

Chapter Four

CALAMITY IN THE UNROOFED TEMPLE

EVER SINCE I CAN REMEMBER, A REMOTE CLOSET IN OUR house has held essential things that have outlived their need. There's an ornate sword in there, the one great-grandfather Jenckes wore while parading with the Providence First Light Infantry. There's also a complex device made of tin; it has a small tank with a filler and three lamp wicks, each of which can be adjusted with a knurled brass wheel smaller than a dime. It's the power supply for what my grandfather's generation called a magic lantern, a kerosene-burning slide projector. Camera lenses of the day sometimes made an image that was brighter at the center than at the edges, so the three wicks would be adjusted to burn at different intensities and the magic lantern projected an evenly-illuminated image against a bed sheet stretched across the living room wall. If the room was large enough, the guests were in front of the sheet and the magic lantern behind it; this was called a shadow play.

Those generations did not require the elaborate distractions that fill our early twenty-first-century days, there was not as much noise then, and one or two magic lantern shows in the course of a summer would be remembered all winter long. The outdoor equivalent of a magic lantern show was a hike up to the snow arch in Tuckerman Ravine.

For a geologist, Tuckerman Ravine is easy to describe: it's a cirque cut by a local glacier that remained after the continental ice sheet melted. It was more than that for Starr King. He published *The White Hills* in 1859, and tells us that when he saw Tuckerman Ravine, "One might easily fancy it the Stonehenge of a Preadamitic race, the unroofed ruins of a temple reared by ancient Anaks long before the birth of man, for which the dome of Mount Washington was piled as the western tower." The public preferred Starr King's version.

The ridges on three sides of the unroofed temple act as snow fences and break the force of the winter winds. As with snow fences of every kind, the snow falls to the ground on the downwind side; in this case, into the ravine. The snow piles in from October until May, not just the ravine's own allotment but also the accumulation that's swept from the treeless uplands on three sides. By the middle of spring the drift piled against the headwall of the ravine may be more than 100 feet deep and compacted to the consistency of glacial ice. There comes a time in early summer when that headwall snowbank is all that's left. Now meltwater from higher up cascades down behind it and tunnels through the icy mass, and the snow arch is formed.

Ethan Allan Crawford discovered the arch in the summer of 1829 and he was deeply impressed: "Such was the size of this empty space that a coach with six horses attached, might be driven into it. It was a very hot day, and not far from this place, the little delicate mountain flowers were in bloom. There seemed to be a contrast—snow in great quantities and flowers just by—which wonderfully displays the presence and powers of an all-seeing and overruling God, who takes care of these little plants and causes them to put forth in good season."

Major Curtis Raymond was also impressed. He spent his summers at the Glen House and he thought there should be a way to hike from the Glen up to the ravine to view the snow arch. In 1863, Mr. Raymond began to build a trail extending 3.3 miles from the carriage road to the snow arch and he maintained it until his death in 1893. By that time, the snow arch was drawing admirers from near and far; there was something about the dreadful grandeur of Tuckerman Ravine and the graceful relic of winter still there in mid-summer that people found irresistible. By that time, the snow arch had killed Sewall Faunce.

SEWALL FAUNCE

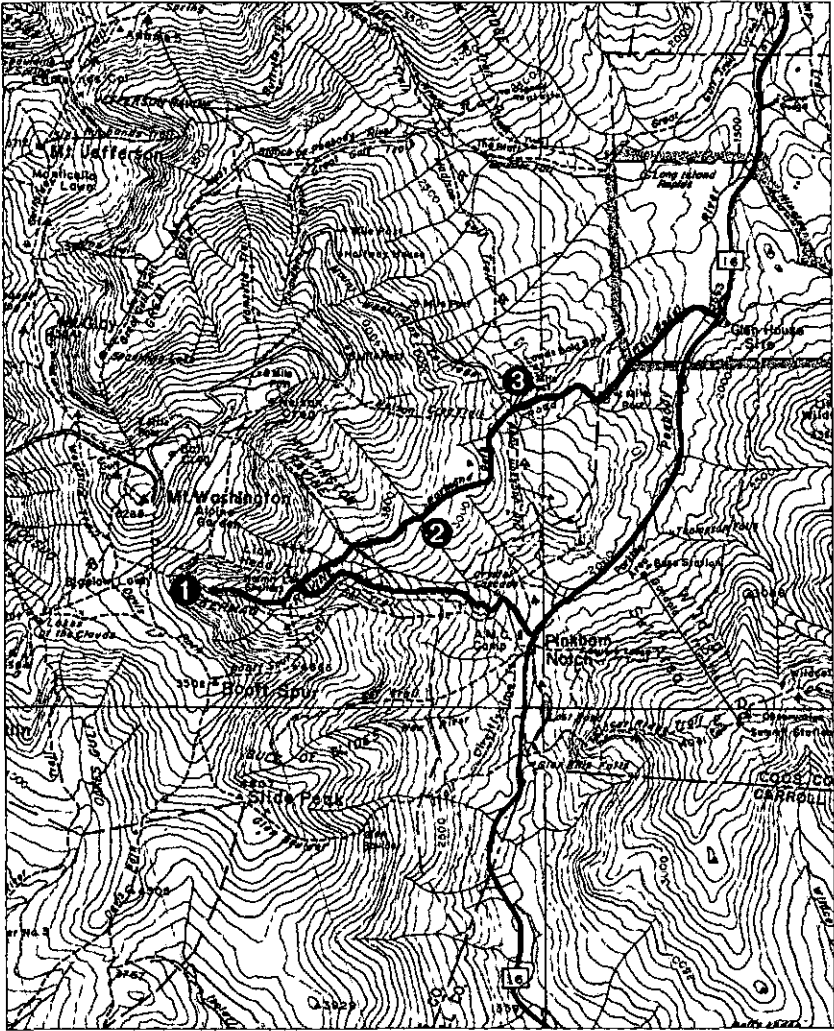
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C. E. Philbrook kept lodgings in Shelburne, New Hampshire. His place was called Grove Cottage, and on the morning of July 24, 1886, a group of eleven guests climbed aboard his mountain wagon and rode to Osgood's Castle, a picturesque creation built in Pinkham Notch where the Cutler River crossed the road. This was the start of the trail up to Tuckerman Ravine, where Mr. Philbrook's guests would view the snow arch. It was a bright and lovely day and they reached the ravine at two o'clock. Edwin Horne was the most experienced hiker in the party and he was accompanied by his wife, three other men, five other ladies, and young Sewall Faunce. The boy had just turned fifteen and his parents back at Grove Cottage had entrusted him to the care of Mr. Horne.

The hikers were in high spirits when they reached the snow arch and the weather, always uncertain on Mount Washington, was so fine that Mr. Horne decided to climb on up to the summit of the mountain and walk down by the carriage road. When his party reached the ravine they saw the snow arch at the right side and he knew the trail led up the headwall still farther to the right. Apparently not fatigued at all by the climb up from the valley, Mr. Horne quickly scrambled up the trail above the rest of his party.

Everyone in the group knew that the snow arch melted gradually until the span could not sustain its own weight, then it would fall and drop tons of ice on anyone underneath it. Accordingly, they did not climb up on top of the snow mass, but they did scamper into that space which Ethan Allen Crawford thought might hold a coach and six. Even the most hesitant visitors are tempted to do this; there's the deep cavern, the dashing water, and the twin contrasts between the cathedral darkness inside and the high blue sky at their backs, and between the frigid air in the cavern and the heat of the day outside. Returning to that new summer, the group found convenient rocks to sit upon while they contemplated the majesties on every hand.

Meanwhile, R. J. Beach and F. D. Peletier were just leaving Hermit Lake, the glacial tarn half a mile back along the trail. They were both from Hartford, Connecticut, and Mr. Beach was a cadet at West Point. They'd arrived by the Raymond Path, eaten their lunch at Hermit Lake, and started on up to the



1. Sewall Faunce encountered snow arch at base of ravine headwall
2. Miss Pierce carried out by way of Raymond Path
3. Met wagon at 2-Mile on Carriage Road

floor of the ravine. They planned to view the snow arch, then climb to the summit of the mountain.

Mr. Lathrop, one of the single men, was standing next to Miss Pierce, one of the single women. Sewall Faunce was standing farther away in front of them. Mr. Lathrop said a few words to Sewall and a moment later he found himself thrown forward as if by the hand of an unseen giant and someone cried out, "*We are killed! We are killed!*" The snow arch had not collapsed, it had not fallen down into the cavern; it had tipped over frontwards, toward the hikers Mr. Horne had brought to the ravine.

Mr. Horne was about 400 feet up the trail on the headwall when he heard the crash and looked down into a cloud of snow and flying ice. At that moment, as one of the men later put it, "We looked around us to see who were lost and who were saved." Mr. Horne rushed back to his friends and found Miss Pierce trapped by several blocks of ice and he heard his wife cry out, "Where's Sewall?" Mr. Horne answered, "My god! Think of his father and mother!" One of the other men remembered, "We did not dare to think, we must *do!*"

Miss Pierce was upright, but buried to her waist in ice and snow and unable to move. The men extricated her without much difficulty, but she was shaken and in pain and they laid her out on a nearby rock. Then they turned back to the enormous pile of snow and broken ice, tons and tons of it, and began picking and prying at it with their walking sticks, trying to find Sewall. They could make no headway at all, so after a brief discussion Mr. Horne decided to try to find help on the summit.

R. J. Beach and F. D. Peletier were just topping the rise above Hermit Lake known as the Little Headwall. They were hurrying to reach the summit but they were not sure of the way, so they were glad when they met several ladies coming down and asked them about the trail. The ladies, however, were not much help. They seemed distracted, they said they had to get to the bottom of the mountain as fast as they could and they said something about an accident. The two young men hurried up to the huddle of people at the snowbank and quickly added their efforts to those helping Miss Pierce.

Mr. Beach, the West Point cadet, asked her if she was hurt and she said she was; he asked her to describe the pain and she said it was in her back and she could not walk. Satisfied that her arms and legs were not injured, the two young men took off their belts and looped one under her arms and



The immensely popular "snow arch" in Tuckerman Ravine killed Sewall Faunce in 1866.

the other around her legs and, hoisting her with this crude sling, they started for the valley.

Mr. Horne reached the summit in forty-five minutes, about half the time usually needed for the steep rough hike. The summertime population of the top of Mount Washington was considerable. The U.S. Army Signal Service acted as the national weather bureau in those days and their observers occupied one summit building. The Summit House was a full-service hotel with a large roster of guests and help, some of whom stayed in the original Tip-Top House. The cog railway and the carriage road kept employees on the summit, and another building was occupied by the publisher, editor, reporters, and pressmen of *Among the Clouds*, the twice-daily newspaper published up there during the summer season.

Mr. Horne went straight to the Summit House with his terrible news and, as a guest said later, "It needed but the intimation of human suffering and death to start a sympathetic and willing company to the rescue." The signal service men, employees of the hotel, the railway and the road, and the entire staff of the newspaper all turned out and started down the mountain with axes, shovels, blankets, and "restoratives," which in the language of the day usually meant brandy.

The rescue party from the summit reached the trouble at 4:00 P.M., just as four other men were leaving with Miss Pierce. Hope for Sewall's life still ruled and the summit group began chopping and digging above the point where they were told he was entombed, but it quickly became obvious that their tools and forces were inadequate. Someone suggested a tunnel and in about four minutes one of the men uncovered Sewall's head, pressed against a rock. As they continued to dig they realized that he'd been standing on top of a rock and was still in the same position, but jammed hard against another rock. There was, as one of the men put it, no breath in his body.

Seven men started back up the headwall with the body, but the going was so difficult that one of them soon hurried on to the summit to find a stretcher and recruit three more men. They rejoined the others just above the headwall of the ravine and regained the summit at 6:15. A doctor staying at Horace Fabyan's hotel had taken the late cog train to the summit and he was puzzled to find scarcely a sign of injury anywhere on the boy's body, though the sole of one shoe was partly torn off.

The women who started for the valley immediately after the accident brought the alarm to the Glen House and Mr. Milliken, the keeper, organized a six-horse mountain wagon with fourteen men and a doctor who would go two miles up the carriage road to the point where the Raymond Path departed for the ravine.

Meanwhile, the West Point cadet, his hiking partner, and two other men were making their way down with Miss Pierce, but they found the carry exceedingly difficult. It could be worse, she reminded them, and pointed out that she weighed only 112 pounds. Thus encouraged, they struggled on down the Little Headwall with the belt arrangement, but this proved so awkward for them and, they feared, so painful for the plucky Miss Pierce, that they decided they could get only as far as Hermit Lake by nightfall. Three of them would stay there and one would go to the valley and return with provisions for the night, then they'd start out again in the morning.

To their surprise, a relief party from the valley met them at Hermit Lake. There was a new telegraph connection from the summit to the Glen House and word of the accident reached the valley immediately after Mr. Horne reached the summit, a factorial advance in the speed of communications. Now they determined to improve the carry and press on through the evening. Having no axe, they hacked down two birch trees with a shovel and

improvised a litter with their raincoats, their belts, and what the West Point cadet gallantly described as "the lady's gossamers." These would have been her stockings, though no gentleman would use that word lest he reveal too great a familiarity with a lady's legs.

Major Raymond's path left the carriage road at the two-mile mark and gained 1,900 feet in 2.7 miles to reach the ravine, a rather moderate grade by local standards. The way was complicated, however, by four stream crossings, two of them twenty feet wide and all filled to the top of their banks this evening with the runoff of waning snows higher up. The rescue party's birch poles cracked twice and they stopped to cut new ones.

A giant of a man joined them and he held back branches and lifted blow-down trees out of the way that four other men together couldn't move. A large stone rolled onto the foot of one of the crew and he was lost to the carry, but after three hours on the Raymond Path, R. J. Beach heard a shout from somewhere in the darkness ahead of them.

"Come and give us a lift," he called, and the answer came back, "I will if you'll hold my horse." It was the Glen House crew with the mountain wagon on the carriage road and in a few more minutes they had Miss Pierce eased onto a mattress in the wagon and they reached the Glen House at 9:15 P.M., just seven hours after the accident.

Two hours later, the body of Sewall Faunce arrived at the Glen House; it had been brought down the carriage road by mountain wagon. The next day, the grieving party gathered once more at Grove Cottage and composed a formal resolution of thanks to the many people who had helped them. Then they passed it by unanimous vote.