

## MOUNTAINS OF THE NEAR EAST

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I HOPE, tonight, that you will find it acceptable that I share with you some views and memories of mountains in a region not particularly known for its opportunities to the climber—the Near East. I would preface what I have to tell you with two observations. Firstly, that it will be an incomplete and poorly documented survey. I have not covered all the ground ; the Lebanon, for instance, or the mountains of Turkey. I know that some of you here tonight could fill in many gaps from your own experience of other areas, and with better illustrations. And secondly, that I have omitted all but the briefest technical details of climbing, although climbing opportunities abound. In this latter respect it will be more a talk on mountain travel than on mountaineering. But I know that I am addressing a sympathetic audience when I suggest that one of the useful functions of this Club is to remind the world of mountaineers that their playground has an aesthetic value and a travel interest at least as great as a physical and technical one. I am sometimes dismayed by the trend, to the point of exclusiveness, to regard technique as an end and not a means—to fail to see the mountain for the rock.

I will start with the mountains of Greece. Greece, as a European country, might well object to being grouped in this category on ethnological grounds, but it was as a soldier that I knew Greece and other countries within the strategic orbit of the Middle East. As we have already seen in history, and may see again, her geographical position associates her, inevitably, with Turkey, with the defence problems in that part of the world, and her mountain topography is highly significant to those problems. Hence my inclusion within my title tonight of the mountains of Greece !

It is proper to begin with Olympus, that mountain of mythology, whose snows so compel the eye of the voyager as he enters the blue waters of the Bay of Salonika. A few details of its location and recent history may interest you. The massif, of which Olympus forms a part, consists of an area of high ground flanking the west side of the Bay. Its height, only 9,480 ft., appears to be enhanced by the fact that Olympus, besides being independent of its neighbours, rises abruptly within a mile or so of the coast ; from early autumn until the end of April its slopes above the 7,000 ft. contour remain covered with snow.

There are five separate summits of Olympus. From north to south these are :— Profitis Elias (The Prophet Elijah), an easy shale-covered peak on the top of which is a tiny chapel, which used to be visited annually by the monks from the monastery of Ayios Ioannis, in the

Mavrolongos Glen ; Stefani (St. Stephan or, to the mythologist, the Crown of Zeus), an imposing curve of limestone arête, which was first climbed by Marcel Kurz in 1921 ; Mitika (2,917 m.) (the Needle), which is the highest point, is more broken, but scarcely less imposing than Stefani when seen from its neighbours on both flanks. Skala and Skolian lie to the south of Mitika and are less prominent summits, from which, however, fine precipices fall into the Tigania Glen. Prior to the last war, Olympus was rarely visited. According to Marcel Kurz, whose book, *Le Mont Olympe*, deals admirably with the area, Mitika was first climbed as late as 1913 by two Swiss, Boissonas and Baud-Bony, accompanied by a protective escort of gendarmes.

Indeed, it was not for several years after the close of the first war that Olympus ceased to be the hide-out of bandits, and exploration was attended by some risk. Typical of other adventures was the experience of a German, Dr. Richter, who was captured together with his escort in 1910. The gendarmes were killed, and the tourist held to ransom for several months before a successful deal was made by the bandits with the Turks for his release.

Between the wars, however, the Greek Alpine Club, with an active section in Salonika, built a fine cabin at the head of the Mavrolongos Glen, some 2,000 ft. beneath the summit, and Greek and foreign alpinists used to visit the higher reaches of the massif each year ; yet few of these appear to have actually reached the top of Mitika or Stefani, according to the summit books on both peaks.

It was due to the kindness of the President of the G.A.C. that I was able to use the Club Hut on Olympus, for two months in June and July 1945, as a base for a series of Mountain Training Courses for units of my Brigade Group. I was fortunate in having on my staff Captain Theo Nicholson of the Lovat Scouts, who had earlier been with me as an instructor at the Commando Mountain Centre in Scotland ; he became the organiser of these courses. Taking advantage of the excellent terrain, and the snow which continued to lie in the sheltered gullies, Nicholson succeeded in imparting to Gurkhas, Pathans, Dogras and the men of my two Scottish battalions a considerable amount of mountain lore in a very short time. Rock climbing was done on Stefani, whose narrow, exposed and rickety arête demands a steady head. The Gurkha contingent proved, as expected, by far the most agile on difficult ground, and were able to teach their instructors the art of descending steep slopes at lightning speed ! But they could not be prevailed upon to take snow-slopes seriously. Both during this summer mountain training and later, when we ran a ski camp in an outlying massif, the Central Pindus, the little Gurkhas found the humorous potentialities of steep snow too much for their sense of discipline ; they gambolled and frolicked and were a constant source of anxiety to their instructors !

To the skier, Olympus has little to offer. In winter, the fine slopes above 7,000 ft. on the mountain are very difficult of access and the problem of supplying a party might be wellnigh insoluble. There are,

in the Pindus and the Peloponnese, however, other areas well adapted for skiing. I have mentioned that we ran a ski camp in the Vermion mountains of northern Greece during an interlude between waves of banditry. I have ski'd in the mountains behind Patras, where we enjoyed the unusual experience of descending magnificent snow-slopes with our skis pointing straight downhill towards the Gulf of Corinth. I have also ski'd in the wooded hills only a few miles north of Athens itself, with the famous city spread out in the plain below me.

Athos is, perhaps, unique in its setting of Ægean Sea, rising as it does, at the extreme tip of the long finger of the Akti peninsula to a height of 6,700 ft. It is a striking mountain at all times of the year and from any angle, and in winter its gleaming pyramid of snow provides an astonishing spectacle from the sea, making a landmark for ships.

It should be noted that Mount Athos is the name commonly given to the whole peninsula, which forms the easternmost prong of the curious trident projecting into the Ægean from the coastline of northern Greece. It is the domain of various Monastic Orders of the Eastern Church, whose monasteries are built along or near the coastline of this wild and rugged strip of land. There are twenty major monasteries, which include Russian, Bulgarian and Rumanian as well as Greek. In addition, there are numerous hermitages, which are dependencies to the monasteries, whose occupants have found the monastic life too mundane. Others, again, have renounced entirely their fellow men and inhabit caves at the extreme southern end of the peninsula, in cliffs facing out over the wide expanse of ocean. Most of the monasteries date from the tenth or eleventh century, and are wonderful examples of mediaeval architecture. Their archives include priceless documents, their churches equally valuable treasures. To land on Athos is, as it were, to step back many centuries in time, for the life of these communities has changed very little through the years.

There are no roads on Athos, and to explore the territory it is necessary to cruise in a small craft along the coast, landing as the whim takes you. A curious feature of this peninsula is that entry to it is restricted to males of every species; it is on this account that even eggs have to be imported. In some parts the ban on the female is even applied to the sexless mule.

One evening in August 1945 I boarded a caique at the little village of Nea Potidhia, accompanied by my batman and Greek liaison officer. It was growing dark, and it would be impossible to round the point of Sithonia until daylight in view of the still unswept mines. We therefore made for the tiny land-locked harbour of Koufos, at the tip of the centre prong. As we chugged across the gulf in the gathering darkness, we watched the glow of several forest fires, common occurrences at this season in Greece, light up the hilly skyline of the mainland.

It was nearly midnight before the caique turned into the little cove between the vertical cliffs guarding it on either side. We tied up at a small landing stage, and as a caique is not designed for comfort, we

preferred to doss down on the beach. The little bay was lovely when daylight came ; its sheltered waters reflecting the rim of golden sand and the rugged scrub, and it was with regret that we pulled out to the open sea again, without having explored this wild peninsula.

As we rounded the point of Sithonia we came into an uncomfortable swell. This did not, however, prevent us from appreciating the grandeur of the south-facing cliffs and the distant prospect of Athos itself. I saw three golden eagles which watched us pass from the steep cliffs above us.

Some two hours' cruising brought us close in shore off the centre of Athos, opposite the Russian monastery of Pendeleimon, whose shining cupolas were reflected in the water at its foot. We were still some miles up the coast from the mountain itself, but already it completely dominated the scene ; from the deck of our craft we had to crane our necks to see the distant summit, its white marble rocks glistening in the sun and creating an illusion of snow.

We disembarked to look over the monastery, which was tended by but a handful of the original monks who had occupied it since before the Revolution, and was fast falling into ruin. Then, continuing along the coastline, we finally went ashore at the Greek monastery of Ayio Pavlou, immediately at the foot of the mountain, from which we were led by a friendly monk up about a thousand feet of steep hillside to a hermitage or skiti ; this made a convenient starting-point for our ascent of Mount Athos next morning.

Nea Skiti turned out to be a scattered group of humble dwellings or cells, centring round a church. The monks live in the most austere fashion, and are quite unaccustomed to tourists. They were none the less pleased to receive us ; a house was cleared and placed at our disposal and a simple meal provided. As we sat that evening on a verandah trellised with vines, looking westward to the dark outline of Sithonia silhouetted by the setting sun, we experienced a great sense of peace. At a time when Greece was torn with dissension, subjected to an insidious war of nerves and enervated with poverty, it was indeed a relief to find so close at hand a place where men could live unaffected by the troubled affairs of the Balkans.

The ascent of Athos next morning was a memorable experience. Accompanied by my batman, I set off at 5 A.M., and reached the summit in about 5 hours ; there were no climbing difficulties on this southern side, but fine precipices fall away to the north and east, divided by deep gullies, which even at the end of August were holding snow down to a height of about 4,000 ft. ; a remarkable phenomenon at this latitude. On top is a diminutive chapel, visited annually by a party of the more active monks from nearby monasteries, to celebrate the Easter of the Orthodox Church. We had been told that we should find a well outside the chapel and had been unable to credit the story. But sure enough, a cistern of clear water exists at the door ; it forms a trap for rain and melting snow from the roof and is a welcome find after five hours' climbing up the hot southern slopes of the mountain.

The long views were unfortunately obscured by haze, but the prospect from 6,700 ft. straight down to the sea on three sides, and northwards along the razor-backed spine of wooded peninsula, is remarkable enough. Far below we could pick out the main monasteries as tiny clusters of buildings. It is said that on a clear day it is possible to see the coast of Asia Minor.

Some hours later I was swimming in the crystal clear water of the little harbour of Lavra before boarding the caique which was to take us along the north-east coast—it made a perfect finish to an unusual mountain day.

The mountain mass which forms the centre of the island of Cyprus and of which the highest point is Khionistra, the cypriot Olympus, 6,000 ft., has all the charm peculiar to forest-clad hills. There is a wide variety of trees, among them the massive Troodos pine and the graceful cedar; in spring the ground, normally somewhat bare of vegetation, becomes a natural rock garden. In summer the walker is seldom far from shade to offset the intense heat, and at all times there is solitude away from the beaten tracks. Water is not abundant, but there are few valleys where a stream does not come to the surface at some point, bubbling ice-cold from its subterranean cavern. In winter, some skiing is to be had on Khionistra.

In 1947 and 1948 I spent a few weeks in these hills with my family, and from a retreat in a remote Greek inn, itself a former monastery, hidden in a hollow on the southern slopes of the range, we explored the country in all directions. Walking in the Cyprus hills is a thirsty pastime, and water provided the main motive for most of our wanderings; there were few days when we failed to find a forest pool for a dip. Beauty lay mostly in the foreground of trees and red crags; the hills have little definition of line to commend them. The scene was memorable, too, for its colour—the greens and reds against the deep blue sky in the mornings, and the darker blues and violets of the long shadows cast by the ridges in the evenings, when the last rays of the sun brushed the pine needles and spread a sheen of silver over the mantle of forest. And always there was the peace of the silent hills, a peace undisturbed by the singing of crickets, the cooing of rock-pigeons and the sighing of the wind in the branches.

In *A. J.* 57. 192 *seq.* I have told of our climbs on Pentedhaktilos in 1948 in company with Max Fleming.

I had always wanted to travel in the peninsula of Sinai, to visit the Greek monastery of St. Catherine, and to climb the Holy Mountain itself. Apart from the traditional and, possibly, historical fascination of the region, the mountains are worth exploring from the climbing point of view, and I strongly commend them as rock peaks to any of you who may, in future, be visiting the Near East.

The monastery is situated in the main mountain mass which fills the apex of the peninsula, between latitudes 28 and 29 North, and at a

distance of some 300 kilometres from Suez by road. It is on one of these peaks—there is some difference of opinion, however, not only regarding the exact summit, but also on the general area—that Moses is believed to have spoken with God during the Exodus ; at any rate, it does seem not unlikely to have lain along the route followed by the Israelites after their escape from Egypt. Today, this route can be traversed with difficulty by car, much of the going being through virtually untracked wadi beds, filled with loose sand and boulders. Despite the short distance, it is advisable to break the journey, and this is usually done at the frontier control station of Abu Zenima, on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Suez.

A party of eight of us, stationed in the Canal Zone, set out at the end of April 1948 in order to visit the Monastery of St. Catherine during the Easter of the Greek Church. Crossing the Canal just north of Suez, we followed a rough track down the shores of the Gulf, past several oases. Among them is Moses Wells, supposedly the first staging place of the Exodus, and the Wadi Gharandal, which is believed to have been the Elim of the Old Testament, but today is a bleak trough of sand, holding only such vegetation as camel thorn, tamarisk and a few poor palms. Abu Zenima, besides being a post for the control of smuggling, is the outlet for some rich manganese mines which are worked some miles inland. It is virtually waterless, and like other stations on both shores of the Gulf, is visited monthly by a small water steamer from Suez.

Next morning we crossed the Wilderness of Sin, where, you will remember, the Israelites murmured against Moses—we felt we could hardly blame them—and turned inland to enter the rugged hills which, hitherto, had lain on our left flank. From this point onwards, the scenery began to absorb our interest. The crumbling escarpments of the coast range gradually gave place to sounder rock, and soon we were moving up a narrow gorge, hemmed in on either hand by beetling cliffs, whose water-scoured bases gave clear evidence of the winter torrents. Abruptly, the wadi opened out at the junction of a larger valley—the Wadi Mukattab—where there is an oasis and some hutments. Behind the ridge about this new wadi on the east, rose a splendid parapet of dark-red sandstone, dwarfing the surrounding peaks. This is the Gebel Banat, over 5,000 ft. high. We stopped here to admire this fine mountain, whose clear-cut ridges and spires presented a wonderful harmony of form and colour against the deep blue of the sky. Later, we had another striking view of Banat from the south-east, where an unbroken cliff falls away from the summit ridge for 1,500 ft.

The Wadi Mukattab led us into the Wadi Feiran, one of the main valleys of Sinai. In the early afternoon we reached the village of Pharan, located in the midst of a dense forest of palms. By contrast with the stark grandeur of its surroundings, Pharan is a rich and beautiful spot ; it reminded me of the villages along the Indus and Shyok valleys in Baltistan. It would make an excellent camping site, and a base for exploring the peaks of Banat and Serbal, on which there must be some fine rock-climbing.

In the cliffs on either hand are a number of caves, once inhabited by early Christian hermits ; for Pharan was formerly held to be the site of the worshipping of the Golden Calf, and it was only after these anchorites had been massacred at the hands of the Arabs in the fourth century A.D. that the place was deserted in favour of the present monastery, which the Emperor Justinian built as a fortress to shelter the Christians.

Leaving this delectable place, we finally emerged on to a wide indefinite plateau at about 3,500 ft., and turned eastwards towards a line of abrupt granite peaks, which apparently barred all progress to our destination. The Watia Pass, however, completely cleaves this range ; it cannot be seen until one is close at hand and is a defile as spectacular, in its way, as Glencoe. It was immediately to the north of this pass, on the Plain of Rephadim, that the battle against the Amalekites is said to have been fought, and it may well be imagined that it was on this very ridge which dominates the plain that Moses stood, and by raising his arms, which as he wearied were supported by his companions Aaron and Hur, caused the Israelites to prevail. As we brewed tea beneath the cliffs, we admired the evening light touching the red rocks above us, and noticed with surprise that the gullies were filled with green shrubs.

It was now growing late, and with over 20 kilometres to go we hastened on, entering the Wadi El Sheikh as the sun disappeared behind the hills to our right. In the last of the light the leading car swung sharply to the left into the little Wadi Safsafa, where we saw for the first time the ancient monastery looming dimly ahead of us, partly screened by its garden.

Next day, we set out to climb the two highest peaks in the massif. These are the Gebel Musa, or Moses Peak (7,500 ft.) and the Gebel Katherina—St. Catherine's Peak (9,000 ft.) The former is the nearer of the two, and rises immediately above the monastery ; this is the legendary mountain on which Moses recorded the Ten Commandments. Katherina lies at a considerable distance, and is separated from Musa by a deep valley ; the expedition was, therefore, quite an undertaking. The route up Musa consists largely of a succession of carefully built rock steps, laid with infinite patience and skill by generations of monks. They led up a steep gully in the rock wall enclosing the monastery on the west side. At its head is a small chapel dedicated to St. Catherine, which was once used as a refuge by the monks, when evicted from their monastery by a plague of fleas. Higher still, on a small platform in the mountain face is another chapel, about 800 ft. only beneath the summit ; this is built over a cave, the very cave, perhaps, in which Elijah took refuge from Jezebel. A strange sight here is a tall and flourishing cypress tree, looking somewhat out of place in its environment of bare crags ; it is obviously of great age.

The top of Musa is about 3,000 ft. above the monastery. Our first impressions were marred by a new and ugly chapel, surrounded by an even more unsightly iron railing. But this cannot detract from the view, which is magnificent. To the south we saw, for the first time,

Katherina, the highest peak in Sinai, with its twin summit, Zebir. Its proportions are noble, and it is distinguished from the surrounding peaks by its rock structure, which is not granite, but a darker igneous rock. Ranges of fine granite peaks rise in all other directions, separated by wide, flat wadis, in which an occasional patch of green showed the presence of water and a bedouin garden.

To the east we could see, faintly, another and higher range ; it was not until we stood later on the summit of Katherina that we realised that these mountains lay beyond the Gulf of Akaba, in Saudi Arabia.

Descending steeply 3,000 ft. on the far (south) side of Musa we arrived in a narrow, wild glen known as the Wadi El Lega, at the junction of two steep gorges. Here we found a well tended garden, which is an appendage of the monastery, and beside which we rested before tackling the ascent of Katherina, whose summit seemed depressingly remote ; it was, in fact, 4,500 ft. above us. We found it a hard struggle, arriving as we had, straight from the level sands of the Delta, and I reached the top somewhat exhausted. From Katherina we were able to see both the Gulf of Akaba and Suez, with the tapering peninsula at our feet ; to the south we were much attracted by the bold silhouette of the Gebel El Tebt.

On our way downwards, we made a detour to visit a large pool of water which we had noticed in the wadi. Above the pool we found a cistern cut out of the rock at the foot of an impending crag, and filled with clear, ice-cold water. Such discoveries, when the throat is parched and the prospects of refreshment faint, delight the spirit as well as the body. It is easy, in such circumstances, to appreciate the reference to water in the Old Testament.

Wishing to sample the quality of the Sinai rock, my wife and I spent the following day climbing on the buttresses which rise immediately behind the monastery on the east side of the Wadi Safsafa. We chose the buttress on the extreme left, on top of which an iron cross—one of several such signals placed on neighbouring crags by agile monks—could be seen from the monastery itself. After a false start on some difficult slabs at the foot, we climbed for some distance by a stony gully on the left flank of the buttress, until it was again possible to get on to the face. From this point we were able to keep to the main line of the buttress throughout, picking our way by a series of complicated traverses and steep, short pitches. The issue was by no means clear until the top was reached, and some of the moves were hard enough to make us wish that we had brought a rope. The rock was sound, and the average angle not unduly high, but the typical, rounded nature of the granite and the scarcity of definite holds made for difficulties, despite the comparative lack of exposure. It reminded me very much of the Cairngorms climbing. Our route ended abruptly at the iron cross, where an easy scramble of a further 50 ft. led to the actual summit of the northern peak. The height of the buttress must be nearly 2,000 ft.

We then traversed in turn five of the summits, moving southwards. The descent of the North peak and ascent of its neighbour provided

some interesting movements, but thereafter we had no more than scrambling for the rest of the day. The rock structure of these peaks is curious. It consists of huge sheets of unbroken granite, inclined gently towards the west, and falling vertically on the opposite flank. Between each peak we found depressions filled with hardy flowering shrubs, which must have been a beautiful sight a few weeks earlier.

I will not take up your time by digressing on the monastery itself, its fascinating library, the Burning Bush (still a healthy tree!), the skull room and the many other relics and evidences of its history since the fourth century A.D. All this, though absorbing enough, would be somewhat irrelevant to a talk on mountains. Suffice it to tell you that it is a monument of hardship, patience and devotion to men through the centuries who have found inspiration in a mountain, which they have related with their God.

Apart from the Sinai peaks, the highest mountain in Egypt is the Gebel Shayib, 7,170 ft., which is described by G. W. Murray in the *Alpine Journal* of a few years back.<sup>1</sup> It stands, a noble peak despite its low stature, amid a spectacular array of granite satellites which attract the attention of travellers passing the head of the Red Sea. The range, of which the Gebel Shayib is a part, forms the northern extremity of the so-called Red Sea Hills; it is on the watershed between the coast at Hurghada and the Nile Valley at Qena.

Early in December 1948 we had the opportunity to visit this interesting region. Our main objective was the ascent of the Gebel Shayib, and we also wished to inspect the Egyptian Government's Marine Biological Station at Hurghada and to visit the Roman town of Mons Claudianus, which lies half buried in the hills not far from our mountain.

Travelling by car over very rough going, we reached Hurghada in two days, passing on the way the large oil wells of the Shell Company at Ras Charib. On the way we enjoyed some wonderful views of the familiar Sinai peaks, bathed red in the morning sun across the Gulf of Suez. Before we arrived in the Hurghada oilfield the sun was setting behind the Gebel Shayib, throwing the long serrated chain of peaks into a fantastic silhouette of sharp and tortured forms. The oilfield officials had been warned by telegram of our coming and the Guest House was placed at our disposal. We were pleasantly surprised to find it a well-appointed bungalow, with electric light, gas cooking and running water; this last was a strange luxury in a place entirely dependent for fresh water on the water tanker from Suez.

After spending the morning at the Marine Biological Station, we set out in the early afternoon, driving fast across country over the soft sandy wastes towards the mountains in two trucks provided by the oil company. After the first 20 miles we were already in the foothills, while the bigger peaks began to rise impressively beyond the wide wadis in front of us. After a further 20 miles and crossing the watershed, we turned up a shallow wadi and suddenly came in sight of Mons Claudianus.

<sup>1</sup> *A.J.* 56. 33.

The ruin represents a walled town some 100 yards square, the dwellings within forming a honeycomb of cubicles. Although the roofs had collapsed, the walls, both interior and external, are in an extraordinarily good state of repair, and on the rubble covered floors we found several domestic objects of obvious historic interest. It was, indeed, tantalising to imagine what must lie buried in this, as yet, unexcavated town. A little above and beyond is a temple similarly well preserved, and in the surrounding hills we found amazing evidence of the industry which had attracted the Romans—the quarrying and dressing of the local red granite and the Royal porphyry. Wedge marks in the rock faces showed where great slabs had been split off by the action of water on wooden blocks. Tablets and cubes of stone lay around in profusion, some of them inscribed. Most interesting of all were the pillars, in every state of completion from the rough, unfinished ‘log’ of rock to the perfectly rounded and polished article ready for export. One such monster measured no less than 8 ft. in diameter and 50 ft. in length; it must have weighed a great many tons. Completely finished, this work of art had split across the centre, presumably while the craftsmen were in the act of moving it from its horizontal bed of rock. In the wadis were numerous high stone cairns or platforms, so placed that the slave masters could sit upon them and supervise the work.

That night, we bivouacked on the watershed at about 2,000 ft., and at dawn next day we set out to cover the 11 miles and 5,000 vertical feet which separated us from the summit of the Gebel Shayib. We had first to cross an intervening ridge to reach the great sand stream of the Wadi Abu Abid which lies beneath the South face of the mountain. Misinterpreting a sketch map in Murray’s article in the *Alpine Journal*, we wasted precious time and effort in getting over this ridge; a maze of shallow wadis and indefinite, stony hillsides barred our view of Shayib and made navigation a difficult problem in the half-light. It was not until 7 A.M. that we stood on its crest, and looked down on the upper reaches of the great Wadi Abu Abid, and across it to our peak. About  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles wide, this sand-filled wadi reminded me forcibly, both in appearance and scale, of some Karakoram glacier.

From this side, the mountain presents a complicated structure of twisting couloirs and bold intervening buttresses. It was clear that a number of routes offered themselves to the foot of the final ridge. But with a bare minimum of available daylight, and with only this one day to spare for the peak, we elected to follow a proven route rather than explore an alternative of our own; we therefore followed Murray’s footsteps via the head of the wadi and round to the North face.

Dropping 600 ft. on to the level, sandy surface of the valley, we made our way upstream, until we were able to gain the foot of a steep gully. Time passed relentlessly, and it was already after 9.30 A.M. before we emerged from the head of this gully into a sheltered amphitheatre beneath the westernmost peaks of the ridge, which now rose not more than 1,000 ft. above us. Here we left most of our paraphernalia, before ascending towards a gap between these summits.

From this we had, at last, a view of the main summit itself. A smooth, square tower of grey granite, it was still about two miles distant along the ridge, and depressingly high above us. Our weariness increased as we continued below the crest of the ridge on the north side. The ascent of a final, boulder-filled gully, leading to a col on the ridge immediately north of the summit, taxed us to the utmost. From this col, there remained 150 ft. of apparently unscalable rock, but by descending for a short distance on its far side, we were able to skirt the uncompromising walls and attain a gap dividing the tower into two distinct turrets. After a few minutes of moderate scrambling we stood, exactly at midday, beside the cairn built by Murray 27 years before.

The day was somewhat overcast, and in the dull light the stupendous panorama lost some effect. Despite this, we were rewarded with an extensive view, ranging from the Sinai massif 130 miles to the north, to the deserts beyond the Nile Valley, at least 100 miles westwards. The coastline could be traced for very many miles; beyond it lay the tapering apex of the Sinai Peninsula, a dark shadow on the deep blue of the ocean. At our feet, 4,000 ft. below, the Wadi Abu Irn bounded the eastern base of the crags on which we stood. The day was still, yet we knew that only 30 miles away a high wind was blowing on the shores of the Red Sea.

Time passed all too quickly, and after 20 minutes we had to start down knowing that already there was hardly time to return to our camp in daylight. It took us  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours to get back to the little plateau beneath the western end of the ridge; we were both suffering severely from thirst, and I was frequently seized with cramp in both thighs. The descent of the long stony gully to the Wadi Abu Abid proved to be as great a trial as on the way up, but worse was to come. The 600 ft. which had to be climbed to leave the wadi and gain the crest of the last intervening ridge was, in fact, a task more severe than the climbing above 24,000 ft. on Saloro Kangri had been 14 years before; we were almost on hands and knees with fatigue. Once up, however, I found a final burst of energy, and with less than half an hour of daylight remaining, decided to hurry on down to reassure the remainder of our party at the bivouac site. At 5 P.M. (it was December and quite dark) we were reunited, and my wife and I were being plied with mugs of hot cocoa; it was mainly of this moment that we had been thinking for the past several hours.

Ours was the sixth recorded ascent of Shayib. It may interest you to know that throughout the day we had found abundant traces of wild life; ibex (of which we picked up a horn), gazelle, marmots and what we were later assured were wild asses. There had been no sign of water, but certain holes do exist at scattered intervals in these stony wastes.

I have taken you on a rapid tour of some of the mountains lying around the focal centre of the Egyptian Delta. By and large, they are little hills, shrunk in the process of time to mere pygmies beside the temporary giants of this age. Some of these regions have long been exposed to a

climate which makes them barely habitable by man. Yet they have retained a certain boldness in outline and their very remoteness gives them a particular romance.

You cannot compare these mountains with the Himalaya or, at the other end of the scale, with our own hills, to the advantage of the one or the detriment of the other, if only by reason of the physical distance which separates them. I have been as awed by the rugged grandeur of the Mavrolongos Glen on Olympus as by the rhododendron-clothed slopes of the Zemu Chu ; my eye has been as deceived by the scale of the Sinai crags as by the spires of Saltoro.

Moreover, you cannot qualify Beauty ; it is Infinite and Absolute. But I am conscious of preaching to the converted. The Spirit of the hills exists, in these bastions of the Near East, as it exists elsewhere, and awaits the true seeker.