

MOUNT KENYA, 1939-1952

By J. W. HOWARD

THE pinnacles of Mount Kenya, standing in splendid isolation and grandeur on their pedestal of moorland and forest, must be one of the most magnificent sights in the world, especially when seen in the clear early morning light from the slopes of the Aberdares looking across the Naro Moru plain. The height of the plain is about 6,000 ft. and of the peaks about 17,000 ft., so that the eye is led upwards in huge sweeps—first to the undulating forest, then on to the steeper bare moorland, and finally to the 2,000 ft. of cliffs which are Batian (17,058 ft.) and Nelion (17,022 ft.).

The mountain is not only a thing of beauty ; it also provides some of the best rock and ice climbing in Africa. The plutonic rock of the main peaks (the core of an ancient volcano) is on the whole solid and excellent for climbing, though the volcanic rubble of the fringe ridges is evil and treacherous. Snowfalls occur down to 11,000 ft. or so, but the snow melts quickly in the tropical sun and the ten small glaciers, which surround the peaks are not always snow-covered. On some of the routes, however, there is a good deal of ice work ; verglas can be troublesome on the north side in the January-February season when the sun is south of the Equator, and on the south side in the July-August season when the sun is north of the Equator.

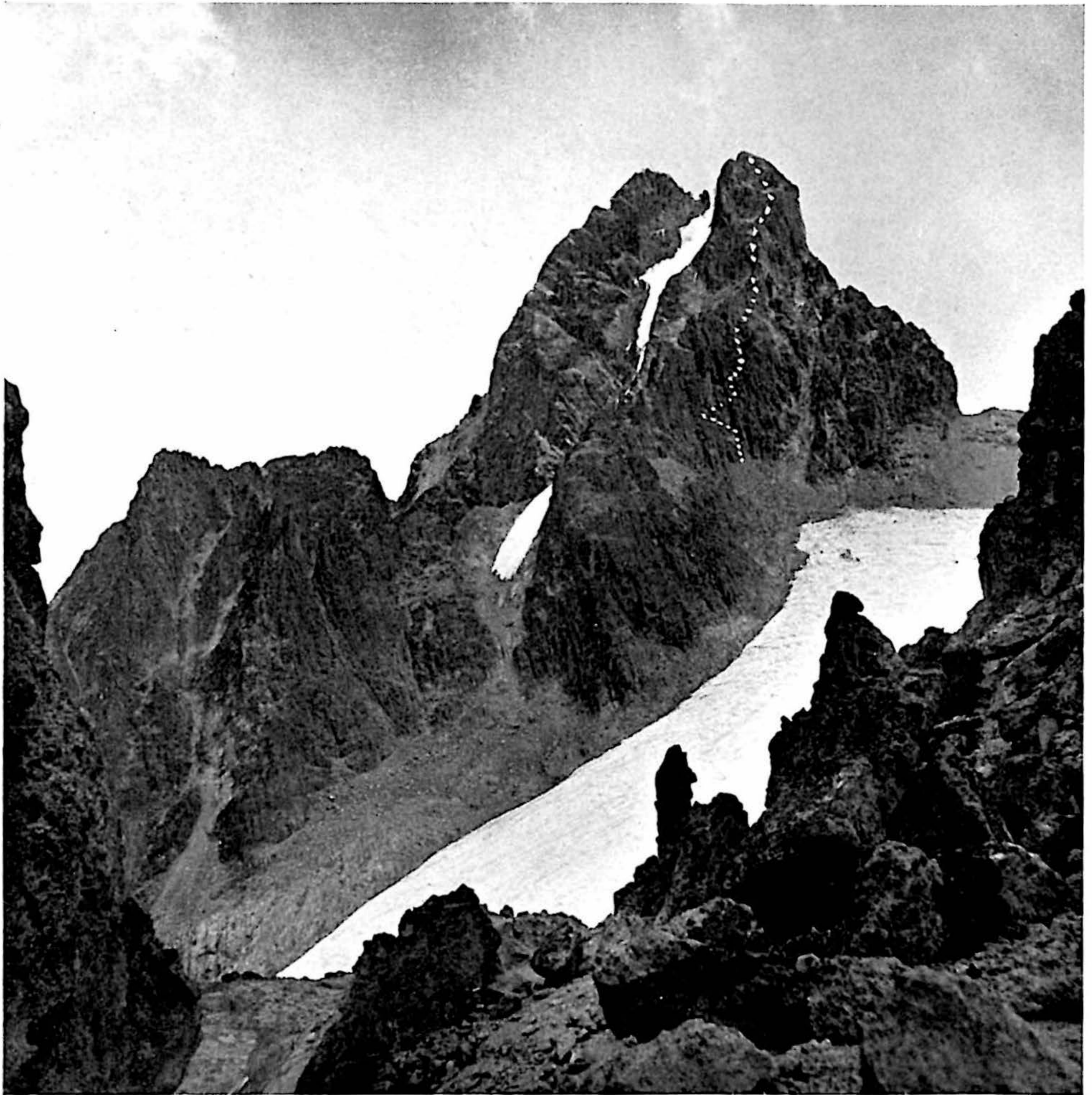
Now that Mount Kenya is a closed preserve to all save military patrols and gangster bands, it is a convenient moment to take stock of the last fifteen years' exploration, but before doing so let us just remind ourselves of the stages by which the mountain has been opened up.

1887-1899. Teleki to Mackinder. Early attempts to gain a footing on the moorlands and peaks, culminating in the first ascent of Batian on September 13, 1899, by Sir Halford Mackinder, accompanied by the Courmayeur guide, César Ollier and porter, Joseph Brocherel.¹

1900-1928. Unsuccessful attempts to repeat the climb by Melhuish, Dutton, Arthur, Carr, Dennis, Barlow, Fowell Buxton,² Hamilton Ross³ and others ; but considerable exploration of the peaks and moorlands, the opening up of mule and porter routes, and the building of two huts.

1929-1939. The second ascent of Batian, which included the first ascent of Nelion, by Shipton and Wyn Harris⁴ ; the first ascent of the great West ridge, which included the first traverse of the mountain, by Shipton and Tilman⁵ ; and the first ascents of most of the principal minor peaks by the same pair. Following upon these notable climbs the 'ordinary' route (South-east face and ridge of Nelion and then crossing

¹ *A. J.* 20. 109.² *A. J.* 33. 431.³ *A. J.* 34. 329.⁴ *A. J.* 41. 362.⁵ *A. J.* 43. 138.



Photo, A. H. Firmin.]

MT. KENYA FROM SOUTH-EAST SHOWING NORMAL ROUTE.

to Batian) was achieved by a number of parties before war broke out in 1939. These included the first ascent of Batian by a woman, Miss Una Cameron in 1938; and the first ascent of Nelion by an African, Mtu Muthara, also in 1938.

Thus, up to the outbreak of war the only three routes to the summit of Batian were by:—

The South-east face and Diamond Glacier (Mackinder, Ollier, Brocherel).

The South-east face and traverse from Nelion (Shipton, Wyn Harris).

The West ridge (Shipton, Tilman).

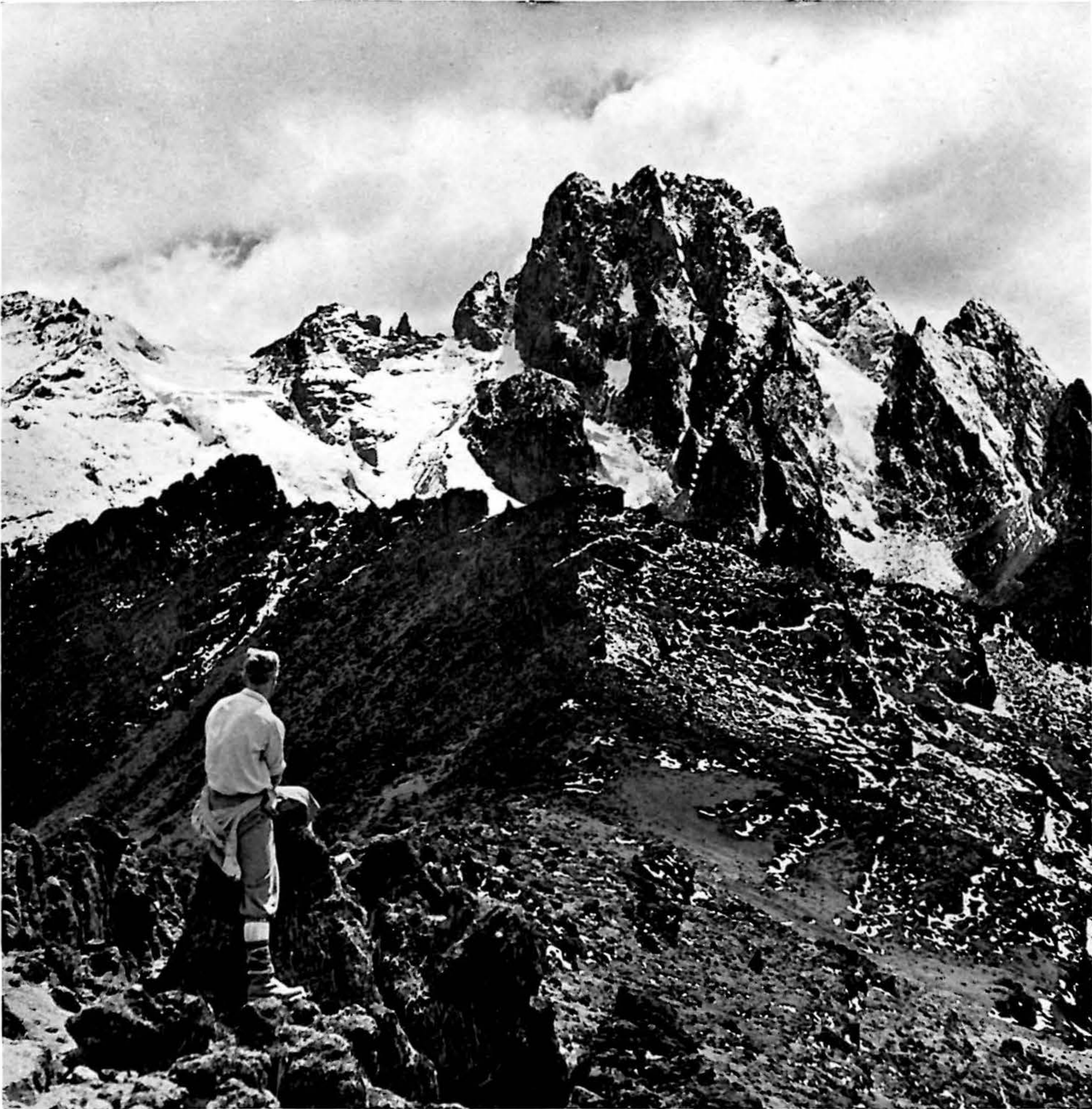
The war and post-war periods brought to Kenya a large number of Europeans, amongst whom were some keen mountaineers. During the war itself there were several ascents by the 'ordinary' route, some of them turning back from Nelion, but some succeeding in crossing the steep snow slope to the Gate of the Mists and gaining the higher peak of Batian. One of these ascents, by Douglas-Hamilton, accompanied by a Kikuyu called Ali, is described in *A. J.* 53. 215. Ali had perhaps made more trips up the mountain than any other African until his death in 1949. Dr. Bernadelli, with whom he was climbing, had reached the top of Mackinder's Chimney and Ali was following him up when the rope suddenly tautened; on being lowered to the foot of the pitch Ali was found to be dead, the probable cause being heart attack. No African has yet reached Batian. One must pay tribute here to the gallant attempt by under-nourished and ill-equipped Italian prisoners-of-war described in the book, *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*. Although the attempt foundered on the slopes of Dutton Peak it was a remarkable effort.

Since the war there have been a number of ascents of Nelion and/or Batian by the ordinary route, including one by four Italian prisoners on parole, and another by Lieut. Bill Hackett of the U.S. Army, who climbed both Kilimanjaro and Nelion on 45 days' leave from his station in America. The month of January, 1952, the last season before the Emergency, was notable for three ascents of Batian and six of Nelion, by the ordinary route.

The first new route to be opened up in the main period under review in this article was the North face of Batian.

The North Face

Shipton, Wyn Harris and Sommerfelt had reconnoitred the North-east face in 1929 (*A. J.* 41. 364-5) and several parties had had a further look before the war—notably Simmonds, Sladen and Hicks, but it was not until 1944 that Firmin, Hicks, Hayward, Mitchell, Simmonds and Timmis started the attack which ended successfully and which is fully described in *A. J.* 55. 76. I will not recapitulate what has been written there, but having descended by the North face in 1948, I can say that the crux of the climb, a long and very severe chimney below where the North and West ridges join, is a most formidable affair; the lead up



Photo, A. H. Firmin.]

MAIN PEAKS FROM NORTH.

— — — — FRENCH ROUTE ON NORTH FACE.

..... HICKS AND FIRMIN'S ROUTE.

this by Arthur Firmin must have been an exceptionally magnificent effort. Apart from this there are no very serious obstacles except complicated route-finding in the lower reaches. This climb has not yet been repeated in the ascent, but a French expedition in 1952 climbed the North face by a route a little further to the east, with the help of pitons. An account has been published in *La Montagne*, No. 359, Nov.-Dec. 1952. The *mauvais pas* came at about the same height as on the Firmin-Hicks route—both Batian and Nelion are defended by steep bastions at about 16,300-16,800 ft. on all sides and many of the climbs on the mountain start on faces, overcome serious obstacles just below a ridge, and end up on these ridges which culminate at the summit.

The next route to be opened up was by the South face and South-west ridge.

South Face and South-west Ridge

There are records of various parties exploring the Darwin Glacier and just above it, but none of any serious attempts by this route, which is one of the shortest and most direct to the top of Batian. It was climbed in 1946 by Arthur Firmin and myself after a preliminary reconnaissance from the top of Pt. John. An account is given in *A. J.* 55. 400. Here again the crux came at a long buttress overlooking the Tyndall Glacier at about 16,400 ft., and here again Firmin accomplished a very fine lead-out. Once on the final ridge of firm rock in the sunshine the climbing was sheer joy, as on a fine day on the Chamonix Aiguilles. However, the subsequent night out just below the summit of Nelion was an experience neither of us would care to repeat, and I fear that our words and sentiments were very different from those expressed by Pope Pius XI (Achille Ratti) when he was benighted on Monte Rosa: 'How could we have given even a thought to the weariness we suffered,' he wrote, 'much less complained of it.'

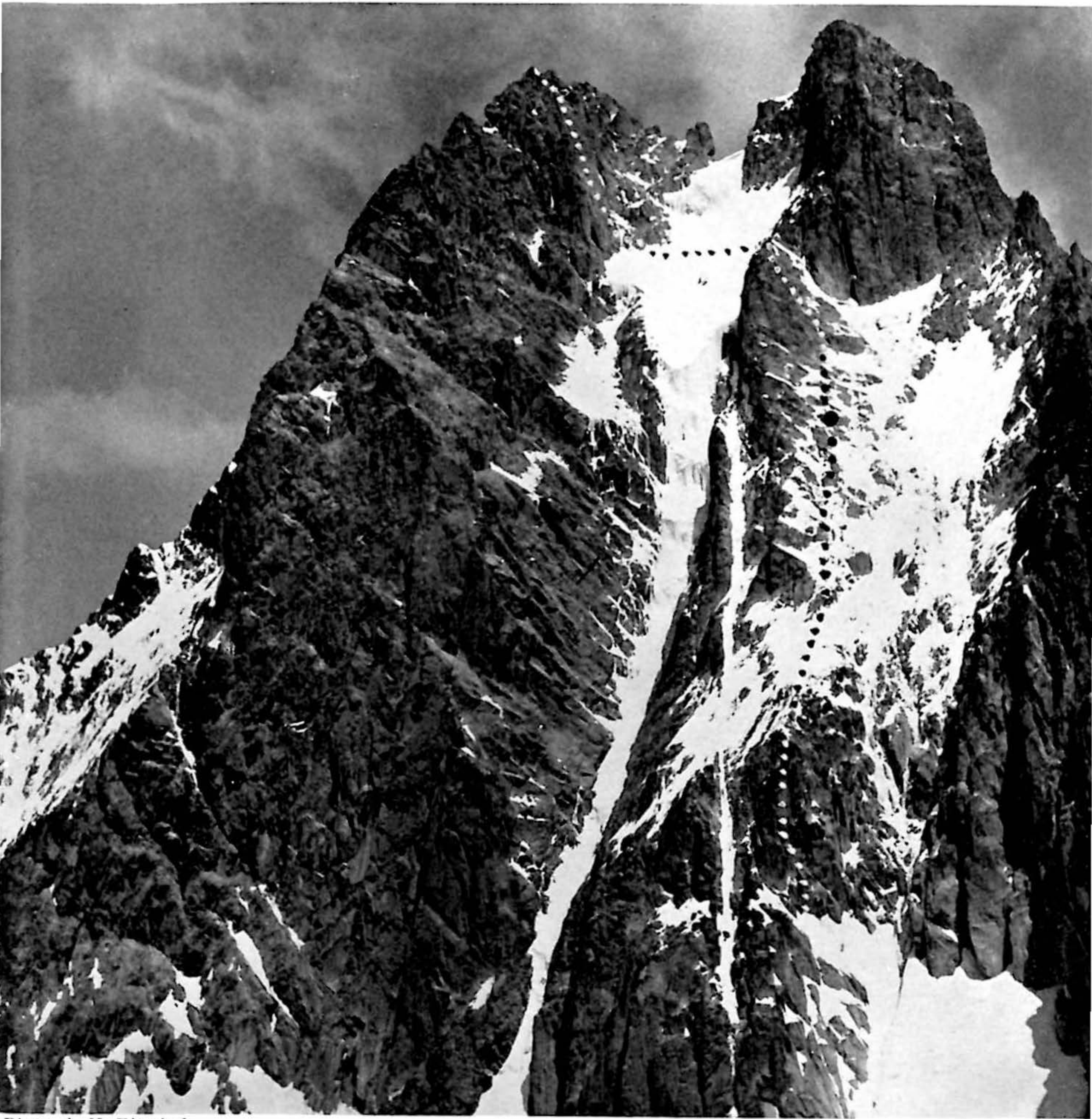
This climb has not yet been repeated. A strong party starting up the rocks above the Darwin Glacier at crack of dawn should be able to complete the traverse in daylight. Since part of the climb lies up the South and West faces, which do not get much sun, there is always liable to be verglas, and the early morning part of the climb is bitterly cold.

The West Face

At the time of writing (Jan. 1955) news comes of the expedition by R. A. Caukwell and G. W. Rose, ending in the tragic fall and death of Rose whilst descending by the ordinary route at night. This fine pair of climbers forced a new route from the Tyndall Glacier up the very steep Heim and Forel Glaciers which hang precariously to the face and joined the West ridge not far from the summit of Batian. After step-cutting most of the time from 7 A.M. to 7 P.M., they arrived on top and found the Gate of the Mists blocked by impassable cornices. In order to turn

Batian

Nelion



Photo, A. H. Firmin.]

SOUTH FACE FROM PT. JOHN.
..... SOUTH FACE ROUTE.



Photo, A. H. Firmin.]

MAIN PEAK FROM TWO TARN COL.

..... WEST FACE ROUTE. - - - - SOUTH-WEST RIDGE ROUTE.

the flank of Nelion they cramponed down across the steep Diamond Glacier (Mackinder, 1899, and Firmin-Bagenal, 1950) and rejoined the ordinary route below Shipton's Crack. Shortly after gaining the South-east face a rock ledge gave way beneath Rose who fell a considerable distance and was fatally injured. Caukwell accomplished a great *tour de force* by descending the precipice to his companion, completing the climb down to the Lewis Glacier when no further help could be given on the spot, and running down the remaining 20 miles or so of mountain to summon help as quickly as it was humanly possible to do so. Rescue parties were mobilised immediately, but Rose had succumbed to his injuries and had probably never regained consciousness. He was buried on the spot owing to the extreme danger of attempting to lower the body.

Other New Climbs and Variations on the Main Peaks

One of the most interesting ascents of the post-war period was undertaken by Arthur Firmin and John Bagenal in 1950. They bivouacked at the foot of the Darwin Glacier, climbed the West face of Nelion to the true left bank of the Darwin Glacier where they joined Mackinder's route and cut steps across the hard ice of the glacier in two long leads-out, with a sentry box and bollard belay in the middle. This was the first traverse since Mackinder's in 1899. Completing the ascent of Batian, they returned by the way they had come. Firmin thinks that this is probably an easier route to the Diamond Glacier than by the South-east face (ordinary route) although it is evidently not so interesting, more liable to stonefalls, and just as cold in the early morning shadow.

The crossing of the Diamond Glacier was repeated in the descent by Caukwell and Rose this year, as recorded above.

A variation of the Diamond Glacier route was achieved by Mr. and Mrs. de Graaff in January, 1952. They gained the left bank of the Diamond Glacier at the same point as previous parties, but instead of crossing over direct to Batian, they cut steps up to the Gate of the Mists and gained the summit rocks of Batian from there. This same party, in climbing Nelion by the ordinary route, introduced a variation after gaining the South-west ridge. Instead of continuing by the Shipton and Rickety Cracks they climbed another small crack 40 ft. to the left of Shipton's and reached the ridge above by what they described as a 'more direct and more protected' route.

The only other climb on the main peaks which might be mentioned is the second ascent of the West ridge of Batian and descent by the North face. This was done in July, 1948, by Firmin and myself after a failure the year before, when we were obliged to escape from the ridge by roping down to the Northey Glacier. The West ridge climb is, perhaps, the longest and most interesting on the mountain. Steps in the ice gully leading from the Joseph Glacier to the col between Batian and Pt. Piggott must be prepared the day before, and from the col there is a steep ice slope to the ridge proper, but after that it is all rock climbing with three or four difficult pitches. On our abortive attempt in 1947 we crept round the treacherous South side of the Petit



[To face p. 274.]

Photo, A. H. Firmin.]

MT. KENYA FROM THE SOUTH.

..... WEST FACE ROUTE.

- · - · - SOUTH-WEST RIDGE ROUTE.

- - - SOUTH FACE ROUTE.

Gendarme, following the Shipton-Tilman route, but in 1948 we found an easier way over the top of the Gendarme.⁶

The West ridge route would be very difficult at any season except July-August when the north side of the ridge (which is the side mainly used for this climb) is in the sun. Possible variations of the route would be to gain the West ridge from the Tyndall Glacier to the south; or from Dutton Peak to the north; and an expedition on the grand scale would be to combine Pt. Piggott in one great traverse of the whole horseshoe ridge, but that would almost certainly involve a night out.

The only face of the mountain that has not yet been climbed is the East or North-east face which looks towards Simba Col. It is a tremendous jumble of precipices, buttresses, and organ-pipe columns; if Shipton and Wyn Harris could not find a gap in these defences, then anybody who succeeds without the use of ironmongery (and probably with it too) will have something to be proud of.

At this point I must draw attention to the remarkable record of Arthur Firmin in the period under review. He has made no less than five ascents of Batian since he first went to the mountain in 1943, and he has climbed the peak by every route so far known, except the West face, including three new routes. As far as I can discover there have now been nineteen ascents of Batian and about thirty of Nelion, some of these *en route* to or from Batian.

Ascents of Minor Peaks

Most of the satellite peaks were climbed for the first time by Shipton and Tilman in 1930, but few, if any, of the second ascents were done until the period under review. For instance, Pt. Peter was climbed for the second time in 1945 by a party which included an Italian guide⁷; Pt. John in 1946⁸; Pt. Piggott in 1948⁹; and Midget Peak (the most difficult of all) in 1951 by J. I. Moore, R. le Pelley, and P. Murray, with a variation by Bell in 1952. Most of these have been climbed several times since then, and the era of exciting discoveries of tins of Brand's essence and bottles of Bouvier (or the local equivalent) is now over.

Since the Emergency started military patrols have often been up on the moorlands and in the peaks area; the Adjutant of one of the British battalions serving in Kenya recently died on the mountain. Apart from the West face climb, the only other ascent of the peaks of which I have record is a very recent one by the ordinary route by a party from Meru—but I have no further details of this.

It is gratifying to learn that the huts have not been quite so badly ransacked by the Mau Mau Kikuyu as one might expect, to judge from the pre-Emergency antics of the fanatical murderous group who called themselves Watu wa Mungu (Men of God) and aimed at going as high as possible on the mountain in order to reach Heaven. It seems that the present cut-throats do not go high very often.

⁶ *A. J.* 57. 94.
⁸ *A. J.* 55. 401.

⁷ *A. J.* 55. 285.
⁹ *A. J.* 57. 94.

The comfortable five-berthed Two Tarn Hut was erected by the Mountain Club of Kenya in 1948, and three years ago the Top Hut at the Curling Pond, originally built in 1929 by Mr. E. Carr, was furnished with bunks and a cupboard. The Mackinder Valley on the north side is next on the list for a hut, but with any money available after the Emergency the Club will have to decide whether to repair the old huts or to build new ones. There is also a hut at 10,000 ft. on the route from Chogoria to the south-east, but this route which involves hiring porters, was not much used during the 1939-52 period. Most expeditions have preferred the approach by mule transport from Nanyuki or Naro Moru to the west.

The Future

Even when the Emergency is declared to be at an end it may be some years before the last bandit is cleared from the forest. However, as we have seen, Kenya mountaineers will not agree to wait for the complete 'all clear' before setting out again, especially as the gangsters normally stick to the lower regions. As a result of anti-terrorist operations a number of motor tracks have now been cut to the top of the forest, so that the day's march through the forest may now be a thing of the past; but, mercifully, it will be difficult to push roads further than this, and there is no danger of Two Tarn Hut suffering the same fate as Arolla or Saas Fee. Route-finding round the peaks and moorlands will be made much easier by the 1/25,000 maps now in course of preparation.

Anyway, until the mountain is fully open to the public again, we still have the peaks of Kilimanjaro and the Ruwenzori range on which to work off surplus energy!