

SIMSAGA AND THE MONSOON

By C. W. F. NOYCE

IF you ask, they will tell you that the monsoon in Garhwal and the Kumaon breaks about the end of June. If you manage to get a month in which to climb, and choose this part of the year, you are quite certain to receive a dose of what might or might not be monsoon. But if you are lucky enough to get away out of the heat haze and unhealth of the plains, you will never grumble at the tempests ; accept them only as a graciously given penance, and thank the powers that such heat of the plains has given the one justification, this year of grace 1944, for playing your month's truant at all. To be away, and in the hills, gives courage to return, to work or fight. To remain would risk losing the ability for either.

I chose the time, then, very carefully according to the experts' advice : end of May to the end of June. I chose the place, near enough to avoid too much valley work through the heat, yet right off the trade routes : Sundardhunga valley and the Sukeram Glacier, under the southern rim of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary wall, and Maiktoli. It was a part too with an association, for at Sundardhunga Shipton and Tilman appeared in 1934 down the Maiktoli gorge, having made the first exit from the Sanctuary.¹ Then remained only the finding of a companion who could also play truant in climbing exploration. Geoffrey Rawlinson, by great good fortune, was able to come on leave from Meerut at short notice. We left Delhi a party of three on May 24, with Ian Grimble doomed unhappily to return to the dusty ways after a first sniff at the Sukeram valley.

I had found out, by error rather than by management, some points of organisation last year. This time, with Mrs. Browne's great help, we were able to leave Ranikhet the early morning after arriving in the afternoon before. We had reckoned five days to Sundardhunga, but we were unable to cut the first sweat-laden marches of the Pindari route as short as we hoped, and the long Sundardhunga gorge itself, twining snakelike down from the Sanctuary shield, took a full day and a half. Then the rain began. There was rain, or snow, after this each day up till the very end. The powers were merciful indeed that allowed so much in its spite, and gave too through the clouds pictures that cloud only can give, vignettes of peaks unearthly and high beyond belief, yet beings that it was granted us to climb and to enjoy.

In the first days the problem was to find a way. The Sukeram valley, running under the southern rim from the west, joins the Sundardhunga, which flows south. We had with us a quarter-inch map with which to get up it to the glacier. But there was mist each day, and the valley was snow-filled with its sides usually to all seeming pathless ; so that

¹ *A.J.* 47. 74.

we had to reconnoitre camp before bringing porters up, and at times scrape steps for their assorted footgear. Except for two, they came up in anything, from my gym shoes to the most elegant patent leather. We got a splendid base under a huge block up the valley. From it, a day later, Rawlinson and I found ourselves, with a Whymper and a small cheese-shaped tent, under the lee of the north lateral moraine of the glacier. We had been up from the base towards the southern group of hills; and now from here too appeared what I had dreamed of all through the spring, a line of peaks bounding the south side of the glacier, facing the rim, and dominated by a queenly snow peak, Simsaga herself from the map, 20,010 feet. But we hardly saw them. The Dhotiyals went back for relays of wood, the snow came and blotted us out all afternoon and till the next morning. We had determined—Rawlinson pushed the determination through—both to sleep in the small tent as we should need to higher. And we did, in a cosy fuggy mass. It collapsed on us, with the weight of snow; we were reassured to know that that did not matter. In the morning we awoke from burial to further reconnaissance and, from peeps through the mist, a view of a just possible line up our mountain, if only some snow disappeared. It meant a camp at about 17,000 feet, on a small glacier running right into the peak, and from which one might get on to an upper plateau that supported a thin snow ridge to the secondary summit on the right. It meant bringing two Dhotiyals up to establish and provision; they were all, fortunately, stout enough to be ready to come.

We dug a snow platform at our high point and tried to sleep, but I was too excited. To be at striking distance under a Himalayan mountain within a fortnight from leaving Delhi was a sleep-forbidding prospect. And we simply did not know the possibility of the dividing wall, or the condition of the upper ridge. That evening too the cloud had wrapt us. By 5.15 A.M. we obviously must start. We warmed a little water on Japanese tommy cookers that Rawlinson had brought as an experiment, and which saved us when the primus failed through a faulty washer. Then we got away on to the glacier. At first the snow was hard enough, and we came quickly to the possible breach in the wall barring us from above. Of the three alternative lines I got stuck with ice on the first and most likely, a couloir; but a small icefall corridor to the left took us up quickly and in thankfulness past tottery-looking séracs, to the plateau. Above this the sun had begun to work, in hide and seek fashion in and out of vast billows of monsoonal-looking cloud, that came up to engulf us and vanished as they came. The going was stickier, and we arrived at the foot of the snow ridge proper only at 9.30. There I was bogged suddenly and unexpectedly, up to the waist in new snow and no hope of better. But the snow ridge led only to the secondary summit; under the summit proper, to the left and across a small snowfield, was a line of rocks, and rock at any rate one can stand up on. We ploughed through the field. But at a tiny bergschrund below the rocks I again stuck wearily; and I



Photo, C. W. F. Noyce]

VIEW OF SIMSAGA PEAKS OVER SUKERAM GLACIER.

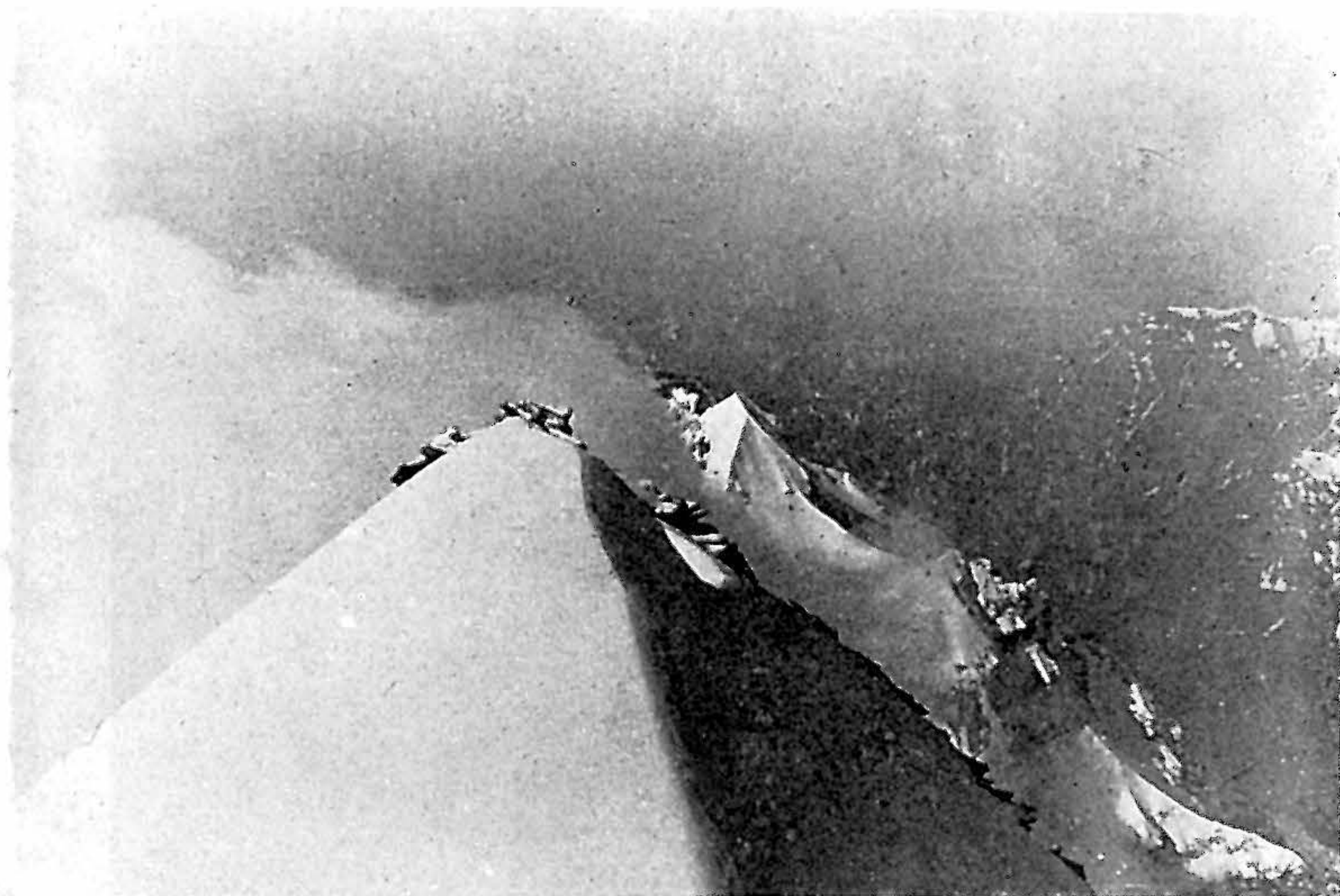
must have become mentally disorganised for a moment, to make the startling suggestion that we should leave the rope, most of whose 150 feet was heavily around me, and get on as we could. Luckily Rawlinson stayed sane. I found then that one could tunnel through, for the odd feet, to the slope above, and, higher, that one could clear off the melting snow and chip easily in crumbly ice below. It was a rest too for the legs, that the arms should work, and for the gasping breath. The rocks when we arrived were as all rocks that we met were—useless and worse, smooth slab with uncertain snow around. But by cutting diagonally straight on we could get back to the second summit, and so along the summit ridge. This from below had appeared a walk. In fact, with the sun-crumbled snow and with the new afternoon fall lying heavily on a slight wavy cornice over the sharp drops, it was almost too much for exasperated temper. We arrived at the top at 2 P.M., panting relief, and tried at once for a quicker way down the other side of the rocks, so soon as we could leave them. And it was quicker, after ice at the top had tried to make it too quick. The rest of the descent is best lost. Part of it was what we called purgatory—the process of having to kick hard facing inwards, into stuff that slid you off immediately you resumed a human attitude. Snow was driving up all the time, blotting our tracks but not otherwise worrying. The two porters had come stoutly up, and in immense calm, with the snow stopped, we were able to pack up and reach moraine camp that night, at 7.30 P.M., discussing on the way down our immense good fortune. We had hardly seen the mountain in its whole height. We had by fluke found the one route really feasible; for the others that we considered from below would have halted us with séracs hopelessly. And though the fresh snow with sun glare through it made for toil and pain, it masked ice which might have given hard step-cutting, and we had no crampons. Then we had porters who would follow us through, and all the month I regretted that there was not time or equipment to train more worthily these Dhotiyals from Nepal, for they would surely rival the Sherpas as climbers, and might outdistance them as companions. We could only put all this down to a tin of half-cooked rice, taken up the first day as a trial for the tommy cooker and left, an unpalatable offering to the goddess, on a sunny boulder.

In the night our faces took on odd swellings and scabs, our lips cracked and opened. This may have been due to the sun through billowy cloud shining between whiles on the new snow, or to the almond oil I had, which perhaps fried us the faster. We returned to the base; and thence went down, through a holiday spell of greenery and flowers, to the head of the Sundardhunga valley and up Maiktoli gorge. The Maiktoli is a brother tributary to the Sukeram, but leading us straight up north-east under the rim, under the loveliest of all heights of that rim, I think the loveliest peak I have seen, the East Maiktoli Peak. To the left (west) of this was the icefall descended by Shipton and Tilman, stretched between East Maiktoli and Maiktoli Peak, 22,360 feet, which Shipton climbed. Below, the valley bed flattens out broadly for

a space, above the gorge, in level pasture to which the shepherds bring their flocks in summer time. We set our Maiktoli camp here, 12,500 feet up.

Unhappily Rawlinson had to return to Meerut, but for our last day together we climbed from a higher camp the 17,600 ft. col which joins East Maiktoli Peak to a peak springing to the south, South Maiktoli Peak, 19,430 feet high. Both these names are my own, our map giving none. Morning was still and icy, with a moon. After fidgeting unsuccessfully through most of the night I suggested an Alpine start, which we agreed would get us up to the col early and before the sun had time more to ravage our complexions. We left soon after 4 A.M. The snow was perfect, almost too crisp. I could find no excuse for an unaccountable puffing, but it led me to take unnecessary photographs and suggest unwanted breakfasts. Rawlinson rightly insisted on the col as our proper resting place. The gentle snow billows steepened towards the end, and crampons might have helped; but it was quick going, and we peeped over at 9 A.M., to be greeted by Nanda Kot in all his glory, and in the far distance all the ranges of the Panch Chuli and hills that the map has hardly dared to explore.

I went on alone while Rawlinson devised protections against the sun, up an 18,500 ft. snow hump on the way to South Maiktoli Peak. From this view point I was in some doubt about the real position of our Simsaga. But from later observations and from the top of South Maiktoli Peak I thought I confirmed fully her right to 20,000 feet. I could now see an upper ridge above me, rather in the style of Mont Blanc by the Bosses, and half determined at once on a heretic journey in the next days to climb it. I could count on fine mornings and afternoon snow; so that, when Rawlinson had to leave, I needed only to take tent and provisions against a forced stay up to 16,000 feet under the col one early morning, and prepare to climb the next. The clouds did this time close round with a black-looking vengeance, as if the weather had changed indeed, and caught me prettily in the comical collapsible tent. The huge circle of cliff here bellowed furiously, in thunder or avalanche, until I had to stop my ears with sleeping bag. But again the goddess was kind, and in fact I think it was pure unreasoning panic that made me believe her otherwise. I got off at 4.15 A.M. by moonlight, in thick but crisp new snow, and through an immense chilliness was kicking past the col at 6.15, unable to stop but this time travelling light and with the one positive goal. Near the top, over the astonishing ridge of East Maiktoli Peak, the square top of Nanda Devi seemed to poke her frown, with Nanda Devi East dodging smooth cloud strata to the right. It was the only time I saw them. The climb ended suddenly, in a blank stare as it seemed straight down the 9000 feet to Sundardhunga and the lower Sukeram gorge. I photographed and fled, for the clouds had mounted again in warning, and slid quickly down, in mockery of my upward labour, to meet the faithful two who had come up a second time. In a sun mist, beside which Delhi would have seemed a coolness, we raced back to Maiktoli



Photo, C. W. F. Noyce]

SUMMIT OF SOUTH MAIKTOLI PEAK



Photo, C. W. F. Noyce]

PINDARI CAMP, SHOWING SOUTH MAIKTOLI PEAK

and more leisurely down that evening to the green land of Sundardhunga.

It is pleasant to walk along a path after pathlessness, to get up late, to see flowers after snow, to stop at the beck of idleness. But the demon of a perhaps purposeless activity, when there is a limited time for activity, is not to be baulked; we were to be found three days later tramping up the last slopes to the Pindari Glacier, again towards the rim but further east still, under dark clouds. We put base camp close to the moraine. In the next days I found that, if the tents stood snow, they could not after four years of war stand the really heavy rain which was only our fair lot. The Dhotiyals retired to a stone and I took the larger and less leaky tent, where I huddled in the less leaky patches wondering on the symptoms of pneumonia. Yet in flashes of sun and intermingling storm the heights again allowed me their vision; first on some rock fingers that stand up on the south flank of the valley, and which above the new snow gave a small stretch of really good rock climbing at about 15,500 feet; then the day after on the glacier itself, on a line through its icefalls towards what I took to be Traill's Pass, and over the largest crevasses that I have ever seen. But time was up. We made our way back to Ranikhet, obliterated once in camp by all night thunder and rain, to listen unkempt and uncomprehending to news of the Second Front, the fall of Rome and all that in the world of 'self-indulgent freedom' had for a month been naughtily put aside.

On larger mountain ventures even such men as Shipton and Tilman have usually found it necessary to produce some sort of scientific result to their justification. Humbly, we could come back pleading only a few microscopic spiders which Rawlinson with a great devotion murdered in alcohol at heights above 16,000 feet, and brought back for the inspection of Brigadier Glenney of G.S.G.S. at New Delhi. They were our one concrete tribute. The other results, besides the knowledge that we could attain this height, were for me these two. I had found that it is possible to live with content mainly on what this district of the Kumaon produces—atta and rice and dal. We took with us ghur, the coarse native brown sugar that we found far preferable to white, and some tins of corned beef, cheese, jam and sardines. But we came less and less to use the tins, except as celebration pieces and to flavour the other things. Vegetable of a spinach character is found in the valleys, and once we had wild rhubarb. The idea of living nearer the land gave a feeling of absurd and quite irrational pleasure, as if one were nearer the hills in other ways too. The second outcome of the journey was unexpected and to me quite startling: the growing bond of affection for the Dhotiyals, and particularly my one-eyed bandit-looking head porter Gunturia. Even before I got to know him he did far more than was needed of a porter: mending, washing, cooking, carrying. Later, when we could talk and smoke together, he and two others in particular, Kalbar and Zudgir, became friends and at the required times climbing companions. I puzzled for long how they might be helped, after I had gone. Kalbar volunteered to come down to the plains.

Yet any first step nearer the plains and to the petty money-grubbing and pretence that sickened me again as I drew nearer to it, could not but make them unhappier. Better, it seemed, to leave them in the hills that we had enjoyed together, salute them in passing and be thankful to have seen happiness; perhaps, I thought, to buy them a new hookah. For they broke theirs, on the journey.

A SHORT HOLIDAY IN THE MOUNTAINS OF SINAI

By J. C. HAWKSLEY

THE mountains of Southern Sinai are admired by many thousands of travellers every year, and viewed from the decks of a liner passing through the Gulf of Suez they are no mean sight. These hills are welcome by virtue of their height after the days of watery flatness in the Red Sea or, if one is going south, as a contrast to the level desert of the canal area of Egypt. I first saw them in 1929. The sun was just rising behind them and outlines were merged into one linear and jagged horizon; I hoped then that I might one day visit these peaks and my wish was granted in 1943. I was posted to Egypt in 1941, a move that at first did not look like being productive of any mountain experience; the Gebel Attaka, a big limestone massif, rising to over 2500 feet, near Suez, provided pleasant walking and safe scrambling; it was whilst in search of more information about these hills that I obtained an introduction to M. J. Daumas. Now he and his friend M. Laroche have devoted their holidays over a number of years to exploration of the Sinai mountains, and I was invited to join them on their next trip. The 1942 leave proved abortive owing to the nature of my duties, and I had to fall back on the not unpleasant alternative of a skiing holiday in the mountains of Lebanon. In November 1943 I was more fortunate in my plans.

Daumas and Laroche have for many years been systematically exploring the Sinai mountains, have checked up existing maps and reports and carried out climbs on many peaks. On the present occasion their expedition began by taking us up a narrow, long and wild wadi, which by the variance of its features from its mapping would appear not to have been investigated adequately before; it also included probably new, though not difficult routes up two of the highest mountains.

As I feel greatly indebted to my friends for their invitation to accompany them and am anxious to claim no share in their observations, beyond altimeter readings with my aneroid, I shall limit my remarks to generalities which may interest any who should propose to visit Southern Sinai. It is much to be hoped that Daumas and Laroche will publish a work on their experiences and observations in the not distant