

## LUKENYA

By J. W. HOWARD

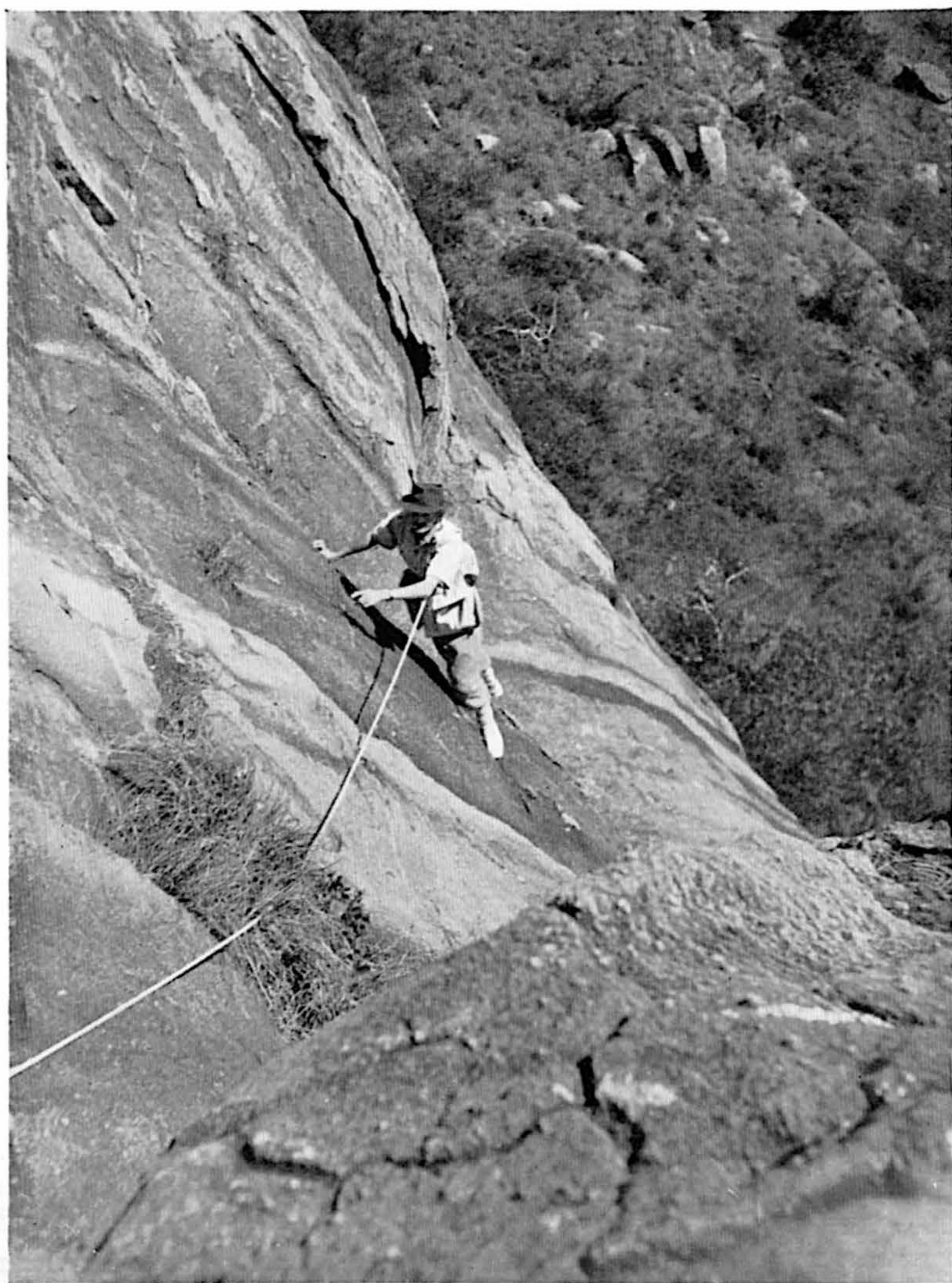
**S**OUTH-EAST of Nairobi the bare Kapiti plains stretch away for 40 miles towards the country of the Kamba and the Masai. Here and there are outcrops of basement rock which rise up through the phonolite like islands in a sea. One of these is the Lukenya ridge. It commands the main Mombasa road, 25 miles out from Nairobi, and is the perfect weekend playground for the city worker. Although situated on private land, the owners willingly allow Mountain Club members to climb on the rocks provided they do not harass the wild life—some of which, leopards, bees and snakes, nobody in his senses wishes to harass in any case.

Lukenya's relationship to Nairobi is by no means what Table Mountain is to Capetown, but it is far superior to anything that London can provide within 100 miles of Charing Cross. The great variety of crags with their firm rock, give fine sport. Apart from numerous Europeans who find relaxation here, there is even one young African (Kisoi, son of Munyao) who is keen on this peculiar recreation of mad dogs and Englishmen, though this is perhaps not so surprising when I add that he has been employed for the past ten years by the Firmins. In Arthur Firmin's day he was employed as a cook, but now he had graduated to work in Mrs. Firmin's photographic studio, and in 1958 he made the first ascent by a black Kenyan of Batian, the highest peak of Mount Kenya. His mountaineering technique is very competent, he is a charming companion, and he is the only black man I have ever met who actually enjoys high altitudes and climbing for its own sake (rather than for material reward in the form of money, honey, meat or livestock, which are the usual motives in Africa for climbing hills).

All walks of life are represented at Lukenya. One Sunday a few years ago amongst others observed disporting themselves on the rocks were the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Colony, an ambassador, a company director, a scientist, an insurance executive, a Treasury official, a schoolmistress, an accountant, a lawyer, a policeman, an airman, and a district commissioner—but this list could be added to on almost any Sunday in recent years.

The history of climbing on Lukenya has been rather like the history of climbing anywhere else. Before the Europeans appeared on the scene the Masai grazed the area sporadically according to the water and





JOHN BAGENAL ON 'ARTHUR'S HORROR'.



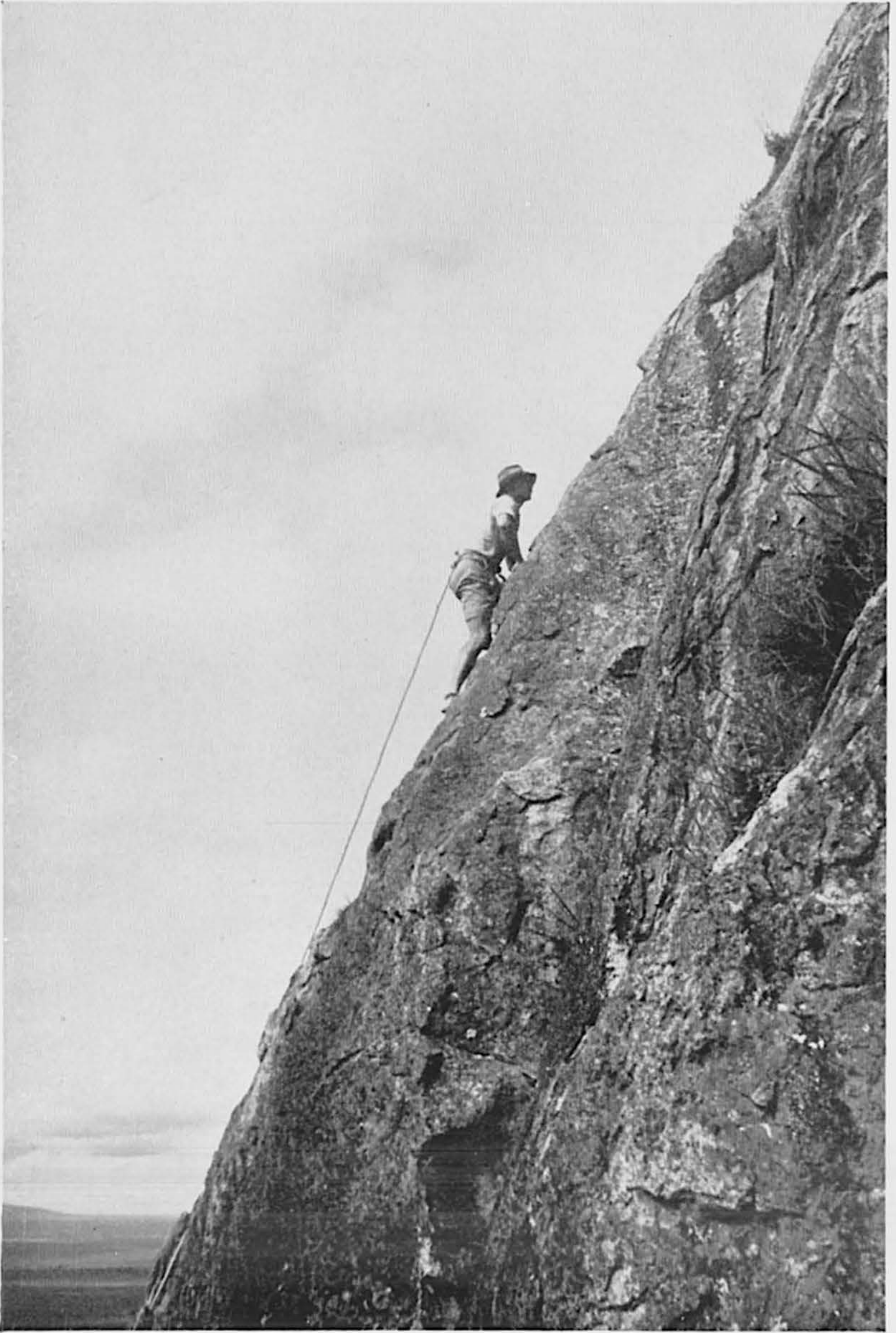
pasture. No doubt a herdsman would occasionally need to scramble up the slopes to collect his cattle, sheep or goats, or to despatch a wounded lion or leopard. The early European settlers were too busy pioneering to have much time for climbing as a sport, and it was not until the early years of the Second World War that serious attention was given to the rock-climbing potential. The war brought to Nairobi an influx of adventurous servicemen who needed a more strenuous outlet for their energies than staff jobs at base could provide. Three such were Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton (A.C.), his brother (now Lord Selkirk), and Sqn.-Ldr. de Salis. They combined forces with local enthusiasts such as Alan Ker, the late Arthur Firmin (A.C.), Colin St. John Hutchinson (A.C.), and the late Eddie Sladen (a fine mountaineer who was killed in Burma) and climbed most of the more obvious routes, especially those on the fine 250-ft.-high slab known as the Main Face.

One of the routes, called Fany's Fright, testifies to wartime activities, though I must add that there is no record as to who or what frightened the poor girl.

After the War the Mountain Club blossomed forth into full activity and increased membership. A keen group of members from Machakos (headquarters of one of the Kamba districts) frequently visited Lukenya and my own acquaintance with it dates from this period. With the help of friends we compiled the first brief guide which appeared in the Club's Bulletin.

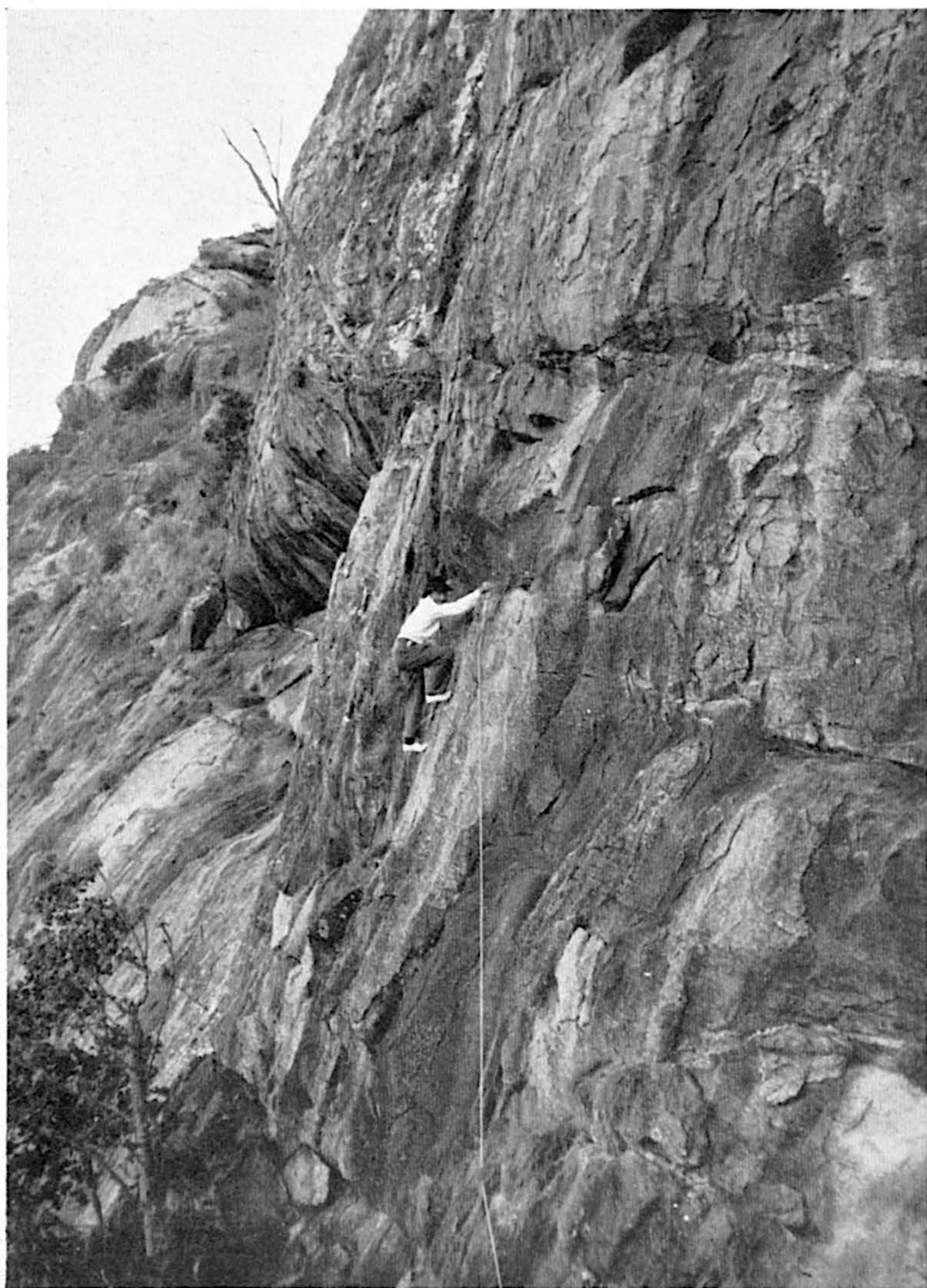
On one of our visits in 1947 to measure up a route, Myles North and I were caught half way up the Main Face by angry bees. The question was whether to escape upwards or downwards. If we went up, where easy ground was slightly closer, we might run into the bees' headquarters, but if we retreated downwards we had 150 ft. of steep slabs to negotiate, not too difficult in normal circumstances but distinctly unpleasant when pursued by enraged bees. In the event we chose to descend. How we managed to maintain contact with the rock in the face of murderous attacks of wave upon wave of bee reinforcements remains a mystery, but we eventually plunged into the bushes at the foot of the face and shook off our pursuers. We fled to the nearest farmhouse where we were hospitably received but told in no uncertain terms that climbers were mad and deserved all they got. On return to Machakos I counted about 50 stings in my head, face and neck. Before retiring to bed for two days we were given bicarbonate of soda to neutralise the acid, but so drugged were our powers of reasoning that we stupidly used it to dab on the stings instead of taking it internally. For future occasions Myles invented a climbers' anti-bee veil which might have been of some use had we been courageous enough to return to the scene of action. Since then most of the bees' nests have been





ALAN KER ON 'COBBLESTONES'.





THE LATE ARTHUR FIRMIN ON THE MAIN FACE NEAR THE  
VERREAUX EAGLE NEST.



charted and can be avoided, but hornets and snakes still give scope for adventure. Climbing one day with Colin St. John Hutchinson and Sir Evelyn Baring (A.C.), Colin was attacked by some hornets, but hardly had these been repulsed when a snake reared up in a fissure a few inches from his face. Luckily, surprise was mutual, and the snake found a quicker escape route than the climber.

Arthur Firmin, Bob Caukwell, Colin St. John Hutchinson and others explored some of the harder routes in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but the full richness of the place was not revealed until the last few years. Most of the crags have now been thoroughly explored and a comprehensive guide-book, compiled by Michael Adams, appeared in 1959. This guide lists no less than 17 crags, each with a variety of routes. There is something for all—cracks, chimneys, ridges, mantel-shelves, blocks and overhangs, but, above all, faces and slabs. The following classifications will give some idea of the scope:

Easy	1	climb
Moderate	10	„
Difficult	42	„
V. difficult	56	„
Severe	41	„
V. severe	18	„

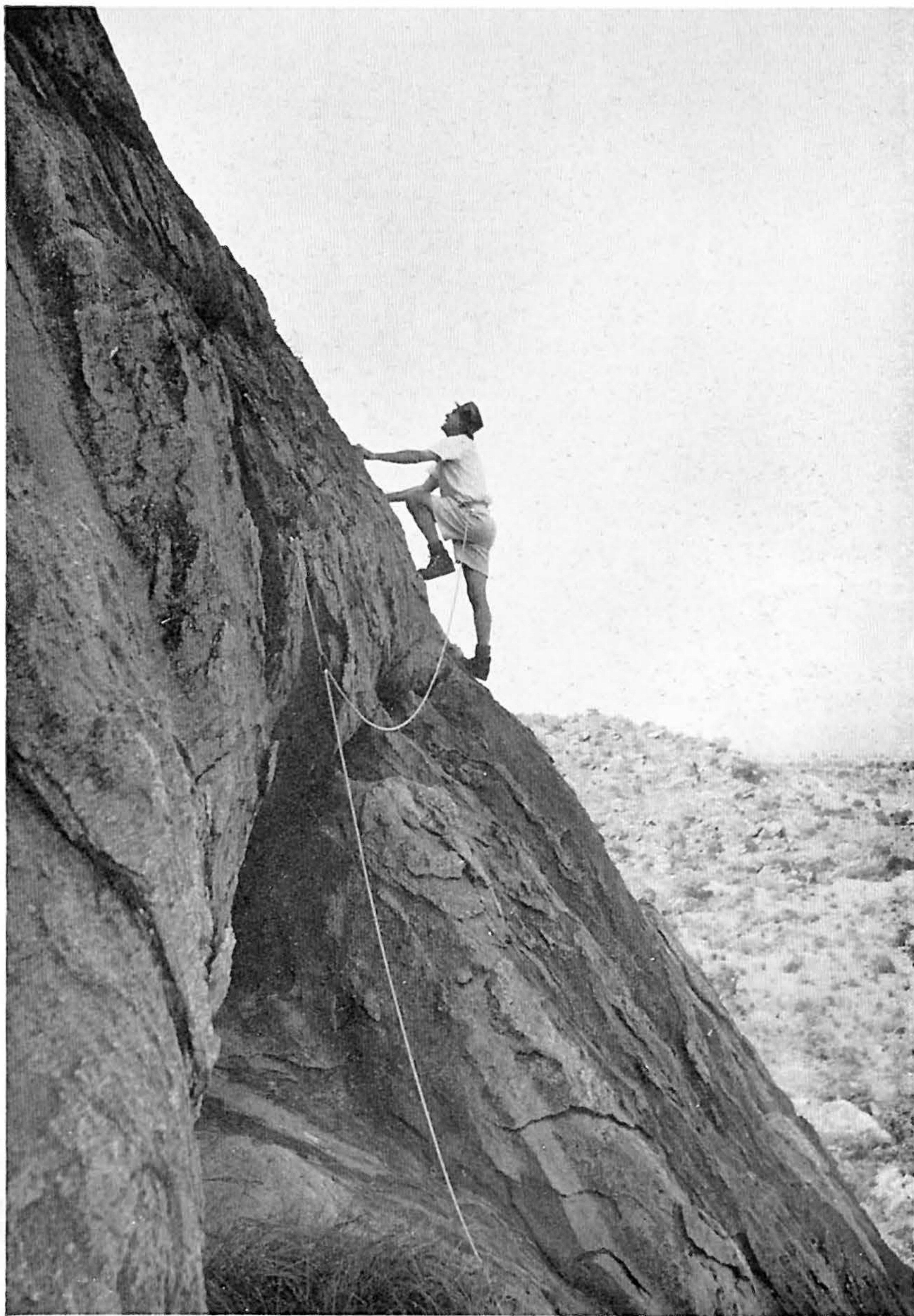
The authors of the new guide had great fun with their nomenclature. Some names were traditional—for instance Fany's Fright, Arthur's Horror, Fig Tree Face and Edinburgh Rock—but numerous others had to be invented. On Egyptian Crag (so-called because the Egyptian vulture nests there) we find the following routes: Cleopatra, Ammon, Osiris, Isis, Pharaoh's Wall, Anthony, Vulture's Nest, and Ptolemy; and on Black Slab we have Charcoal, Black Magic, Black Death, Black Cat, Black Jack, Black Treacle, and Black Groove.

Besides the Egyptian vulture, another rare bird nesting at Lukenya is the Verreaux eagle, the magnificent great black eagle that lives on the Main Face. Some of the hardest climbs are in the region of the nest.

The fauna of Lukenya includes the leopard, klipspringer and Chanler's reedbuck, whilst the flora is also extremely interesting since the annual mean rainfall does not exceed 20 in. (as against 30-40 in. in Nairobi) and many dry country plants are to be found.

A description of any of the climbs at Lukenya would be tedious and technical, but a typical day would involve three or four routes on different crags in the morning and two or three routes in the afternoon, perhaps on the Main Face which is then in shadow. Cars can be brought almost to the foot of the lowest rocks where there are shady thorn trees to provide good spots for picnics and siestas. If it is one





COLIN ST. JOHN HUTCHINSON ON THE MAIN FACE.



of the Mountain Club's 'beginners' days' or 'mountain rescue practice days', a start will probably be made at Jacob's Ladder, a steep easy slab with good holds where beginners are initiated and 'bodies' on stretchers can easily be lowered. All the best planned days end on the summit ridge where, on a clear evening, the climber's reward is a distant view of Mt. Kenya 100 miles to the north, the snows of Kilimanjaro glistening 120 miles to the south, and the Aberdares and the Ngong Hills basking in the rays of the setting sun.

Lukenya is a good place for a picnic, wild yet accessible. Once I took my family out for what was to be a quiet New Year's Day. My wife had never been entirely reconciled to the principle of mountaineering by husbands and fathers and the trip was designed to break her in gently. Hardly had we finished luncheon however than distant cries for help were heard, and we rushed to the rescue of a leader who had fallen off the top pitch of Arthur's Horror on the Main Face. Miraculously his experienced second had held him on thin rope, but he was badly bruised and shocked and required a few days' hospital treatment. As far as I know this is the only serious accident to have occurred at Lukenya, but it unluckily coincided with my family's only visit and needless to say provided ample extra material for admonition!

One of the advantages of Lukenya is that although it may take 2 or 3 hours to work one's way up routes to the top of the ridge, one can always run down to the car by an easy way in a quarter of an hour, so it is unnecessary to carry food and other impedimenta on the climbs.

I hope that these brief notes may give an idea of the merit of the place. As already indicated Alpine Club members have been prominent in pioneering new climbs and in continuing to enjoy the old ones. One of these members, who has recently returned to England after seven years' service in the Colony and who so much enjoyed a day on the rocks in the sun and the wind, will be much missed.