

AFRICAN HOLIDAY

By G. A. DUMMETT

WHEN Geoffrey Furlonge, now Ambassador in Ethiopia, asked me to join him in an ascent of Mount Kenya, I was very tempted. When he added that he proposed to approach it by crossing the Southern Ethiopian Desert in a jeep I found myself quite unable to resist. Accordingly, the middle of January this year found me arriving at Addis Ababa airport with a variety of rather tatty equipment, suitable for both tropical heat and high-altitude mountaineering.

After a day or two's stay in Addis, Furlonge, Ronnie Peel, his Counsellor, and I piled into an old Dakota bound for Maji near the Sudanese border in Southern Abyssinia. Our route from there was to cross the desert country west of the river Omo to Kalam, the capital of the new Galubba Province; thence along the shore of Lake Rudolf to Lokitaung, through Kenya North Frontier Province, and eventually, via Lodwar and Moroto in Northern Uganda, to the Murchison Falls Game Park lying near the head of Lake Albert at the junction of the Victoria and Albert Niles on the Uganda Congo frontier. Thence we were to return through Southern Uganda and Kenya to Nairobi, there to join another Club member, John Howard, in an attempt on Kenya.

The Dakota was of a kind unfamiliar to those accustomed to normal air travel. There were no seats, only a sort of aluminium slide down each side of the fuselage. Passengers, animals and freight were all indiscriminately jumbled together. Fortunately the pilot asked me to sit in the cockpit for most of the journey and I was thus able to get a splendid view of the magnificent hill country of central Ethiopia.

Eventually we were put down at Maji airport, which surprisingly consists only of a clear strip of sand and a tree; no building, no fuel, no-one in charge, and bush and scrub as far as the eye could reach. Here our two Land-Rovers from the Embassy were waiting for us with two Ethiopian drivers and a Sudanese guard who turned out to be excellent and helpful fellows in every way. They had driven the cars down the track from Addis Ababa, and it is typical of the state of the roads in this part of the world that what had taken us a bare two hours' flying time had taken them nine days' hard driving.

We set out at once on a rudimentary track which had apparently last been crossed by white men three years ago, and then at an average speed of no more than six and three-quarter miles an hour. We did a great

deal better than that and managed an average of eleven over the first hundred miles or so to the first village we reached, but there were times when we were glad to do even as much as four miles in an hour on the level.

The desert here is not just an empty waste. There is too little to support human life, but there are thorn bushes everywhere and an abundance of game. We saw many sorts of antelope and gazelle and even baboons, and there are lion and hyena though we did not see any. Birds of every size and shape abound from ostrich, secretary birds and vultures down to weaver birds and the brilliantly coloured Abyssinian roller. This semi-desert country forms part of the Great Rift Valley and here is an enormous flat expanse out of which rise chains of lava hills looking at a distance like moon mountains. It is bounded on either side by mountain ranges running up to about 8,000 ft., and is split down the middle by the Omo. Often the landscape is dotted with what looks like diminutive factory chimneys ten to twelve feet high, nests of the white ant which give an added touch of unreality to the already fantastic view.

The first night we camped in the lee of some thorn bushes in the open desert and were glad of the boys' fire and Mahmoud, the guard's, rifle in the night when a lion killed close by. Ronnie Peel had a splendid rickety marquee and camp bed to sleep on, but Geoffrey and I made do with Meade tents and Lilos which we found perfectly satisfactory even in the considerable heat of the Rift Valley.

For the most part we lived on tinned food, though we did on one occasion try a Great Bustard, a huge long-beaked bird rather like a cross between a heron and an ostrich, and to my mind tasting just about as attractive although Ronnie had assured us that a cut off the breast would be even more savoury than turkey. We didn't bother much about water. We of course carried a reserve in tanks and used this for making tea or coffee, but for the most part we relied on lager or whisky and soda to quench our thirst aided by large Thermos flasks of ice. This we excused on the grounds that it avoided any possible trouble with typhoid or other noxious bacteria.

The main object of our journey was to investigate some blood-curdling frontier incidents on the spot and to discuss the action to be taken with the Kenya and Ethiopian authorities. A few months before, some two hundred Kenya Turkana had been atrociously butchered by the Ethiopian Galubba. In the middle of our second day's travel we came on the first human habitation and met some of these gentry. They proved to be sufficiently startling in appearance.

They were Hamitic in race and magnificent specimens physically; tall and lithe with better features than the Bantu Africans with whose appearance we are more familiar. When out hunting or with their

goats, they wear no clothes except for a blanket or hide hanging back from the shoulders. The hair is caked in red mud with a phallic symbol on the forehead decorated with an ostrich feather or two. Tribal scar marks disfigure the face and the whole torso. The lower lip is pierced and bears a large white enamel disc attached to a ring threaded through the hole. They carry long spears and also often a knife or bow and poisoned arrows. Invariably they also carry a curious wooden contraption which we afterwards found out was a head-rest for sleeping in the shade, for in this part of the world only women do any manual labour. The women for the most part wear a simple blanket skirt and elaborate necklaces and earrings of beads. They speak a language which was quite unknown to all of us, including the Ethiopian drivers. We were rather chary of taking photographs of these characters for they are liable to regard the camera as the evil eye and to murder accordingly at sight.

Their life is extremely primitive. It is entirely pastoral, for they have neither the wheel nor the plough nor, except by accident, fire. Their huts are made by simply throwing leaves or hides onto a framework of bent sticks. Existence with these people is marginal, and somehow one could easily feel that life under these circumstances was bound to be cheap, for death can come at any time and generally in an unpleasant form. Moreover, frontiers can mean very little here where they often consist of no more than imaginary lines passing across huge expanses of flat open desert.

A few miles further on we came to the first habitable places which consisted of more elaborate grass huts inside a stockade with detachments of Amharic guards. The Provincial Capital, Kalam, was distinguished from others only by the fact that it had a two-storey grass hut in it which was the Governor's official residence. Beyond we found our way eventually down to the banks of the Omo ; a huge river about the size of the Rhine with beautiful trees and shrubs and lush green grass growing on either bank for about fifty yards before the bare desert started again. We camped here by the water and had several most enjoyable bathes in the river until the Ethiopian Provincial Governor turned up and pointed out very large crocodiles lying in the water practically invisible both up-stream and down-stream from our bathing place.

After the official conversations were finished, we moved on south and west through the lava desert country of Northern Kenya and Uganda. As soon as we crossed the Moroto Hills into Uganda proper the countryside changed to a heavily wooded one, fertile, with many sorts of crop and flowering shrubs, in complete contrast to what we had been passing through before. Eventually, some three days from Kalam, we reached the Murchison Falls Park at the head of Lake Albert,



SOUTH FACE OF BATIAN AND NELION FROM SOUTH RIDGE OF NELION UNDER POINT JOHN.

one of the two great game parks recently established by the Uganda government and now run by Rennie Bere, another Club member, who is Chief Warden. At the Murchison Falls itself the Nile plunges over rapids and then four hundred feet down through a gap in the rock only some twenty feet wide at the narrowest point. The Game Reserve lies on both banks of the Nile over some thousand square miles. It is simply over-running with big game.

It is curious that animals which will either flee from or attack a man on foot are quite oblivious to his presence in a car or in a launch so that one can get quite close to even comparatively dangerous animals without harm in this way. We motored about the Park seeing elephant at almost every turn ; in fact round one bend we nearly bumped into the back of an old bull. Herds of buffalo and all sorts of antelope and gazelle wander at will over the open bush and baboon, pig and rhino are easily found.

Our most spectacular trip, however, was up the Nile by launch. Everywhere groups of hippo stew and wallow in the water, and enormous crocodile bask on sandbanks in the sun or glide across the bank with horrifying rapidity into the water. We disembarked from the launch a mile or two from the Falls and with an armed guard walked along the river bank and up the Falls themselves, a superb sight.

For two nights we camped in the Park above the Nile, and, curiously, were not troubled by any of the game in any way whatever although elephant passed quite close to our tents and rootled very destructively in the wardens' gardens. Then we set our course eastwards for three days through Southern Uganda and across the Kenya Uplands to Nairobi where Ronnie Peel left us and took the Land-Rovers back to Addis Ababa.

The following day, after a hectic last-minute re-pack and final oddments of shopping, Geoffrey and I set off in a Land-Rover which he had managed to cadge for us, round the western side of Mount Kenya through Nanyuki to Meru, our base for the ascent, where we spent the night. On the way round, we had our first glimpse of the mountain, a double pinnacle of rock rising extraordinarily cold and aloof from a high saucer of upland moorland which surrounds it. I did not, at that stage, think very much of our chances of getting up, for I had had no proper exercise for a couple of months or so. While Geoffrey was in rather better training, he gave even me a year or two in age and had felt the altitude very badly when he had been up to the foot of the mountain some year or so beforehand.

At Meru we met John Howard who was leading the expedition and who has an unrivalled knowledge of the mountain, and indeed of East African mountaineering as a whole. He had organised the trip and I must say that in spite of the large numbers involved it went

magnificently smoothly. We dined that night with Peter Fullerton, the District Officer at Meru, who was also a member of the climbing party and who had arranged our porters for us.

Our approach was the long route from Chogoria on the east side. We had chosen this partly because it is scenically more attractive than the shorter routes from the east, but also because we had a large safari of porters carrying bits of the new Arthur Firmin Memorial Hut and this route would be rather easier for heavy loads. Accordingly, the next morning we collected a vast quantity of most unattractive looking animal limbs for the porters' food and then drove down the winding dust road through Chogoria and up into the camphor forest. The last two of the climbing members of the party, John Lane, a Kenya farmer, and Kisoï, an African who had been cook to Arthur Firmin and then assistant in his photographic business, were to follow on a day later.

The bright red dust track carried us up beyond the Mission station and into camphor and cedar forest. At first the going was good, but the sky was overcast and soon the track became difficult and we had to haul the jeeps by rope over some passages axle-deep in mud. Eventually the track expired in an open clearing and there, in by now bright sunshine, we met our porters, thirty-nine of them.

Special permission is still necessary to take an expedition on the mountain for it is still Mau Mau territory. It was, then, with a little concern that I learned that our porters were Kikuyu and Meru, their near relatives, a concern which was not lessened when I saw the villainous curved panga knives which they carried. I need not have worried, for they turned out to be excellent chaps; like prep. school boys, always ready to try on a complaint about the size of loads and the distance they were supposed to carry them, but cheerfully accepting the fact when they found there was no getting out of it.

After enormous argument, and weighing and re-weighing the loads, we set out in the hope of reaching Urumandi, a hut beyond the forest belt, that night. The track led at first through camphor forest and over open grassy clearings till, after a few miles, it evaporated in bamboo through which we had to find and cut a way uphill. Bamboo grows very close, and is only broken by arched tracks made by elephant and rhino lumbering through it. It is next to impossible to see where one is going and there is of course no track. As usual on these occasions, we were blessed with a know-all who claimed to have known the way since childhood and who, of course, got us hopelessly lost. Cutting and pushing our way through was heavy work, especially in the heat of the day, and we were all pretty tired when we emerged at sundown from the bamboo into a beautiful park-like landscape of grass dotted with splendid trees with fell country rising behind.

It was now clear that we could not reach Urumandi that night so we pitched our first camp above the bed of a stream. Here we were visited by an old bull elephant, the only game we saw on the mountain, who soon made off when he saw the fires and a few brandished knives.

The next day was a long trudge past Urumandi and up steadily rising grass slopes, eventually following the precipitous edge of the superb Gorges Valley in which the river ran 2,000 ft. below us, its upper precipices framing the final rock bastions of the peak beyond.

The effect of altitude is much more marked in the tropics than in the temperate zone ranges such as the Alps or Himalaya and at about 12,000 or 13,000 ft. we all began to feel the effects of rarefaction. John Howard, in fact, had to pack up about half-way to follow on the next day. For the rest of us the going became very hard and personally I was reduced to five minutes' walking with ten minutes' rest, feeling very sick at that. The porters struggled more and more and we found less and less energy to whip them up, so that eventually we called it a day earlier than we had intended, and camped nearly a 1,000 ft. below Hall Tarns which had been our objective that night. We were now out of the zone of ordinary vegetation. Trees and familiar plants had practically vanished and their place was taken by the fantastic giant groundsel which grows up to about twenty feet high, and giant lobelia which looks more like a giant loofah than a plant, let alone a lobelia.

The following morning was brilliantly fine and hot. While we waited for the others to come up I went off on my own to the little rocky peaks on the north of Gorges Valley for a practice scramble. Coming back to camp I met John Howard, John Lane and Kisoï with their party of porters, and we then packed up and made on to Hall Tarns, our next camp. There are three or four little tarns lying together in a shallow saucer, one edge of which plunges down some 1,500 ft. perpendicularly into Gorges Valley below. On the other side a chain of fantastically shaped volcanic peaks rises, while the head of the valley is blocked and dominated by the buttresses of the North face of the summit massif. Here we were able to send most of our porters back and leave a permanent camp, for only a half-day climb over boulder and scree lay between us and the Top Hut.

Accordingly, about midday found us with our half-dozen tiger porters at the hut. This is, or rather was, a miserable contraption eight or nine feet square, in which four of us slept, the other two camping outside. The situation is superb. One looks straight across the Lewis Glacier to the East face of Nelion ; on the right Point Lenana rises behind a frozen tarn, the Curling Pond, which always had several inches of ice on it whilst we were there ; to the left the ground drops fairly steeply away and a prodigious view out over the upland farms to the Aberdare Hills is revealed.

Life at Top Hut was hardly comfortable. We all suffered the usual minor ills, upset stomachs, sniffles, sore throats, lack of appetite and the like. It was pretty hot in the daytime in the tropical sun for the mountain is almost exactly on the Equator, but at night it was remarkably cold. I personally slept inside two sleeping sacks wearing full climbing clothes, three sweaters and two thick layers of woollen stockings. Even so, I was barely warm enough. Even inside the hut the water in the tin froze solid every night. Kenya certainly lives up to its native name which means The Cold Mountain.

That afternoon Geoffrey, John Lane and I did Lenana, which is a perfectly simple snow and rock scramble, not requiring a rope. The only difficulty was due to mountain sickness from which we all three suffered, more or less. In the meantime John Howard, Peter Fullerton and Kisoï had gone off to reconnoitre the way over the Lewis Glacier and to look at the East face for we had decided that under the circumstances we had better all stick to the ordinary route.

On their return from the mountain they reported that conditions were good and the rocks open and dry. So, the next morning the three of them set out for the climb while Geoffrey, John Lane and I crossed the Lewis Glacier to make a route along the ridge between Point John and the terminal point of the South ridge of Nelion. This we found was an amusing but not difficult rock climb, with only one pitch of any real difficulty in it. It was John's first day on rock and he made a very good job of it. While we were on the ridge we were able to look across at Nelion and Batian high above us and saw the others descend to the gap between the summits above the Diamond glacier, well named Gate of the Mists, and pass across it on to Batian. They had thus completed the traverse and Kisoï had thereby become the first African to set foot on the principal summit.¹

We made our way very easily off the ridge down a rotten couloir and were back in the hut in good time, while the others came back off the mountain having completed the normal traverse of the two summits just as we began to think we ought to go out to support them, for darkness was falling, though we had heard them on the mountain for an hour before.

For Geoffrey and me it was now or never to get the peak, for just after we got down from Lenana a police plane appeared from nowhere and dropped a message recalling him urgently to Addis Ababa. In the course of making the drop just over our heads the pilot had done some superb stunt flying, including passing between the two main summits over the Gate of the Mists. We had calculated that we could just get

¹ Mtu Muthara reached the summit of Nelion in 1938. A Kikuyu named Ali made several trips to Nelion and in 1949 died on the mountain. See *A.J.* 53. 215 and *A.J.* 60. 270.



ON THE EAST FACE OF NELION ABOVE MACKINDER'S CHIMNEY; IN BACKGROUND
IS MACKINDER'S GENDARME.



EAST FACE OF NELION FROM TOP HUT.

the climb if all went well and had therefore sent the last of our porters as a runner down to carry a message calling for transport to meet Geoffrey on his way down on the Nanyuki side of the mountain two days later. We had felt it necessary to have a day's training rock climb before we chanced the peak and therefore everything depended on good weather for our climb the following day.

Fortunately it was a brilliant one and we left the hut at 6.45, rather late as it turned out, armed with some pencilled notes as to the route culled from John Howard the night before.

We crossed the Lewis Glacier straight towards the East face where a bay of scree rises high up onto the rocks. At the top of this we took to the rocks and climbed vertically upwards for some 300 ft. until we met a ledge traversing left. This we followed until it abutted on a shallow couloir containing remnants of snow. At this point we traversed back to the right for some 300 ft.

So far all had been little more than scrambling, but we now reached the foot of the first main obstacle, Mackinder's Chimney. This is an intimidating place with a great overhanging roof at the top. In fact it is not anything like as difficult as it looks, for five or six pitons have now been put in at the top. I preferred, however, to look at the alternatives. The first, the Rat Hole, a nasty little groove with an overhanging set of chock stones at the top through which one has to crawl, I did not like much better, and consequently, by process of elimination, took to the buttress still further to the right which proved fairly hard but open and pleasant climbing. The route then continues pleasantly straight up to the main ridge and one climbs along it for 100 ft. or so until it steepens up markedly. At this point we traversed left over onto the Diamond glacier side and moved over snow and broken rocks to a gulley leading back to a gap in the ridge. The way is barred by two steep cracks, Shipton's Cracks. Both could be strenuous if tackled bull-in-a-china-shop fashion, but can be climbed neatly without too much effort. This was important because at this stage already we were finding ourselves feeling tired and rather short of breath.

Immediately afterwards comes the crux of the climb. From the gap one moves up the ridge until a flat platform leads off to the right at a point where the ridge steepens suddenly. This *Vire des Bicyclettes* ends in a steep crack, the so-called Rickety Crack. In fact it is not rickety in the slightest. At its mid-point one swings out on a projecting flake not more than half an inch thick, for the rock here, as practically everywhere on the East face, is of Chamonix granite standard. The technical difficulty of this passage is not very high perhaps, but it is very exposed and almost completely unsecured.

The climb continues back on to the ridge and along it until one meets the steep final buttress of Nelion. A traverse round to the right leads

into a sort of small amphitheatre which leads pleasantly right up to the summit.

This we reached at 11.15 and almost immediately set out on the traverse to Batian. We realised already that time was against us but decided that we ought not to give up without at least having a stab at it. The traverse now lay on the North face of the mountain which at this time of year gets virtually no sun. It is therefore plastered with steep snow and ice. Fortunately the steps which John Howard's party had made the day before were still in good condition and we were able to use them, although with some caution, for the position is airy. Across the Gate of the Mists we were on the main ridge of Batian, once more on warm and snow-free rock, sound and blocky.

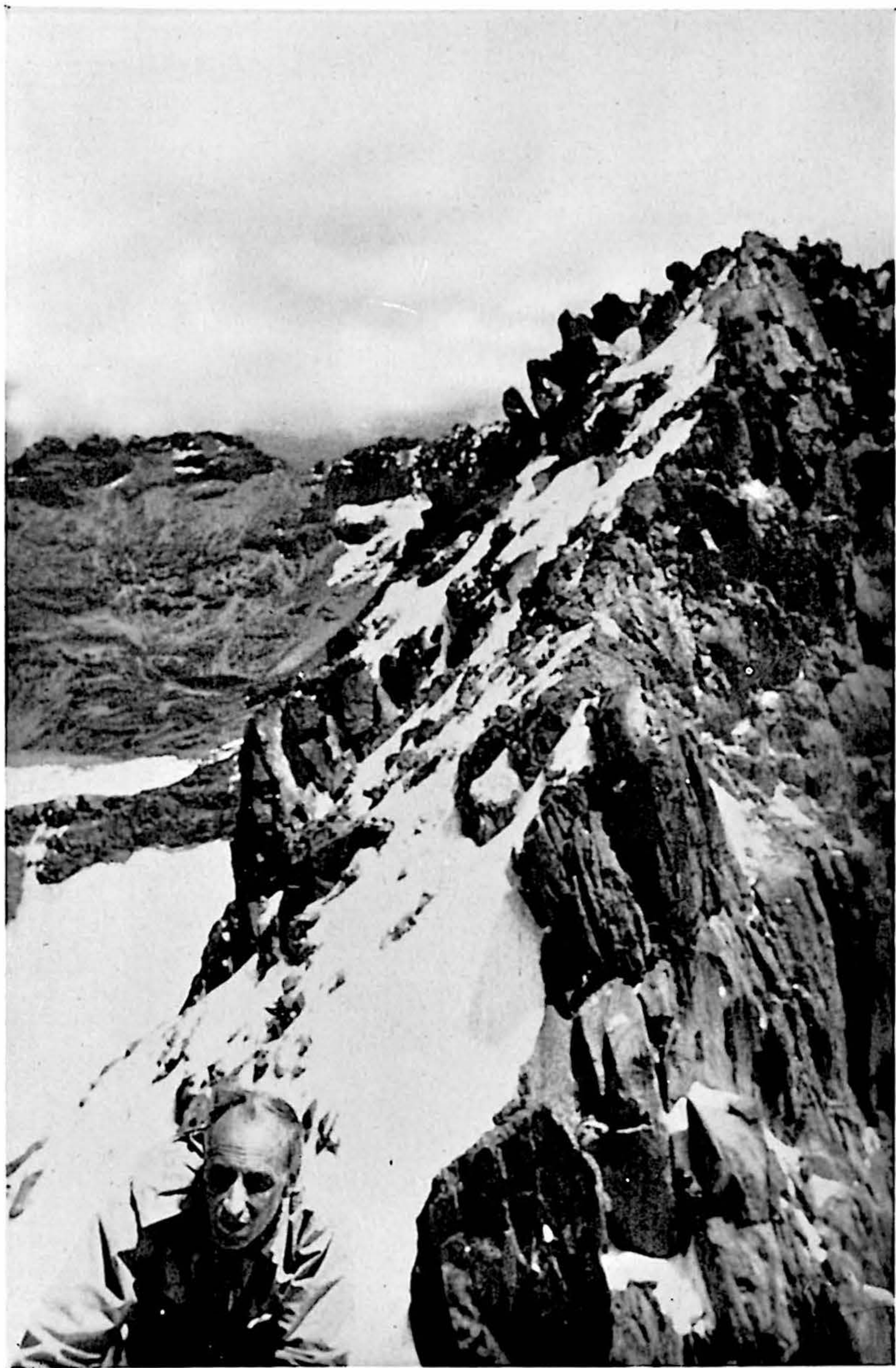
We reached the summit at 1.30 and almost immediately set back again as clouds were beginning to gather and were already swirling over the gendarmes of the West ridge running down from our feet. We were by now feeling rather tired and made exactly the same time back to Nelion, arriving there at 3.30. We stopped for a little chocolate and boiled sweets and then made our way down using the same route that we had come up, except that we abseiled the harder pitches. Foolishly, I had taken an old hemp abseil rope with us. We had trouble with this sticking which lost us time and energy, and on one occasion it was very valiantly retrieved by Geoffrey.

It was sunset when we turned down from the ridge towards Mackinder's Chimney, and we knew that time was getting short. One of the disconcerting things about climbing on the Equator is that one has about four hours less daylight than in the Alps in July or early August.

Roping down Mackinder's Chimney we had our only mishap. The abseil is free for about fifteen to twenty feet and Geoffrey went first. To save time I decided not to take the sack off but to abseil with it on. This was, of course, a most stupid thing to do and the inevitable happened. The rappel cord caught in the sack and refused to run so that I hung in mid-air struggling until I could jettison the sack and get myself into the chimney, by now pretty puffed.

All the technical difficulty was now over, but it was getting dark. The others had realised that we were getting behind time and had come up in support and fixed rappel cords down to the scree. We were soon down and picking our way laboriously in the dark over the scree to reach the hut at about 8.00 p.m., a going time of thirteen hours.

Next day Geoffrey was off at crack of dawn and pelted down the path to Naro Moru on the east side where he found a police plane waiting for him in a high meadow and was in Nairobi almost in time for lunch. The rest of us collected the ropes off the mountain the following morning and walked down for a leisurely evening at Hall Tarns. Our porters in the meantime had come back up to meet us.



WEST RIDGE OF NELION FROM BATIAN; G. W. FURLONGE IN FOREGROUND.

As we went down we shed all our minor ills and the last day's walk down from the Tarns along the edge of Gorges Valley was sheer delight. The flowers were superb, the weather magnificent, the bathing delicious and the atmosphere carefree. I never spent a more enjoyable day nor with better companions. We camped that night by a stream in a clearing in the camphor forest. The next morning we walked on down to meet the Land-Rovers and drove back to Chogoria, where we paid off the porters, and then on by a lovely ride through the twilight over the winding east side road to Nairobi.

The whole trip, Nairobi to Nairobi, took us ten days. It is an eminently possible thing to do direct from England and I am astounded that the climb is not made more often for it is extremely well worth doing and needs far less organisation and equipment than does a Himalayan journey. While the technical difficulties are not formidable on present-day standards, the route is nevertheless fully equal to one of the first-class classic alpine routes. It is carried out at an altitude equivalent to about 22,000 ft. in the Alps and the effect of altitude is therefore not negligible. It is not, of course, a very long climb, but nevertheless some 3,000 odd feet of rock climbing are involved in the final day. Finally, of the great extra-alpine mountains it must be one of the most accessible. Provided one had help in advance in organising porters, though porters are not entirely necessary, the ascent could be very comfortably carried out in a fortnight's holiday from London or, at a pinch, in ten days.

Without making great demands on one's time or pocket, a visit to Mount Kenya still has an expeditionary flavour. There is much yet to be done on the massif in the way of new routes. The scenery, and especially the atmosphere, of Africa is strange and lovely. All in all I never expect to have a more rewarding holiday.

[Mt. Kenya (Batian) was climbed five times in January, 1959. Mr. John D. Graham, a 63-year-old American, made the ascent with two Zermatt guides; according to the *East African Standard*, Mr. Graham has climbed 102 peaks over 14,000 ft. (4,267 m.), which is claimed as a record. Mr. W. M. Adams and Mr. R. J. H. Chambers, both of the Mountain Club of Kenya, made a new route to the summit of Batian via the Northey Glacier and the North-west ridge. They also repeated (for the first time) the West face route opened by R. A. Caukwell and G. W. Rose in 1955.

For an authoritative description of the mountain and its history, v. J. W. Howard's article, *A.J.* 60. 270. In January, 1955, Howard was able to trace nineteen ascents of Batian and about thirty of Nelion. Dummett's and Furlonge's ascent four years later was the thirty-second of Batian.]

Route

From Top Hut cross the Lewis glacier to a big amphitheatre of scree biting deep into the East face of Nelion, and flanked on the right by the steep gulley which splits Mackinder's Gendarme off from the main face.

The rocks are attacked at the highest point of the scree and climbed for some 150 ft. until an easy ascending traverse left can be made into a little gulley. Almost immediately another rising traverse is followed easily to the right for some 300 ft. round an awkward corner to the foot of Mackinder's Chimney. This cleft can be climbed direct, or a traverse made right to a groove with an overhanging chock stone and through route (The Rat Hole) or to an open buttress still further to the right. All three routes converge and an obvious line of weakness is followed up to the main South ridge. This is followed for about 150 ft. until it steepens suddenly. The difficulty is turned by taking to easy rocks on the Batian (left-hand) side of the ridge. An upward traverse leads into a gulley blocked by two successive steep and awkward cracks (Shipton's Cracks). Ascending these brings one to a gap in the ridge between two steep portions. Here the ridge is followed for a little, and then a traverse made along a flat shelf for about 30 ft., at the end of which is a steep crack with a prominent projecting flake half-way (Ricketty Crack). Climbing this, probably the most difficult pitch of the climb, leads back to the ridge which is followed until it loses itself in the final steep precipices of the summit rocks. A traverse of about 100 ft. to the right leads into a little amphitheatre above which pleasant climbing directly upwards leads in about 250 ft. to the summit of Nelion.

The traverse from Nelion to Batian is quite obvious and runs close to the ridges running down to the gap between the two peaks (Gate of the Mists) at the head of the Diamond glacier. The ridge from Nelion is mainly snow covered and is steep and rather featureless, while that of Batian is composed of steep slabby blocks.