Sudan Saga

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It was early January 1983 before we made our plans for that year's winter trip. Having a rather eccentric attitude to mountaineering we chose Sudan, and by the time we had made the necessary travel and medical arrangements two months had passed and the African 'winter' was already over.

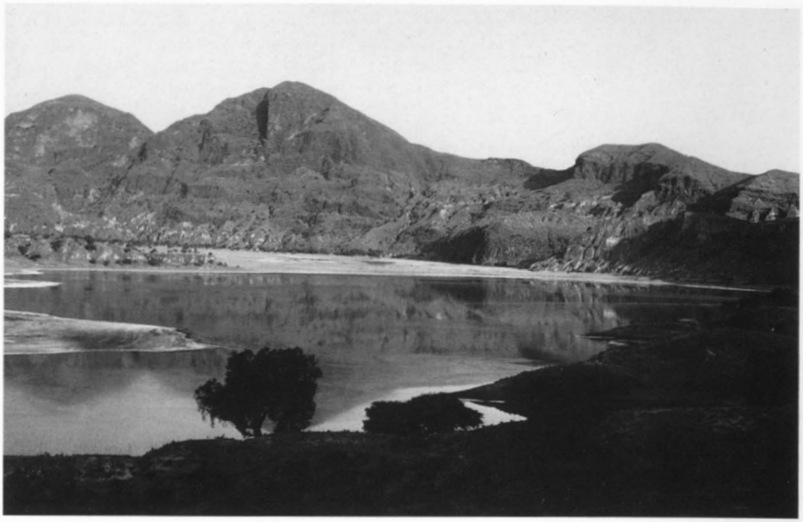
We flew into Khartoum at the beginning of March, obtained our E Sudan travel permit, and three days later we had reached our first base at the oasis of Kassala, 400km to the east near the troubled Ethiopian border. We arrived on the back of a lorry in the middle of the night and, on waking the next morning and washing the sand from our eyes, were greeted with the sun rising over a miniature Yosemite! The granite towers of Kassala thrust themselves almost 600m from the desert, in domes of solid granite beckoning the climber.

We spent about two weeks in the area. During this time we went to the base of most of the walls and repeated the only climb in the area, a VS route to the highest summit first climbed by R A Hodgkin and L W Brown in December 1939, and described as 'one of the finest rock climbs in Africa' (*AJ* 54, 155–161, 1943–44). A truly unforgettable experience with a bivouac at the foot of the climb overlooking the hazy hills of Eritrea and a nibble on the leaves of a tree on the summit, said to give mystical powers and everlasting life!

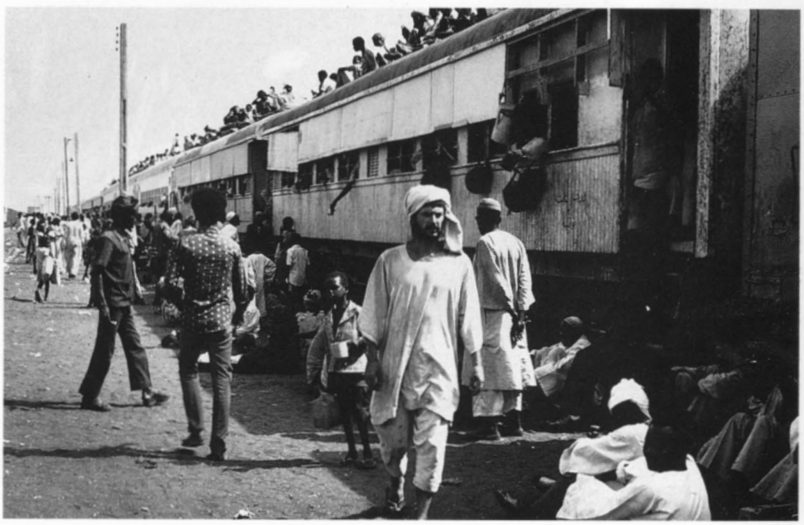
Our hopes of making some first ascents in the area were dashed for a number of reasons, most importantly the unbearable heat (December to February would be the best months, but even at Christmas Robin Hodgkin reported that 'the rocks were uncomfortably hot'). Another problem is the vultures which nest and roost on the peaks in their hundreds, so that almost all ledges and crack-systems are either carpeted in droppings or guarded by these huge birds, standing over three feet high with a wing-span of more than twice that size. Finally, but equally important, the main walls are virtually featureless, whilst the cracks are often mere rounded runnels rather than fissures, with no protection or belay points. The harder routes here would probably require pegs or even bolts for security.

Despite making only one ascent in the area we had a memorable stay amongst the straw-roofed villages at the base of the peaks, and further out in the desert at the camps of the various tribes – Rashaida and Haddendowah and Beni Amir (the swaggering, sword-carrying 'fuzzy-wuzzy, pore benighted 'eathen, but first class fightin' men' of Kipling). Also nearby were camps of Nigerian Moslems who had settled there whilst on the Haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, and those of refugee Eritreans from just over the border, escaping the endless civil war and the beginnings of the great drought, at the time unknown to the outside world.

From here we returned to Khartoum where our second objective was



63. Crater Lake, Jebel Marra.



64. Khartoum–Nyala train journey (author, centre foreground).

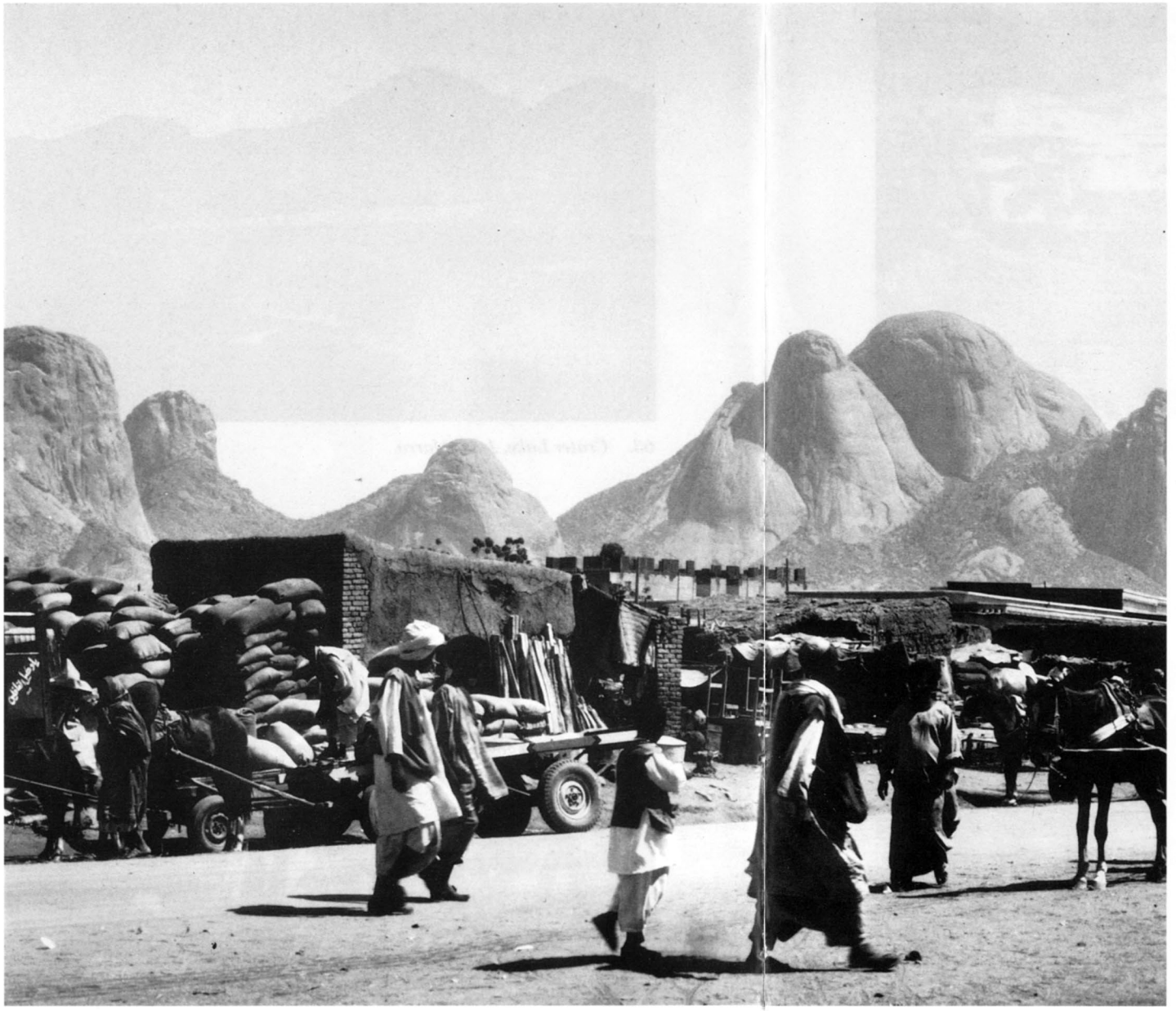
eliminated by the refusal of permits to the Nuba Mountains where there are interesting, possibly unclimbed, peaks such as Jebel Abu Anga, as well as the fascinating and proud Nuba people with their rich tribal culture. Our third and final area to visit was the group of peaks around the long extinct crater of Jebel Marra (3000m) close to the Chad border, 1300km west of Khartoum. Permits were granted and a train journey of five days through dust, scrub and more dust ensued. In the heat of the day we squashed ourselves into the shade of compartments where 12 or 14 people occupied six seats – impossible to vacate when the train was in motion, as the corridor was a tangled mass of bodies. At each stop for a village or for prayer (or simply a breakdown), we and hundreds of others climbed out through the windows to stretch our legs. In the early and late hours we joined the multitudes travelling on the roof, rocking slowly westward through the dust-filled days. At night the choice was sleep on the roof (if you could find space) and maybe fall off – there are accidents on most trips – or squeeze back into the sardine-can below. There's little sleep or rest either way. To arrive at Nyala at the foot of the Jebels and the end of the line is a major achievement!

Not that there's anything there – just a dusty market town on the edge of the Sahara – a little bigger than most, maybe, but not a place you'd go for a holiday, and nowhere really to stay. There is one 'hotel', but it's overcrowded with no beds, so you sleep on the floor and put up with the bugs. The toilet door hangs off its hinges and the hole in the floor that indicates the possibility of a sewer was long since blocked so there's really no place even to stand for the filth and maggots even if you try (and having the 'runs' doesn't give you much choice!). There's also no running water, just some dregs in the bottom of large earthenware *zias* (or jars). Only the many regulars get the water when the jars are filled each day.

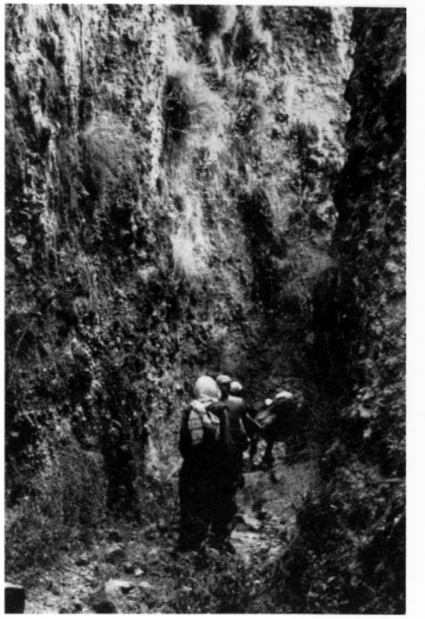
We didn't linger long (though the cafés by the market were good, with plenty of water), and we were soon moving out on top of a lorry with its load of sacks and people to the villages at the base of Jebel Marra where drivable tracks end. From there we hired a mule and its owner who were returning from the market in Niertiti to the village of Quailla higher up the W flank of the main crater. One of the Fur tribe – an Afro-Arab people – knew Jebel Marra well and offered to take us up into and through the crater. We spent a week with Abdulai who took us on an incredible journey, entering the crater by moonlight with weird silver reflections glinting from the lakes below, as we crested the rim and looked down into its depths.

The following night in the crater itself, a herd of horses galloped through our camp and wolf-like animals skulked in the bush close by. Abdulai sat up through the night tending the embers of the fire, occasionally prodding it into life, sending sparks into the gloom and emphasizing the darkness of the ring of peaks around us.

But there was nothing to climb – did we ever really think there would be? We moved out next day through a narrow gap in the E wall of the crater and left as we had entered by a tortuous maze of tracks through interweaving defiles and gorges worn into the volcanic ash by the annual rains. After a full day's walk we were little more than five miles as the vulture flies from our previous camp-site,



65. *The Kassala mountains from Kassala oasis.*



66. *Leaving Crater Lake through maze of ravines in volcanic ash and debris.*

when we stopped for the night at the village of Taratonga, 'The House of the Wolves'. It had been a fascinating if somewhat hungry journey as the famine was beginning to make its mark even here in the comparatively fertile mountains, and we had travelled for a week on a diet of dates, flour and muddy water! Another day took us to Gorlangbang and, after two days, a lurching lorry journey on the brink of more gorges, along dried-up river beds and out across the barren desert took us back to Nyala and our dream hotel.

Three days to wait for the train, and then the train was two days late, and then five days back to Khartoum – ah! the romance and luxury of travel! From Khartoum we went north down the Nile with two weeks to spare, because of our inability to enter the Nuba Mountains. (Permits for Jebel Marra were also stopped whilst we were out there.) Another train-top journey followed, first following the Nile, then out across the desert of Batn el Haggar (Belly of Rocks) to Wadi Halfa at the upper (Sudan) end of the Aswan Dam. Then down the lake in an old boat, overcrowded as always (it sank two weeks later, with a reported loss of over 300 lives) and into the ancient lands of Egypt, through which we drifted by felucca from the Temple of Karnak and the Valley of the Kings, down towards the Pyramids and Cairo, the end of our journey. Not much of a climbing trip, you may think, but mountains have more to offer than their summits!