

# Out of the midday sun: the Lost Arrow Chimney

Ed. Ward-Drummond

'The brimming self confidence shown in your letters and elsewhere borders on audacity, and engenders in me irritation. . . .' Robbins' words were a warning which nagged me as we slunk through the last of the scrub's defences to face the object of our desire in the broken dark.

The aspect shut us up for a while, sorting gear while obedient eyes crawled 1800 ft up to the Lost Arrow Spire, its tip thrust from the great limb of the Lost Arrow Chimney into the upper air.

The affair had been carried off in one long day on the first free ascent by Chuck Pratt in 1966, but we were to spend a night out with her, my first, not having the push and acquired subtlety of the valley man, which opens the secrets of the least willing.

The first long drain-pipe crack, at about very severe, flattered our virility; obviously a snare; the lift of a casual eyebrow. Illusions of attainment at ease were abandoned to extreme climbing in the hammering sun up a shallow crack system on poor pinch grips, and made me long for the cool falls of great shadow above our heads where the chimneys began to close. The third pitch took us over a large 'gritstone' over-hang to the 'Horseman's Ledge', before the 'Safety Valve', a squeeze chimney which once it allowed admission would not admit of return. It had taken us some four hours to reach this point, a bad beginning and omen for the harder pitches above where my inefficient hauling and pedagogical belaying were to lose us hours. It was the most strenuous pitch that I had ever done to a technique born of panic, I am not a strong swimmer. Schneider, the young American with whom I had teamed up for the climb, led through on what looked an innocuous pitch. All that was innocuous was my sense of scale after the confines of the intestinal hole.

A frog leaping downhill with easy indifference to the world of exposure lapping below us. Tiny, mocking my gigantic effort in the skin-tearing jam-crack where for the first time I seriously doubted my ability to free-climb the whole route; if it got any harder. . . . Below, on a lower pitch, I had stopped my hammer from driving a peg into a tiny frog, occupying the gloom of a convenient crack. The strangeness of the climb, myself a stranger here with a stranger, made me respect a life that in its insecurity of lodgement seemed my own.

Schneider seemed inspired by the difficulties of the crack that I had led, in spite of his prusik up it, to lead through on a fifteen-foot wide chimney, and in the cold twilight find only the second adequate ledge of our fourteen-hour day. Seconding revived me to lead through and, after a rapid pendulum to

bivouac as high as possible; I was relieved at a long easy-angled chimney stuck with overhanging chockstones.

The chimney gathers the winds to it at night and without a half-sack my duvet was insufficient to bring sleep for long. Long absurd sounds of empty cans clattering down the day below amused us before sleep came.

The next day was only four pitches in length to the groin of the Lost Arrow Spire with the trunk of the chimney, where we were to meet Josephine my wife, with friends who were to leave prusik lines from there, the Notch, as is usual to avoid the final artificial wall. These pitches took me all day to lead.

The third was very hard. Too hard for me at the time, but I had to do it or be faced with a next day of rappels, and days of shame. On the first fifteen feet of the pitch I had used some aid; tired, cold, and scared. Halfway up the pitch I was aware of a further 70 ft of air up which, against my gravity and fear, I had to move. Up the lips of this repudiating gargoyle I had to squeeze myself with cross pressure between knees and heels, and with downward-pointing palms. My puffed and bloody knees, ripe from the night, softly exploded in crimson berries on my dirty trouserless legs. If you are thrown overboard with your wrists and ankles tied, still you will try to swim. I went inside the blackness of the mouth and waited. Nothing would happen; I had to make it so. I risked the flare again with 50 clear feet of air below; a nasty house to fall off. Back I go; look around. At the top to the chimney a nest of stones. I caved up the back and succeeded in threading these together. Less worried now I descended and climbed up the spouting flare from the outside, protected from above. A dead mouse unwrapped itself in my slings as I climbed, lifted by the able wind that held my hair on end as well. No matter, not even that spectre mirrored me; I was succeeding. A few feet higher I had to remove my chest harness, and retie at my waist, as the chimney was too narrow to permit me, corset and all.

That day and that climb ended one pitch above, the alley of my inexperience ringing with my shouting American friend, shouting at my slowness, teaching me. But the prusik lines promised an end, and for a while I forgot myself, and just screamed back, as virtuous as a god.

SUMMARY—California. Yosemite Valley. Lost Arrow Chimney, 27–28 July 1968. Ed. Ward-Drummond, R. Schneider.