Waller's Crack

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(*Plates* 71, 72)

Every climber knows of Ivan Waller, the man who in 1927 with Stuart Palmer climbed Belle View Bastion to the jazz tune of a gramophone on the terrace above. A remarkable lead for its time, that alone has been enough to ensure him a reverential place in several history books. One would expect such a capable leader to have a string of similar firsts to his name, but this is not the case and, though he has seconded some famous new routes, Ivan himself can recall only two others where he has been at the sharp end; Fallen Block Crack on Clogwyn y Ddysgl and an obscure short route on Harrison's Stickle in Langdale known as Waller's Crack.

I first met Ivan through what Sid Cross disparagingly refers to as the 'Alpayne Club' (obviously to Sid's mind even more toffee-nosed than the 'quate plum-in-the-mouth enough Claymers Club'). Despite his advanced age of 78 years we teamed up on the 1985 AC Grasmere meet where, to Ivan's indubitable delight, we succeeded in overtaking another AC party (mere striplings in their fifties) on Westmorland's Route. I usually meet up with Ivan at these Lakeland do's, if not to climb, at least at the evening dinner where in general I try to steer the conversation round to his fascinating reminiscences of the early days: Mickledore Grooves with Kirkus, or the time he called Smythe 'a silly ***' on the Grépon, and such-like. Sometimes Waller's Crack would be mentioned and Ivan always looked up hopefully at this point and said, 'Have you done it?' And I always, not having quite got my Pikes sorted out from my Stickles and thus not really being a hundred per cent certain as to where Waller's Crack actually was, replied rather guiltily that no I hadn't, not yet.

There is something rather special about these AC meets. I think it is the sense of meeting living history on the hoof, so to speak. Everywhere one looks in the crowded basement room of the suitably lacklustre lakeside hotel, one sees faces straight from the books on one's bookshelf. The lines more deeply etched, the hair now grey or non-existent, the owners apologetic for their physical shortcomings of age, it is true, but the glint in the eye for the lady, the enthusiasm in the far-fetched tale is as strong as ever. Lectures are listened to with rapt attention and speakers shoud be prepared for some searching and well-informed questions.

Typically one such speaker, a fellow whose reputation for being somewhat economical with the truth has preceded him, who had just proudly announced his recent 'second ascent' of a well-known Karakoram pinnacle, was surprised to be informed courteously by a diffident but insistent elderly gentleman that his was actually the third ascent. The French had apparently made the second ascent a few days after the success of the original British team.

The elderly gentleman turned out to have been the leader of that team and at the end of the talk he again stuck in a mischievous oar by innocently enquiring of the speaker how he had managed the awkward rock-step between the first and second summits, the second apparently being slightly higher. The ambivalence of the squirming lecturer's answer would have done credit to a politician coming under heavy fire on Sir Robin Day's 'Question Time', and there was a considerable increase in the banging of walking-sticks and deliberate coughing that forms the normal accompaniment to such lectures. In fact these meets are usually so entertaining that this year I finally persuaded my wife Jill to accompany me.

By some strange quirk the weather turned out to be gorgeous and the dog was panting hard by the time we reached Gimmer. He wasn't the only one. The crag was crowded but we found a couple of free places in the Chimney and started up. On a good weekend in the Lakes, on a popular crag, one is unfortunately generally guaranteed to see some fairly silly climbing techniques on display. The pair who belayed on a single small wire and then chalked their way up the Strenuous Chimney probably won the 'Wally Award' for that day, though the leader who later led the Neat Bit and then belayed 20 feet to the right without putting in any protection for his second definitely came a close runner-up (if you'll excuse the pun). By the time we had reached the top I had a pounding headache which even the clear unwallied air of Pike o' Stickle took some time to dispel.

By now it was tea-time and folk were heading down. Yet the sky was clear blue tinged with gold, whisked egg-white clouds sat like meringue topping along the length of Crinkle Crags, and as the shadows lengthened our dog finally found a muddy hole to wallow in. It seemed a shame to leave such a beautiful scene, especially as the dinner wasn't until eight. Across the plateau a short crack set in a gilded wall glistened in the sun. Surely that was Harrison's Stickle . . . and if so that must be Waller's Crack . . . Just the thing . . . Jilly could hold the ropes, I would climb the route and then abseil down to get the gear. The new guidebook said VS, 12m, and put it almost at the bottom of the graded list, so it shouldn't take that long. It would be pleasant to be able to say to Ivan, 'Oh by the way, I climbed your crack today.' I could hardly wait to see his face.

From the bottom the climb seemed somewhat steeper than it had done from the far side of the Upper Dungeon Ghyll bogs. Off-width and overhanging too, and as I lurched off the ground to what looked like a good rest but wasn't, my heart lurched a little in sympathy. I hurriedly fumbled in a poor runner.

The crack now revealed itself to be far too wide to jam, but too narrow to get more than an arm and a leg into. Moreover, it was too deep to get at some tantalizing holds at the back. A few feet up was a small chockstone which I couldn't quite reach. Eventually I udged up to it but it was deep in the crack and this left me nothing to stand on. I slithered helplessly and in final desperation resorted to my usual ploy when *in extremis* – friend stuffing! Fortunately for Jilly, who was anxiously anticipating holding her first leader fall, the friend found purchase midst the moss and a certain amount of entirely accidental rope tension allowed me to thread the recalcitrant chock. A few feet higher a second slimy stone proved just as elusive. Almost an hour of udging, thrutching and

further friend stuffing gained me a yard and a welcome handhold out on the left wall. Unfortunately at this point the crack narrowed slightly and provided no further handholds when facing left. Even the few available footholds were placed in such a position as to require painful contortions of the user. I made a poorly controlled descent back to my non-good rest, breathed deeply, swore even more deeply and tried it facing right.

The problem with this approach was that, although there were now some poor sidepulls, there were no footholds whatsoever. More slithering ensued. I tried it both ways and several times. Despite the coolness of the evening, sweat was pouring from my brow, my eyes were filled with specks of lichen and my clothing was becoming tattered. My fingers were bleeding, my arms ached and my mouth was, as they say down under, as dry as a dead dingo's donger. Worse, I was beginning to feel somewhat silly. But I couldn't not do it, or Ivan would have a field day and several drinks at my expense. Standing on my non-rest, I tried to examine the situation logically with studied calm. As usual, this proved totally hopeless. But years of experience in such situations had not been in vain – with my last protection point almost at waist-level any fool could see that another runner was called for. I udged back to my high point and vaguely waved a bunch of wires at a hidden hairline crack. One of them stuck and provided a modicum of Dutch courage. I recalled other chimneys I had known – Deer Bield Crack for instance – but this seemed far harder. I thought of Winking Crack at Gogarth where the secret had been simply to move further out of the crack than seemed possible without falling off. The pitches seemed similar in difficulty despite the grading difference and I resolved to try the same here. Another udge up, facing left. I reached down and grabbed my left ankle, wrenched it up and placed it on the good handhold – meanwhile jamming my right knee deep in the crack. My hamstrings twanged in protest, but at least now I could try taking my hands off . . . Ooooer! I tried again, this time managing to twist round and grab a small flat hold behind me. At this point my right leg slipped out of the crack and I spun round, dangling from the handhold. I tried to jump my right foot up on to some small dimple, but couldn't get it high enough. After several failures I let go of the hold with my right hand, grabbed the reluctant foot and heaved it on to the hold. A desperate manoeuvre, but it paid off – I was in balance and a few steep bridging moves saw me to the top.

It took two abseils to recover the gear, and what with taking the wrong path on the way down and having to get changed amid the puddles of the Old Dungeon Ghyll car park, we felt lucky to get to the venue with five minutes to spare. The dinner was as entertaining as usual, the average age on our table being, I would think, somewhere around the seventy mark, the food and beer as excruciating as ever, and the projector breaking down half-way through the lecture leaving the speaker to conclude bravely with 'Well, the next slide I would have shown you was . . .' I waited until the liqueur stage before I broached the subject most on my mind. . . .

'Oh, by the way, Ivan, I climbed your crack today.'

'Oh . . .' said Ivan mildly, 'did you enjoy it?'

'Er . . . yes . . . ,' I lied. 'When did you do it?'

'Oh, about 1930, with Jack Longland.'

'Did you lead it?'

'Yes.'

'On sight?'

'Yes.'

'Er . . . did you have any runners?'

'No . . . we didn't in those days, you know.'

'Did you find it difficult?'

'Not really, but I was quite thin then, I almost fitted in the crack. I suppose it was a little strenuous.'

'Oh . . .'

It was not only the cold autumn air which exerted a sobering influence as I left the hotel somewhat later that night.