

THE NORTH FACE OF MOUNT KENYA AND OTHER CLIMBS

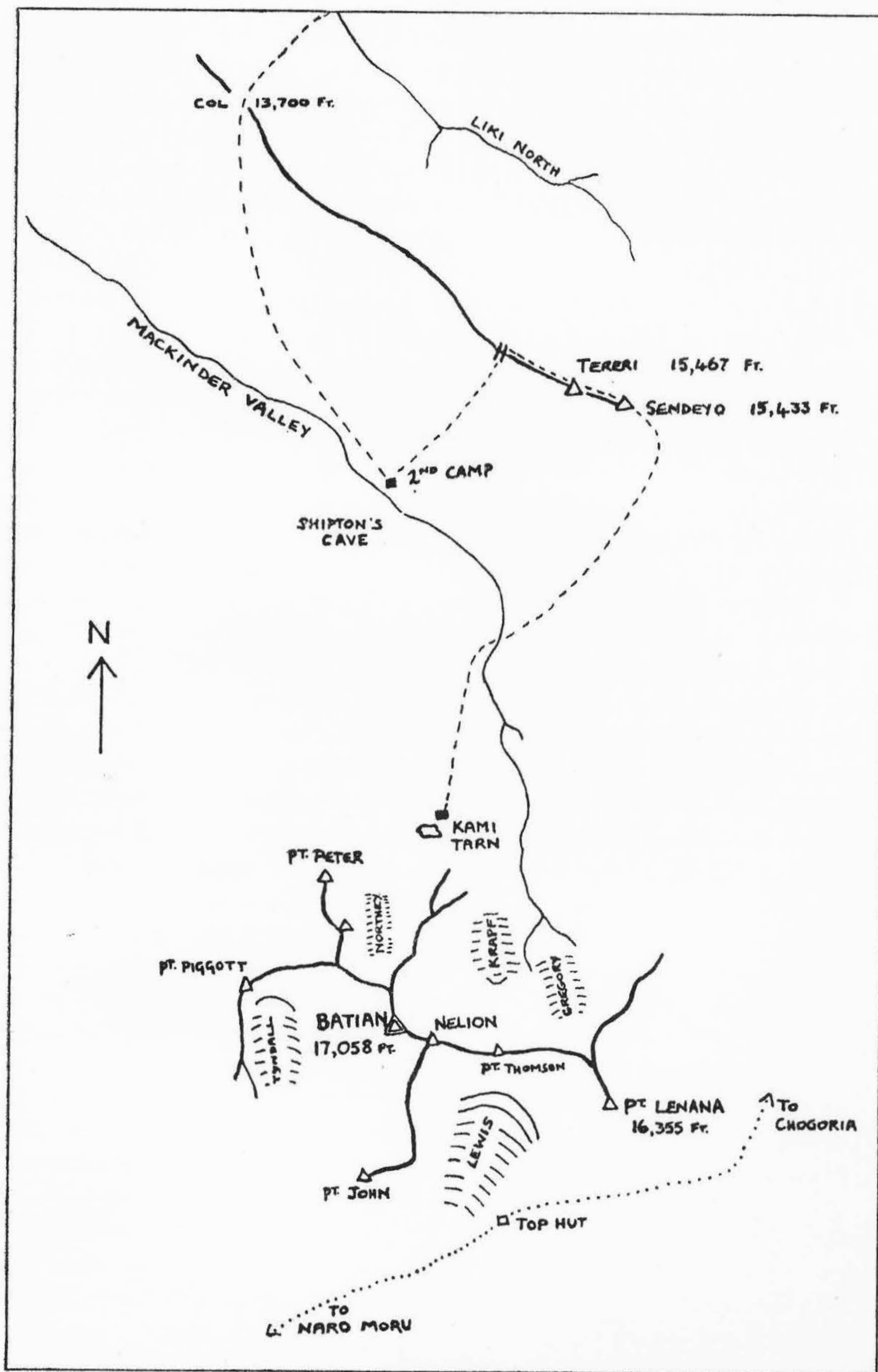
By HAMISH NICOL

(Three illustrations: nos. 25-27)

'21046877', the Indian postman spelt out the registration number of my parcel again. We were in the main parcels depot at Nairobi and he had been looking for it for over an hour. Rows and rows of dusty brown paper parcels lay on racks and piled in corners. I made a mental inventory of the pitons and pullovers which would be lost to our expedition if it did not turn up. We had arrived in Nairobi that morning by B.O.A.C. Comet jet and, the 40-lb. baggage allowance not catering much for ironmongery, I had posted off a 20-lb. parcel by sea mail in May. After 1½ hours search somebody decided to examine a filthy object which was acting as a door stop between the parcels depot and the corridor outside. It was my parcel.

Preparations were now complete, and the next day my wife was planted under a thorn tree in the centre of Nairobi to await the arrival of a guardian uncle whom no member of the family had seen for over twenty years. Meanwhile Alan Wedgwood and I drove off northwards from Nairobi to Nanyuki with a full load of food and equipment. Robert Chambers had work to finish off and promised to meet us at the Sportsman's Arms Hotel in Nanyuki that afternoon. Steven, Alan's brother, was already waiting for us there. The 120-mile journey was on tarmac nearly all the way, bumpy and, by the time we reached Nyeri, very wet. In fact it was pouring with rain. The sullen Kikuyu regarded us from under their black umbrellas, and scowled. The fact that they were by now the master tribe in Kenya was not evident in their dejected attitudes, and from the coffee plantations of Fort Hall to the bare uplands scattered with blasted thorn trees beyond Naro Moru not one interested face seemed one whit pleased to see us. We debated a little on this discouraging reception. Was it a genuine dislike of white faces, or a general ennui or a particular dislike of our land rover, too laden with ropes and boots, tinned bully and pineapples to be inclined to offer lifts? At Naro Moru, Mount Kenya, only a few miles away to the east, was still completely invisible. A thick mist came down to 9,000 ft., but we spun along the murrum road to Nanyuki happily enough towards better weather over the Sirimon track on the northern slopes of the mountain.

Robert's Volkswagen tore into the forecourt of the Sportsman's



SKETCH-MAP OF MT. KENYA.



Photo, H. G. Nicol]

NORTH FACE OF MOUNT KENYA.

(This photograph may be compared with that which appears at A.ŷ. 55. 80, on which the North face route is marked.)

(No. 25)

Arms at 4 p.m., and after a quick reorganisation we checked out at the police station, giving destination and estimated date of return.

There had been considerable debate in England as to which of the various routes up to Mount Kenya would suit our purpose best. The Naro Moru route was most direct but would we or our mules sink in the 'vertical bog' which was a feature of it? Nobody seemed anxious to find out. Robert favoured an elegant three-day route from Chogoria on the east side, wandering at ease through forests of bamboo and past enchanted tarns. We would hire an army of porters who would live on one blanket and a carcass a day, and his command of Swahili would be a distinct advantage. However he dismissed this plan almost as soon as suggesting it with the implication that, suitable as it might be for leisured aesthetes, it hardly met the case for our tight itinerary and plebeian inclinations. Barry Cliff had suggested the Sirimon route, but tortured by day after day of fine weather in July when he had been able to see Mount Kenya in full view from Nairobi, he had not been able to contain himself, and had set off up the mountain, a week ahead of us.

The Sirimon route approaches Mount Kenya from the north-west. It leaves the main road from Nanyuki to Isiolo, and goes straight up to the high moorlands through magnificent forests of cedar and cypress. The track was built during the Mau Mau uprising as part of a scheme to destroy terrorists, and it remains as a very great asset to tourists like ourselves. In an hour and a half of driving one can reach an altitude of 11,000 ft., a height which it took Benuzzi seven days to achieve, hacking his way on foot through the forest with pen-knives. As we drove up the track, a week late, we wondered what Barry was doing. The rain forest with its tall trees all hung with mosses, looked particularly lovely in the evening light, and I felt a quickening excitement as we drove steeply upwards past occasional dung heaps which I was assured were 'elephant', but which might just as well have been 'mule' for all the sight or sound we had of wild life on the way. Our predecessors, from Shipton to Benuzzi, had all had glimpses of the heavy artillery of the forest, but our experience of elephant or rhinoceros was necessarily limited to half-crown colour slides bought at the tobacconist, for we saw none of them. At 9,000 ft. the track became steeper, four-wheel drive was engaged, and the land rover plugged on upwards passing a number of abandoned saloon cars, some of which had obviously been reversed uphill in a last desperate attempt to gain height.

Camp site that night was at 11,500 ft. A mountain stream crossed the track in a glade surrounded by giant heather bushes. On one side lay a hillock surmounted by some sort of rain-gauge, on the other fifteen miles of forest undulated downwards towards the uttermost plains of the Northern District of Kenya. Alan stopped the land rover in the glade and Robert jumped out to welcome John and Waru, our two

muleteers, who had walked up that day with the two mules, one zebra-horse,¹ and two horses. That evening, just before sunset at about 6.15 p.m., Mount Kenya detached itself from the clouds for the first time. Its summit an unbelievable pinnacle of rock and ice, it dominated the 300 square miles of moorland on whose edge our camp site was placed. Like a twice life-sized Chamonix aiguille, it looked fierce and very difficult. We all slept better that night, satisfied at least that our goal existed, and had been seen.

Robert, who was not only our local expert, but an early morning riser of the first quality, got us all up at 6.30 a.m. next day, on the pretext that it would take at least two hours to get the mules loaded. He was right, and our cavalcade did not set off up the diminishing Sirimon track until 10.30. The mules carried 120 lb. of cargo each, the mountaineers about 30 lb., not because it was necessary but because it was good training, and the two muleteers sat at ease on the two horses and whistled through their teeth. At the 12,000-ft. contour the route breaks off right in a south-westerly direction, and crosses a trackless moor of tussock grass and the axis of two streams, the Ontulli and the Liki North, both of which involve tiresome descents and ascents. From the bed of the latter, which despite its name is a charming mountain burn coming from the northern corries of Tereri and Sendeyo, we were faced with a steep pull up to a col at 13,700 ft., from which it should be possible to see the Mackinder valley, the great northern valley of Mount Kenya. The going was fair, and at an altitude equal to the Lenzspitze one would expect to be a little short of breath, were it not for the herbaceous surroundings. A foreground all of greenery, grass and groundsel is not quite the setting for laboured mountain breathing. Alan posed for photography beside the first lobelia, and we all stood around gasping. The mules, well acclimatised, were already 400 yards ahead. On the steep descent into the Mackinder valley, however, they did not do so well. One or two of the loads broke loose and the climbing party set off alone leaving John and Waru to sort out the mess. At 3 p.m. we came to a well-watered camp site just below Shipton's Cave.

It froze hard in the night and in the morning the tent and guy-ropes were frost covered. The muleteers, under their ex-W.D. tarpaulin stretched on a line between two tree-groundsels, must have had a bad night. After breakfast, I set off with Alan and Steven to traverse Tereri and Sendeyo, while Robert accompanied the baggage train direct to Kami Tarn hut. Tereri (15,467 ft.) and Sendeyo (15,433 ft.) form the true right flank of the Mackinder valley, and from our camp site it was only necessary to strike straight uphill avoiding still frozen rivulets draining from the impressive battlements above. Tereri and Sendeyo are geologically part of the rim of the ancient volcano, of which Batian

¹ A cross between a zebra and a horse.

and Nelion are the eroded plug or core. The rock is loose and soft, and the temptation to make a direct ascent up the face of Tereri was easily resisted. Instead we walked without difficulty up to a col on the North-west ridge of Tereri marked by a slim finger of rock. The obvious course now would be a direct ascent of the North-west ridge of Tereri about which no details were available, possibly because none were really necessary. Two steep pitches from the slim gendarme brought us to an ample hump on the ridge, from which a direct route could be seen by way of a smooth wall of red rock to the summit. The smooth wall looked interesting and Alan found a way up a chimney which I graded V on the grounds that, following second with a loaded rucksack, progress could scarcely be made up it. The views over to Batian and Nelion were splendid, and our ascent from the camp site to the summit of Tereri had taken four hours. Sendeyo lies half a mile east of its neighbour, and is separated from it by a precarious toothed ridge which we avoided for the most part by traversing along at the foot of the pinnacles on the north side, where snow lay in patches. We left Sendeyo summit well satisfied with our introduction to climbing on Kenya.

Robert greeted us at Kami hut with the news that Barry Cliff had made the first ascent of the North face of Nelion. A laconic message to this effect was pinned to the hut door. His opportunist departure a week early had paid off, and perhaps it was as well, because we were never to have the good weather which would have made an attempt possible.

Kami Tarn hut is an aluminium box with a door but no windows which was dropped by the R.A.F. as a tactical exercise in 1962. The fact that some of the parachutes failed to open has secured for the finished product a degree of ventilation which was not envisaged by the architects. Nevertheless the ventilation is still inadequate, and all of us suffered from early morning headaches, which were cured not by codeine, but by going outside.

On the left inside the door was a sort of wooden shelf on which the party were supposed to sleep. In the other direction was a cooking platform, but alas, no pressure cooker. Without one, cooking presented serious problems at 14,700 ft. Boiled eggs took twelve minutes, tea was impossible but the worst failure of all was boiled rice. 'Two hours' cooking on each of four successive nights made no impression on it, and finally it was consigned to the tarn, where it sank like a stone. Fortunately we had not forgotten to bring up a supply of every imaginable tinned food, and after an enormous meal on these the party retired early determined to climb Batian by the Firmin-Hicks route next day.

Robert got us up at 4.30, and as we passed the outlet of the tarn a thin film of ice covered its surface. An exceedingly irritating traverse across boulders and screes brought our party to the snout of the Krapf glacier as dawn broke. The route now lay up a gully on the right, with

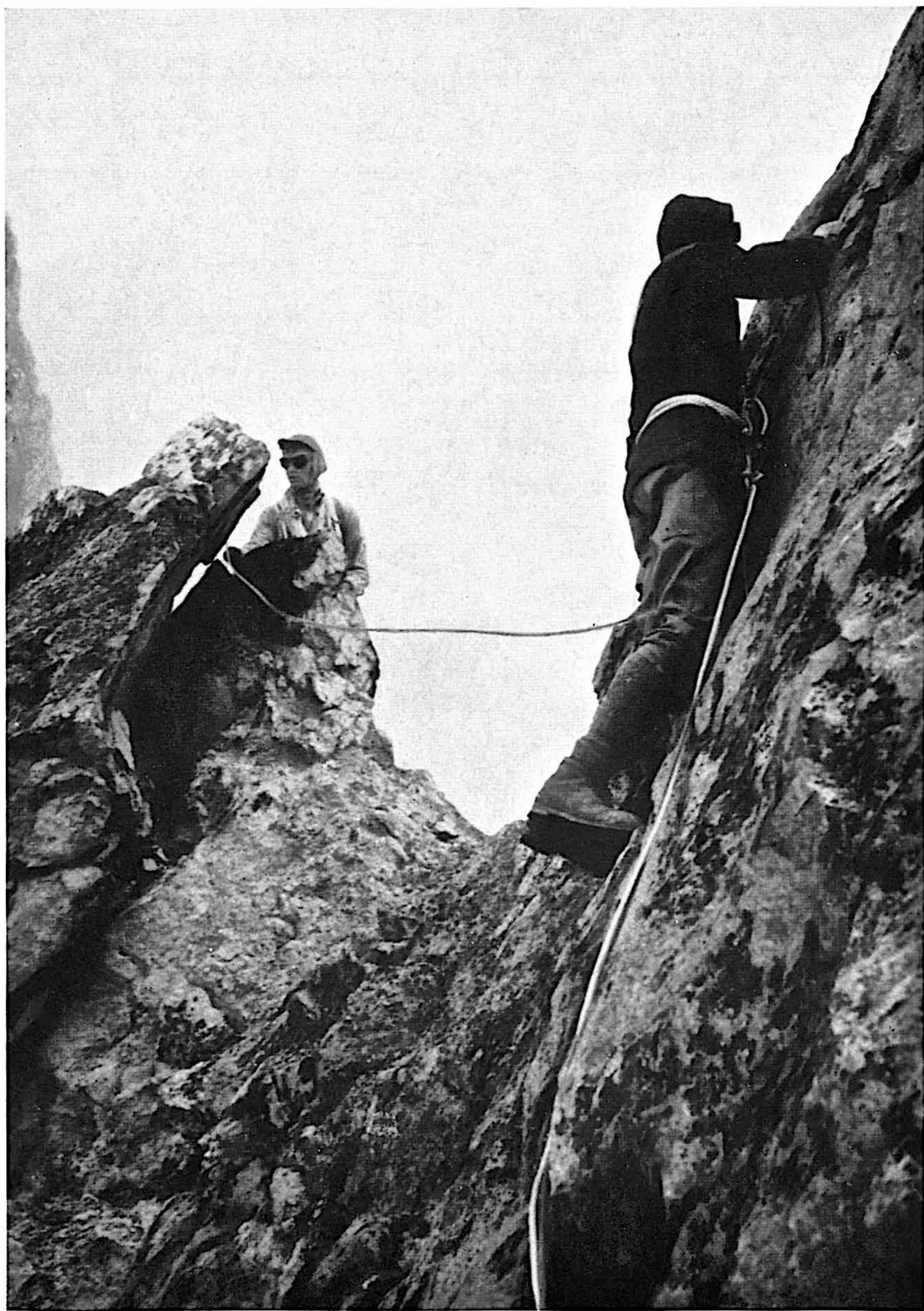


Photo: H. G. Nicol]

NORTH FACE OF MOUNT KENYA: CLIMBING INTO SHIPTON'S NOTCH.

(No. 26)

jammed boulders making cave pitches. Loose rocks lay in heaps on every level place, and it was sometimes impossible to avoid sending avalanches down on the heads below. After an hour or so in the gully the Wedgwoods reached the right-hand amphitheatre, a broad expanse of scree and easy ledges below Firmin's tower. I had managed to lose the route momentarily, and followed with Robert a little later. Alan and Steve (who had done no serious climbing before this day) were forging ahead and were soon at the foot of the tower. Towards the left-hand edge of the steep 200-ft. wall of rock which constitutes the tower is a broken system of crack and chimney. It was here that in 1944 Arthur Firmin discovered the key to the North face of Batian.

Robert vomited for the second time and announced that he was ready to belay me. His attitude to mountain sickness was one of complete disregard. It had no right to interfere with the ascent, and it was not allowed to. The first twenty feet of Firmin's crack was very steep and I fervently hoped that there would not be much more hanging on from jammed boot and fist holds higher up. Luckily the crack widened, and gave entertaining climbing for 100 ft. to the top.

By this time the mists had overtaken us, and the rest of the climb was completed in fog. Fortunately there was never much doubt about the route, which followed a poorly defined ridge beside the upper snowfields of the Northey glacier. Here and there a difficult pitch had to be negotiated, usually a steep chimney involving appalling struggles with a jammed rucksack and sterterous dyspnoea. At a point where Shipton's notch would have been visible on a decent day Robert indicated that we must traverse to the left in order to cut off the corner made by the intersection of the North and West ridges. This manoeuvre saved a good half hour and by means of a delicate finger-traverse led straight into Shipton's notch.

We arrived at Batian summit at 12.30 p.m. shortly after Alan and Steve, who had abseiled into the notch from a point on the West ridge. The ascent had taken five and a half hours, and I remember noting that it was exactly five days after our departure from London airport, and that in five hours it would be dark. A dump of bivouac equipment had been left below Firmin's tower. Would we get back there in time? There was nothing to see except fog in all directions, the tip of Nelion summit, and the Gate of the Mists between the two highest points.

At one o'clock we set off down the mountain by the same route. It began to snow. Many of the steep chimneys had to be roped down, and in particular Firmin's tower made one spectacular abseil with the 250-ft. rope. It just reached the bottom and, as we shot down it, the hail pattered on the red rock. Four and a half hours from the summit, Alan landed first in the screes beside the Krapf glacier. A vile altitude headache accompanied me down the screes. Robert added my rucksack to his and we

returned in silence to the hut. Nobody had the energy to cook or eat supper that evening, and the whole party turned in on empty stomachs.

Wednesday, August 7, was a perfect day for climbing which was spent lying flat on the grass beside Kami tarn. The following morning an expedition was planned to climb Point Lenana, and visit Top hut and the Lewis glacier. Inertia prevented some of the party from attempting Thomson's Flake *en route*, and those who were not prevented by inertia were defeated by its blighted and cankered appearance. In fact it was said that only a damned fool would have gone up Thomson's Flake, but as I was sunbathing on the summit of Lenana at the time, having dawdled gently up the Lewis glacier from Top hut with Steve in tow (this being his first glacier) I cannot take sides in this argument. The truth is perhaps that Thursday was going to be our last easy day before another much harder attempt on the mountain, and we were anxious to complete our acclimatisation in as civilised a manner as possible.

Unfortunately for this plan, it started to rain heavily at 5 p.m. Despite this Robert left Kami hut at 5.30 to rendezvous with Barry in his camp site below the North face of Nelion. For the rest of us there was much chess playing and eating and not much serious preparation, for by this time it was a full blizzard and a tacit decision had been made not to attempt the North face of Nelion next day.

In the morning two inches of snow lay on the ground outside the hut. Alan and I set off late for Point Peter and an attempt on its North ridge. This is the right-hand skyline ridge of Peter as seen from the hut. Where the ridge steepens, a porthole goes clean through it, and the climb starts just below the porthole. Above this was much excellent ridge climbing, some of it rather hard, and a few pitons which had been brought at vast expense from England were at last put to use. Once again the summit view was completely blotted out.

This was the end of our trip from the climbing point of view. On Saturday, in rain and thick cloud we built and cairned a footpath between Kami hut and the Krapf glacier, and again it snowed heavily in the night. The sight of Mount Kenya plastered in snow next morning decided us to go down. The members of the Kenya Mountain Club who were with us were convinced that the weather had broken for good, and they proved to be right, for it rained continuously in Nanyuki for a fortnight, and the next party on the mountain did not even see the summit. Much surplus food was cached in boulder holes by the tarn. Pitons which could not be carried down were nailed to the door of the hut, and shouldering loads of 60 to 70 lb. each we set off down the Mackinder valley splashing through puddles and marshes, as if in Wales. Snow actually lay on the hillside down to the 12,000-ft. contour, and it was one of the hardest carries which anyone could remember.

The expedition to Mount Kenya having been in some respects a



Photo: H. G. Nicol]

SOUTH FACE OF KILIMANJARO FROM NEAR THE BIVOUAC AT 12,000 FT.

(No. 27)

disappointment, it was more necessary than ever to climb Kilimanjaro especially as Steven, having got as far as Mawenzi on a previous occasion, was determined to reach Kibo at all costs. Four days later the two Wedgwoods and I set off on the 300-mile drive down to Moshi, a cosmopolitan township on the southern flank of Kilimanjaro. Alan had only a few days of holiday left, and it would be necessary to attempt the shortest possible route. Mike Adams, our host in Moshi and an extremely accomplished climber, had for the past two years been opening a new way up the southern side of the mountain. He urged us to do it, and in this way avoid the vomiting *ingénus* and other embarrassments of the tourist route.

On Sunday, August 18, with a diagram sketched on the back of an envelope, our party of three took to the forests in the land rover, and drove steadily uphill past first banana groves, and later steep, heavily wooded hillside. It was all four-wheel drive work in bottom gear and just as doubts began to be raised about the possibility of turning the vehicle, the track by now being encroached on markedly by forestry on both sides, not to mention sizeable plantations between the wheel tracks, a thankful clearing appeared ahead. Here the land rover was parked, wired, and locked, and at 11 a.m. we set off by foot into the forest. The altitude was perhaps 7,000 ft. There was said to be a first bivouac at 9,000 ft., but the recommended stopping place was at 11,500 ft., which we reached in the afternoon. It was well sited from the point of view of firewood, for giant heather trees thirty feet high grew in all directions. The water supply was less appropriate and involved an hour's walk into a barranca on the west side. The following day, we had a pleasant walk through giant lobelia and groundsel plantations, then open moorland, and finally steep scree and *névé* to the 'battleship' bivouac at 17,000 ft., named from the shape of a piece of rock in the vicinity. 2 p.m. was an annoyingly early hour to get there. Was there time to reach the summit that day? Would a bivouac of sixteen hours' duration be tolerable? Not knowing how much mountain remained to be climbed, there being no accurate map, we decided to stop. A site was prepared on a steep scree and a meal cooked. Soup was boiled and overturned over the nearest member of the party which chanced to be Alan's left foot. No pain ensued, an apt demonstration of the depression of boiling point at high altitude.

At 9 a.m. on Tuesday we reached the summit after some pleasant scrambling through broken cliffs to the crater rim. Thanks to acclimatisation on Mount Kenya, nobody experienced the slightest trouble with altitude. At this point the prospect of a third night on the mountain was unpopular, so with only an occasional jog trot we descended the 12,500 ft. to the land rover in seven hours. An entertaining journey back to Nairobi by bus, in the company of fifty Masai warriors, completed my three weeks' holiday in East Africa.