

# COUNTRY OF NATURAL BRIDGES

By H. L. A. CULMER



**G**RAND GULCH is hundreds of fathoms deep, and winds its serpent way among the rim rocks of the wilderness from Elk Ridge to the San Juan river in southern Utah.

It lies hidden among groves of pinion pine and cedar, an unsuspected pitfall across the way of the few who have dared to attempt the passage from the Colorado river eastward to the Blue mountains. After wandering along its brink for days and days, most of these few have turned backward in despair, while some have persisted to its source and by "heading" the gulch have reached their destination. The country above is easy and rolling, but except in rare seasons of rain it appears to be absolutely without water, and those who venture there may perish unless they bring a guide who can lead them to some secret far-away water hole.

It is vain to look down into the great gulch upon the tantalizing stream that appears and disappears from time to time in

its depths, for there is no scaling its dizzy walls. A year or two ago, however, some cattlemen ventured to make a trail down one of the ravines that come in from the west midway along its course, and at last succeeded in entering the solitudes of this stupendous chasm.

It was along this dangerous trail we groped our way one early morning in April, 1905. There were seven of us, with twenty horses and mules under pack and saddle, exploring the great bridge country in southeastern Utah.

We reach the bottom of Grand Gulch in safety and send the pack up the canyon to camp, while we go down stream, making a path where none had ever been before, amidst wonders wild and strange. The canyon is rarely wider than a few hundred feet, and frequently narrows to a mere slit between the walls. At one point we can touch both sides with arms outstretched, and the trunks of great dead trees lodged among the ledges seventy-five feet overhead tell a story of flood times when the fury of the current must have been appalling. The side canyons that come in at intervals on either



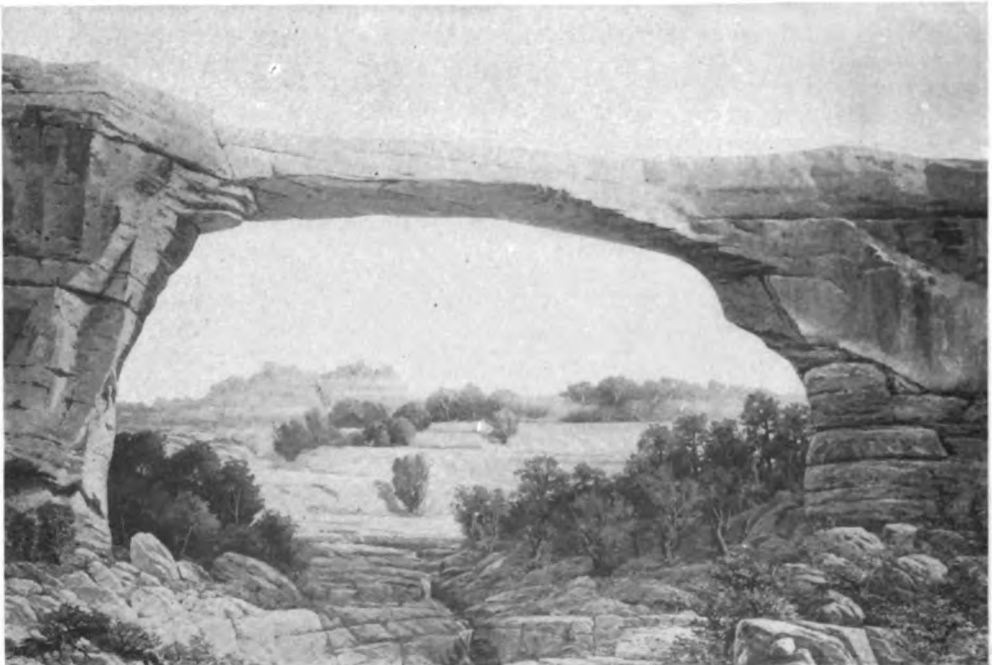
EXPLORING THE OLD CAVE-DWELLINGS IN THE BRIDGE COUNTRY, SOUTHERN UTAH.



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**THE AUGUSTA BRIDGE.**

This is the greatest natural bridge in the world: 265 feet high; span, 320 feet.



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**THE EDWIN BRIDGE--THE THIRD LARGEST NATURAL BRIDGE IN THE WORLD.**

hand are gigantic galleries of rock forms, weird and grotesque. Strange shapes and leering faces disengage themselves from the rocky walls; columns capped with Tam-o'-Shanters, huge corniced portals and wind-carved monoliths. One gorge is like an exhibition of ponderous Egyptian architecture, while another with its circling balconies and great overhanging dome resembles a vast auditorium.

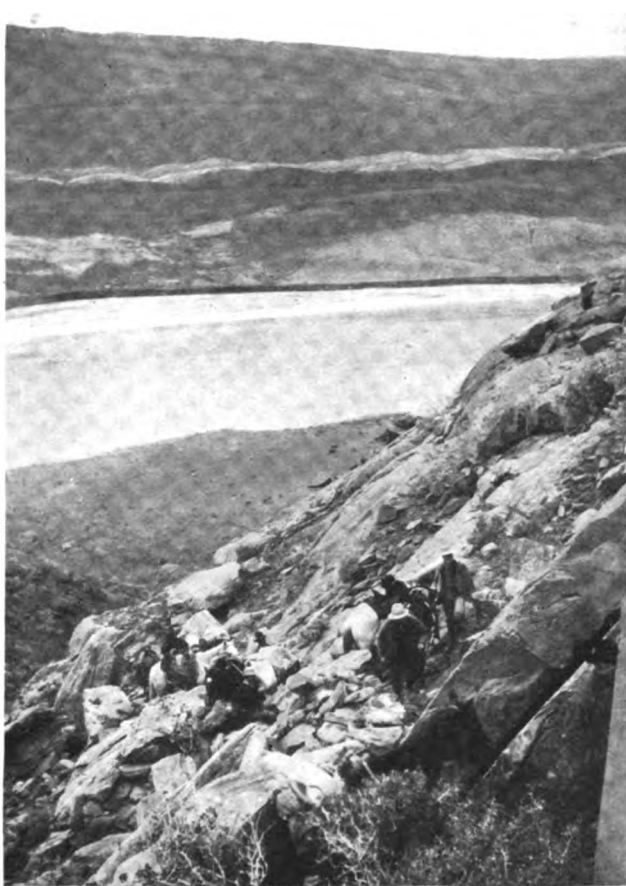
The windings of Grand Gulch are such that in one place we find ourselves separated by a wall only sixty feet in thickness from the spot we left some time before, although we have since traveled nearly a mile; but the most marked characteristic of the gorge is that its majestic cliffs are set about by ancient cottonwoods, the green of whose foliage contrasts finely with the rich red walls.

Another day we ride many miles up this same gulch, amid bewildering arrangements of crag and gorge, the lines growing heavier as we ascend, until they are cyclopean, titanic rather than fantastic—cliffs with great holes through them and rim rocks far overhanging the massive pillars that support them. Such marvels, repeated with infinite variety, continue up Grand Gulch some forty miles farther to its source.

Vastly different are the scenes on the highland above. There, where the winds sweep freely, we look across endless forests of cedar and pine sloping gently from the snowy "Bear's Ears" on Elk Ridge to the far away broken buttes of the San Juan river in the south. In the dim distant blue, beyond the Navajo Indian reservation, the white outline of the Chuckaluck mountains is seen, and far away to the southwest rears the

lonely pale cone of Navajo peak, marking the spot where the turbulent waters of the Colorado and San Juan rivers join.

Many deep chasms slash this forest slope, but they are all invisible from where we stand. Not far away to the north of us is one of the greatest of



DESCENDING NAVAJO PASS.

them, White Canyon, with its forked arms ploughed deeply into the bosom of the mountain. Across this gorge Nature has constructed three colossal bridges, far exceeding in proportions any similar structures in the world. They are the main objects of our adventure into this wilderness, but are by no means the only notable works of nature in this strange

region. Among the cliffs are caves innumerable. Many of them are pleasant places of great size, cool and ferny, and from their lofty shelter the approach of friend or enemy in the canyons below could be easily marked. In some of them, cool springs drip from the ceiling throughout the year, and from the brink huge clambering pines, rooted in the dark and damp, wind their way to outer sunshine.

In scores of such canyons we explored the ruins of structures made by some ancient race, more ancient than any others which have left traces of their ex-



CLIMBING THE GREAT AUGUSTA BRIDGE.

istence in America. There we found stone axes and spear heads, cords made from fiber of the oose plant, pieces of feathered funeral robes, sandals skilfully woven of fiber, long pieces of beautifully twisted black thread, strong and lustrous as silk; bone needles and awls; but never a bit of metal of any description. Pieces of well decorated pottery are strewn everywhere. Many of the walls are covered with hieroglyphics, most of them rude and intended to convey simple thoughts, although sometimes they appear to have been sketched by a master hand and to have a more complicated meaning. They seem to have been brief epitaphs, showing the exploits of those who are sepulchered among the near-by ledges. Some of the ruins are easy of access, while others can only be entered with great toil, and by the use of rope ladders. One of the largest in White Canyon is supplied with the remains of an ancient ladder. Above this, steps have been cut out in the rock, and a stairway of crumbling cedar affords a dangerous but possible means of ascent. This lofty cave is well fortified and contains a number of apartments, pottery kilns and storehouses. Here, as in other places, the walls show many handprints stained with red, brown and white pigments, as though the inhabitants had proclaimed their titles to the places by setting their hand and seal upon them.

As we draw near the big bridges, we feel an anxiety lest they fail to reach our expectations. Three of us have come a long and weary way in quest of them. Leaving the Rio Grande Western at Thompson's Springs, we came by stage to Moab, where Grand river was crossed, thence 125 miles by slow wagon with our instruments and supplies among mountains and wind-swept deserts, jolting over rocky wastes or dragging slowly through deep sands to the little town of Bluff, on the San Juan river. We still have sixty miles to go, but there are no more wagon roads, and we engage four men and twenty animals to take us the rest of the way, although our guide is the only man in Bluff who has ever seen the bridges. Then by devious and dangerous trails we come, over the break-neck Navajo Pass, splashing for

miles up the muddy torrent of Comb Wash, riding the rims of sunken gorges, nooning at water-pockets made by recent rains, sleeping at night in great caves, until the high cedar ridge is reached and the bridges are close at hand.

From where we enter White Canyon, we make our way four miles up stream, floundering among quicksands and waterholes, breaking through copses of willow and scrub oak, crouching under boughs of great cottonwoods, cutting a new trail where recent floods have washed away the old one, and on making a sharp turn in the gorge, we behold one of the most magnificent and shapely structures ever achieved by Nature, the gigantic Augusta bridge!

It is by far the greatest natural bridge in the world, being 265 feet from the stream to the causeway above. The latter is 35 feet in width and 83 feet thick, while the span is 320 feet. Hitherto it has been deemed inaccessible, but several of us reach the top by difficult climbing aided by rope ladders, and by use of our longest line make the above measurements, which we inscribe in durable oil paint, together with the name of the bridge, on one of the abutments. This we do over the signature of the Commercial Club of Salt Lake City, who sent out the expedition. The altitude at base is 6,050 feet above sea level, yet at one time, as geologists have proved, these ledges were beneath the ocean.

The Augusta bridge must henceforth rank with the greatest of natural wonders, and take its place with Niagara, the Yellowstone geysers and the Grand Canyon in Arizona, as one of the masterpieces of American landscape. It is set in the midst of big things. The trees beneath are giants of their kind, the cliffs round about are massive and towering, but the sweeping lines of this colossal bridge dominate everything, making the horsemen look like pigmies and the great pines that cling to its abutments appear like shrubbery. It is of a light red hue, somewhat weather-stained in places, but glowing in color on the under side of the arch where it is protected and where the cleavages are fresh. A sense of enormous strength pervades it, a sense that it has endured for ages,

and will endure for ages yet to come. A short steep canyon, stone paved, and without a vestige of soil, comes in from the south and joins the main arch beneath the bridge. High among the surrounding ledges, are many ruins of cliff-dwellings.

The second in size of these tremendous bridges, the Caroline, is at the junction of Armstrong creek and White Canyon, about four miles below the Augusta. It is heavy and clumsy, the thickness being 60 feet, the height from stream to top



UNDER THE CAROLINE BRIDGE.



A QUIET BIT OF LANDSCAPE IN THE BRIDGE COUNTRY.

182 feet, width of causeway 60 feet, and span 350 feet. In most respects it resembles the Augusta, but is not so shapely and cannot be seen so well, because the surrounding walls prevent a distinct view.

Three of four miles easterly up Arm-

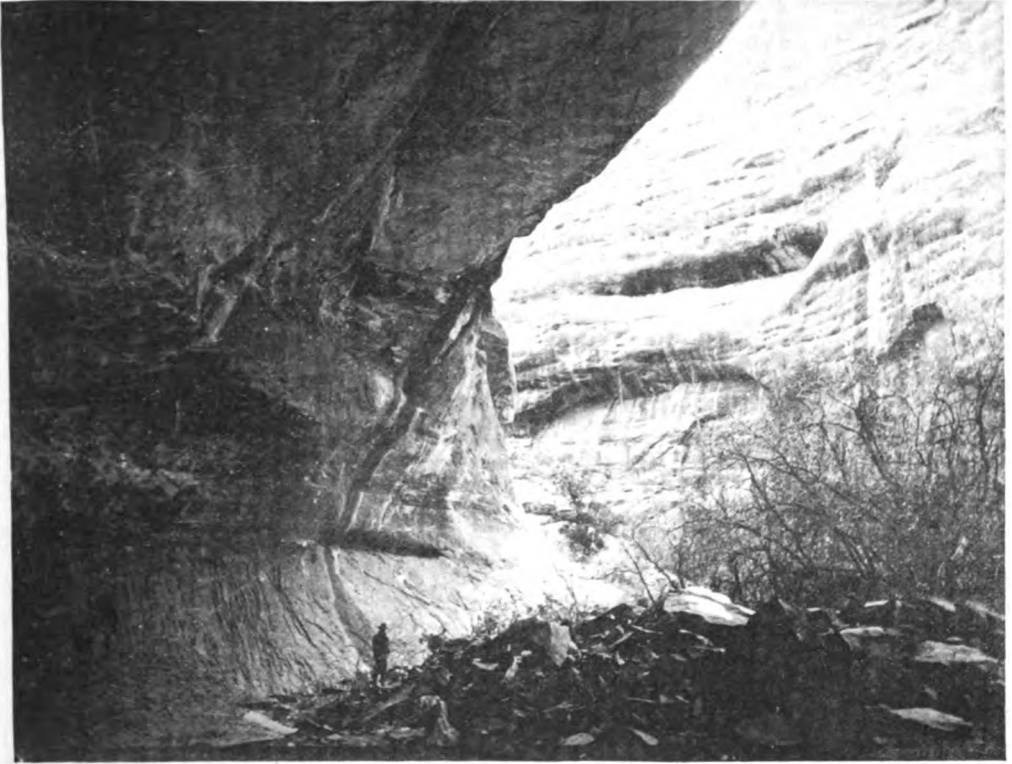
strong creek, is the third of these wonderful structures. We named it the Edwin Bridge, in honor of Col. Edwin F. Holmes, who was the first man to advocate our expedition. This is the smallest of the three, yet is much larger than any other natural bridge known, except those mentioned above. Its span is 205 feet, height 111 feet, thickness 10 feet, breadth 30 feet. It is paler in hue than the others, and while it does not express equal strength and power it is far more graceful than they. A little woodland of fully grown trees flourishes in its shadow, and a rivulet cascades beneath it to join Armstrong creek close by. On its top are many water pockets, now filled with clear, cool rainwater, and a few small cedars and pines grow among them.

Evening was falling as we returned to



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THE CAROLINE BRIDGE—SOMEWHAT CLUMSY AND UNGRACEFUL IN STRUCTURE, BUT STILL PICTURESQUE.



UNDER THE AUGUSTA BRIDGE.

our pleasant camp near the Caroline bridge. That night the moon rose late, and in the starlight I wandered among the spacious caverns that surround the bridge, making my way alone in the silence through deep and dismal passages, among the desolated abiding places of a long forgotten people. As

the night grew, a faint warm glow lit the distant spires and domes, and touched upon nearby crags. Soon fingers of silver light stole beneath the arch, playing with the mystery of those dusky galleries; and slowly the white moon rose over one of the great abutments of the bridge.



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