

MOUNT KENYA.¹

BY P. WYN HARRIS.

MY friend, Mr. E. E. Shipton, arrived in Kenya Colony towards the end of last year, and it was only after some difficulty that we arranged to make an attempt on Mt. Kenya in January 1929. I obtained local leave and everything appeared to be in order when a plague of locusts invaded the country, and they who passed through Nairobi were seized, armed with locust-destroying apparatus, and sent into the wilderness to kill. It happened, however, that when I arrived in Nairobi either the Government or the locusts were becoming discouraged, and the wary seeker after leave could, with much cunning, slip through the net set for him.

We met on December 31, together with G. A. Sommerfelt, whom we had invited to join us at Nairobi. A heated six hours of purchasing ensued in the Indian bazaar, and at 1 P.M. we set off in a half-ton lorry for Chogoria Mission at the foot of the mountain. We had on board sufficient food for sixteen days, a Whympet tent, sleeping bags, lamps, cooking pots, an axe and machete, tropical as well as warm clothing; also all the usual Alpine equipment.

The distance to the Mission from Nairobi is about 160 miles, and towards evening we arrived at the Government station of Embu, where 400 lbs. of mealie meal were added to our already overladen lorry. Just as night fell we stopped at a small Indian trading centre to fill with petrol, and it was unfortunate that we did so. The road from thence, on its way north to the frontier, skirts the eastern foothills of Kenya and winds its way in and out of the forest, crossing the many streams by means of wooden bridges. The Indians told us most harrowing tales of unfortunate lorry drivers delayed on the road after dark. It appeared that elephants made a habit of drinking at one of the streams and interfered with those who passed on their lawful occasions. We were sceptical as we had passed that way before, but the tales were more than enough for our native driver; he considered that his day's work was finished. It was rather a dilemma, as to put up for a night would mean one day

¹ Cf. *A.J.* 20, 102-10, for the first ascent of Mount Kenya, Illustrated.



Photo. G. A. Sommerfelt.
N.E. face of NELION and BATION from first high camp.

less on the mountain, and we had few enough as it was. However, Sommerfelt solved the problem by diving to the bottom of the lorry and bringing to light some pieces of a rifle which he proceeded to screw together. As a rifle it had one advantage—it looked dangerous—and it calmed our driver's fears; we set out once more. Except for a large grey boulder tastefully arranged in the middle of one of the rivers, which excited our driver's fears once more, we saw no dangerous game, and therefore the technique of avoiding elephant as a branch of mountaineering art has yet to be discovered.

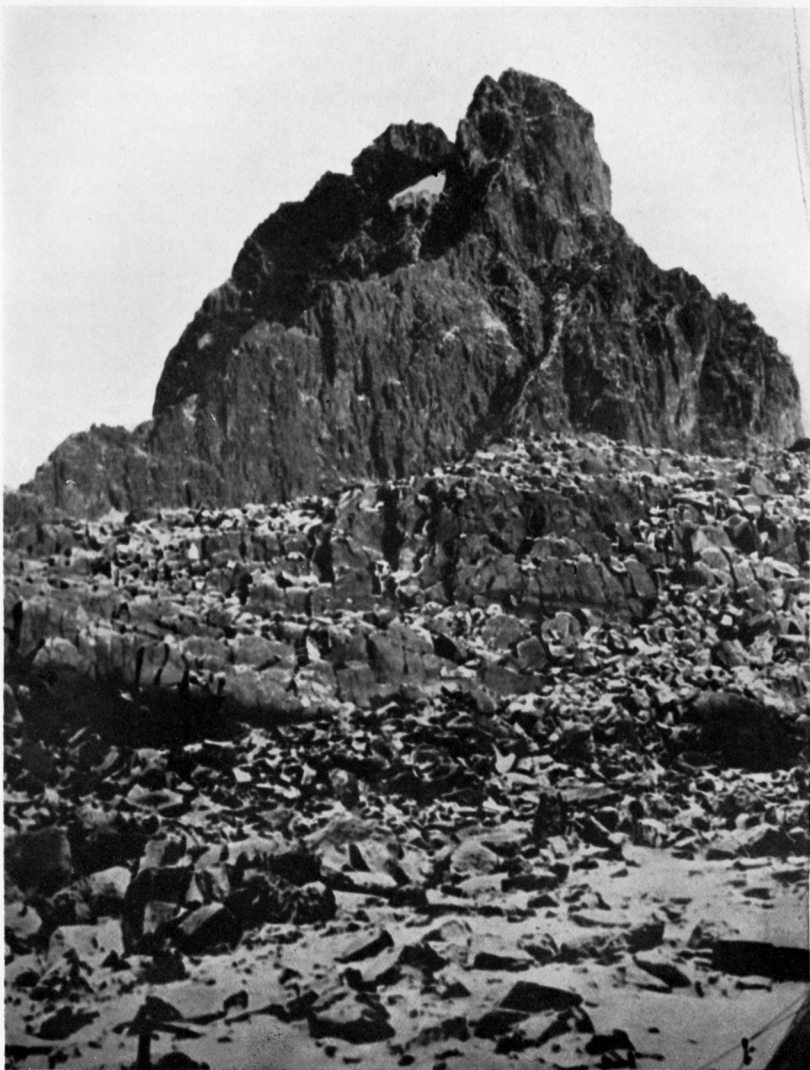
Actually elephant and buffalo are fairly common in the Kenya forests, but according to native reports they move over to the other side of the mountain during the dry season. The previous time we had passed through the forest in January and February none of the elephant tracks seemed particularly fresh.

We arrived at the Government camp some two miles above the Chogoria Mission just before midnight, where we dined off plum cake, an unorthodox but fairly sustaining diet. Shortly after dawn we set about collecting porters, and after selecting twenty-two we discussed the question of wages. Half an hour's bargaining ensued before we arrived at the usual figure: one shilling per man per day; two pounds of mealie meal, salt and ghee for rations; each porter to have two blankets, which we agreed they should keep if they worked well. Actually, when we got to the top camp, we paid off ten of the weaker men, keeping the remainder to carry our equipment down. Each man carried between forty and fifty pounds weight, and the loads were as follows: Porters' food, nine loads; tent, one load; food for party, three loads; cooking utensils, stoves, lamps and fuel, two loads; equipment, bedding, clothes, etc., seven loads. From the above it would appear that we were travelling rather 'de luxe' and that with lightweight bedding and equipment the number of porters could have been materially cut down.

We broke camp at 9 A.M. on January 1, and our porters filed slowly into the forest. Mr. Carr, of Nairobi, has cut a track along which motor cars have passed occasionally and with some difficulty, and which now attains a height of some 12,000 ft.; he has also built a large cabin at 10,000 ft., just above the forest line, and another at some 15,000 ft. on the left bank of the Lewis Glacier; the top hut, now rebuilt, had been blown down when we made our attempt, and we were compelled to camp above 10,000 ft. The journey through the forest to the lower hut usually takes two days, the distance being some eighteen miles

with a rise of 4000 ft., but, with a certain amount of pressure, we managed to persuade our porters to do the journey in one march, so that we arrived at the lower hut towards nightfall. The next morning we left the forest behind, and passing up the left side of the Nihhi Valley over country not unlike the top of the Little St. Bernard Pass, we attained in the space of three hours our first view of the peak some five miles away at the head of the valley. It had been our original plan to attack the S.E. face of the two peaks, that is to say, the face up which Sir Halford Mackinder made his ascent, but as we got nearer to the N.E. face and it danced temptingly before us in the sun, we worked out a possible route on the true left wall of the great couloir dividing the two summit peaks, Nelion and Bation. We therefore decided to make our first attempt on this face, and, camping that night at about 12,000 ft., early the next day moved our camp on to a ridge running N. from Point Lenana (16,300 ft.), so that we were directly in front of the N.E. face but some 900 ft. above and half a mile away from its foot. That afternoon Shipton and I crossed the foot of the Gregory Glacier, which descends from the col between Point Lenana and Nelion, and reached the actual foot of the N.E. face.

Our first difficulty was to effect a lodgment on the face ; the great couloir overhung in places and was clearly impossible for the greater part of its length, but a smaller couloir to the right ran diagonally across the face and seemed to give promise of better things. It started some 300 ft. above the foot of the face and was guarded by steep ice-worn slabs. We spent the whole of a hot afternoon trying to get into it, and towards evening we solved the difficulty by a series of traverses from the right. We returned over the half-mile of moraine in the cool of the evening to find that Sommerfelt had pitched camp and had supper in readiness for us. He had sent our porters down to camp some 2000 ft. below with instructions to report in two days' time. The next morning we had intended to make an early start, but the cold proved too much for us after the heat of the plains, and it was not until 7 A.M. that we finally got going. The reconnoitred traverse to the foot of the couloir was steep and fairly difficult, but the rock was good. The sacks we were carrying proved too much for us in our untrained condition, and with one accord we left them behind at the end of the traverse. The couloir led us up by steep snow for some little distance and terminated in a steep rock wall ; this, after one unsuccessful attempt, we climbed by means of a difficult chimney. We now found ourselves in a steep snow amphitheatre, the head of which over-



Photo, E. G. Whittal.

NELION and BATION
showing S. ridge of Nelion.



Photo, G. A. Sommerfelt.

... "We attained in the space of three hours our first view of the peak, some 5 miles away." ...

NELSON and BATION.

PT. THOMSON.

PT. LENANA.



Photo, G. A. Sommerfelt.

From the 'Skating Pond.'

looked the great couloir. The snow was in excellent condition and we attained a subsidiary ridge on the left of the couloir without great difficulty. The ridge after about 100 ft. of climbing landed us on the face some 400 ft. below the summit of Bation. But the way was barred by a smooth wall about 80 ft. in height and quite holdless except for a repulsive-looking crack. The time was now 2.30 p.m., and as we were beginning to wonder what the effects of a tropical sun would be on the snow slopes below us we decided to return. This we did, and reached the foot of the rocks shortly before dark. We were not properly acclimatized and felt the return across the moraine acutely; the 900-ft. drag up to camp seemed interminable, and it was with no small satisfaction that we crawled into bed.

We decided to make an attempt on the S.E. face before again attacking this face; we therefore called up our porters and skirting round the eastern flank of Point Lenana arrived on the left bank of the Lewis Glacier, which descends from the col between Point Lenana and Nelion on the opposite side to the Gregory Glacier. It was at this point that Mr. Carr had built his second hut, then in ruins, and the spot is remarkable for a small frozen ice-barrier lake generally known as the 'Skating Pond.' Across the Lewis Glacier Bation and Nelion tower up, and although on this side they are little more than 12,000 ft. in height, they present a far more impressive view than the N.E. face. The S. ridge forming the right bank of the Lewis Glacier has been attempted several times by different parties, and soon after midday Shipton and I crossed the glacier to look at it. After moderate climbing for some 200 ft. the ridge narrowed to almost a knife-edge, at the end of which a blunt nose overhung for about 40 ft.; this we were unable to turn on either side, but careful peering round the corner gave a faint hope that we might be able to force the Lewis Glacier face and so attain the S. ridge above the overhang. We returned in the dusk feeling far from confident that we could force a route up any part of the southern side.

The next morning, January 6, we two left camp at 7.30 a.m., and after an improvised breakfast set off once more across the glacier. Starting almost underneath the overhang we traversed upwards and to the right over steep and difficult rocks to an almost vertical corner which we passed with some difficulty to a platform at the base of a steep chimney. We were surprised and heartened to find in its depths a rope of no small antiquity. Subsequent inquiries have thrown no light as to whom it belonged, and it is probable that Sir Halford Mackinder used it

in his descent. An awkward chockstone was the chief difficulty in the chimney; this overcome, easier rocks led us on to the ridge some way above the overhang. A short distance and the ridge abutted against the face of Nelion: a large gendarme marks the end of the ridge, and it was with some labour that we climbed a crack to the gap between it and the face. From this point two hanging glaciers lead round the S. face of Nelion to the gap between the two summits. Sir Halford Mackinder attained the summit of Bation by traversing round these slopes; they were very steep, and the black ice gleamed in the sunlight to such purpose that we were unanimous in attempting the rocks of Nelion before committing ourselves to the ice slopes.

Shipton led off along an exposed ledge to the right and proceeded up an insecure and unpleasant-looking crack. He required more than 60 ft. of rope, and the step was by far the most nervous and difficult part of the whole climb. There was a large stance at the top of the step, and the next 100 ft. led us to an *impasse*. The only exit ran downwards and to the right along an exposed traverse to a shallow depression in the eastern face of Nelion: this passed, three short steps led us to the summit of Nelion some 200 yds. distant from and 40 ft. below Bation. The descent to the gap between the two peaks, appropriately called 'The Gate of the Mist,' took us some time and we did not arrive on the summit of Bation until 1.45 p.m. No trace of Sir Halford Mackinder's ascent could be found, but his photograph of the summit blocks was still recognizable, only one or two stones having shifted. Having built a cairn, we left the summit at 2.15 p.m. and returned over the same route. In two of the more difficult places we came down on a doubled rope and arrived at the foot of the rocks at sunset.

On January 8 we repeated the ascent together with Sommerfelt; the weather was perfect, and from the summit of Nelion we were able to see Kilimanjaro, over 250 miles distant. On our descent that evening we met Miss V. de Watteville, who, with eight native porters, had come up to the 'Skating Pond' camp. She had seen us on the peak during the day and very kindly crossed the glacier to meet us at the foot of the rocks with food and hot tea.

The next day, in company with Miss de Watteville, we wandered round the foot of the twin peaks and examined the W. side. There would appear to be several routes worthy of attention on this side. That night the weather broke hopelessly, and we descended to Chogoria Mission, where, after a wait of two days, we caught a lorry to Nairobi.