five feet diagonally to the right up the tower before us, we then traversed along its right flank to a little col; here we recrossed the rib to the left (south), descended to a little gully some forty feet, and moved a few steps farther to the south on a good ledge to the face of the mountain, just at the level where its lower precipice breaks back in some rising tiers of slabs.

These slabs were climbed easily for some three hundred feet up into a little recess, bounded on the right by the rib we had left, on the left by a low rock wall, and in back, or straight ahead of us, by a new uplift of sheer cliff. We now surmounted the wall to our left, and found ourselves on the southerly edge of the huge rectangular abutment previously mentioned (it was the face of this abutment which we had hitherto been climbing), and looking into the deep reentrant right-angle where it joined the southern half of the general east face, or the main body of the mountain. Descending slightly, we traversed right (west) along the side of the abutment into this corner.

It was clear that the hardest part of the climb now lay before us. The right wall of the corner—the wall of the abutment, leading to the shoulder—was out of the question. The left wall—that of the mountain proper—sloped back promisingly after a couple of hundred feet, but that initial section looked like trouble. We attacked it at first close to the corner. After climbing up perhaps fifty feet here, however, we were confronted by a bad crack.* It looked climbable at a pinch—in fact, Dawson and Eichorn were both confident of being able to do it and eager to have a try—but before such a *tour de force* was undertaken Clyde and I urged that a traverse, which we had all already noticed out to the left, be investigated. For this we descended part way again and then moved out to the south around a minor protruding rib which had obscured the farther view. Encouraged by what we saw we continued the traverse, which now led us out in a very exposed position directly over the tremendous precipice that falls a thousand feet to the snow-fields and talus-piles at the foot of the mountain. Some loose rocks which we here pried off fell without a sound for an uncanny number of seconds before crashing once for all at the head of the glacier. The hazard, however, was only illusory, as the holds were good and the climbing not difficult, though involving more delicate problems of balance than had any hitherto.

The traverse, perhaps a hundred feet in total length, turned diagonally upward into the foot of a small chimney containing much loose rock. Half-way up this chimney we moved out of it again on the right and climbed directly

up over a couple of shelves. The last of these was spacious enough to accommodate the whole party, and here, in a very airy situation, fronting the magnificent drop to the glacier, we paused twenty minutes for lunch.

We had now practically passed the band of difficult rock. A short movement to the left, across the head of the little chimney, a straightforward pitch or two upward, and a longer easy traverse back again to the right returned us into the corner formed by the great abutment, at a point where its left flank (upon which we were) took the shape of a large gully sloping back at a pleasant angle. Up this we scrambled, at first easily for a hundred feet over scree, then with increasing difficulty for seventy-five feet more over a series of huge granite steps. The last of these steps was surmounted, in its left-hand (southwest) corner, by means of a pretty little chimney, the secret of which—discovered by Dawson, leading, for the whole party—was to step out, near the top, upon the south wall of the great gully. Here we observed that a route from our lunching-place, directly up the south ridge of the gully to the point where we now stood, would probably have been easier than the one we had taken up the granite steps in the base of the gully itself.

Our difficulties were now over. Moving around the head of the gully to the right (north), we found ourselves upon the shoulder that caps the great abutment, with nothing but easy broken rock, as Clyde had foretold, between us and the summit. The monument hove in view, unexpectedly close above, and was greeted with a cheer. Taking off the ropes, which were no longer necessary, we made our way individually up the final stretch by various routes (the easiest seemed to be around to the left near the top), and at 12:45 were shaking hands with Farquhar on the summit.

The route we had followed was exactly that which we had mapped out originally while standing by the little lake. Much of the fascination of our climb lay, in fact, in seeing the sections which we had marked out for ourselves as critical successively opening up to permit us a way. The rock work was not really difficult. There is, I should say, less than a thousand feet of it from the roping up to the unroping place, and I believe a good climbing party that knew the route could ascend from the lake to the summit in something like half the time we required upon this first occasion. The beauty of the climb in general lies chiefly in its unexpected possibility, up the apparent precipice, and in the intimate contact it affords with the features that lend Mount Whitney its real impressiveness.

* On September 6, 1931, Glen Dawson, Walter Brem, and Richard Jones descended the east face, varying from the route of the ascent by roping down over this crack.—EDITOR.