

## THE GRAND TRAVERSE OF MOUNT KENYA, 1964

BY T. B. H. PHILLIPS

*(Four illustrations: nos. 86-89)*

**M**OUNT KENYA has just claimed its fourteenth victim as I write this. Three British soldiers on leave from Aden fell on the South face and were killed. The efficient Kenya mountain rescue machine, which involves climbers being flown in from several hundred miles away, including Uganda, has wound down to an efficient conclusion. In proportion to the number of expeditions on the mountain—even now probably not many more than fifty parties have been to the top of Batian (17,058 ft.)—this is a dismally high figure. Given that one or two of these were Africans seeking a closer communion with their gods, perhaps on appeal from an adamant witch-doctor, the Alps would still seem to be a safer place to spend a holiday.

Having spent a month on the mountain last year, I find it difficult to account for this. The rock has all the good properties of granite from the climber's point of view. Snow and ice conditions always seem frank about themselves. Our weather was like a chaperone who knows it is her duty to spoil the fun but just cannot bring herself to do it. There seems an absence of quick-as-a-flash storms; instead, a predictable and not inhospitable mist works a nine till five day, shrouding the upper peaks.

It may be that some do not take the altitude seriously enough. By its easiest route Mount Kenya is perhaps comparable with the Dru, certainly it is harder than most Alpine peaks. There is rock-climbing, albeit modest, to be done at 17,000 ft., and a party is unlikely to have its wits about it on a long weekend's visit from Nairobi. The answer, probably, for neo-colonialists and other East Africans is to spend a week getting acclimatised and then to have a weekend on the mountain every few months so as to stay in trim. For, weather permitting, there is no reason why an acclimatised mountaineer should not climb Batian, Nairobi-to-Nairobi, in two days.

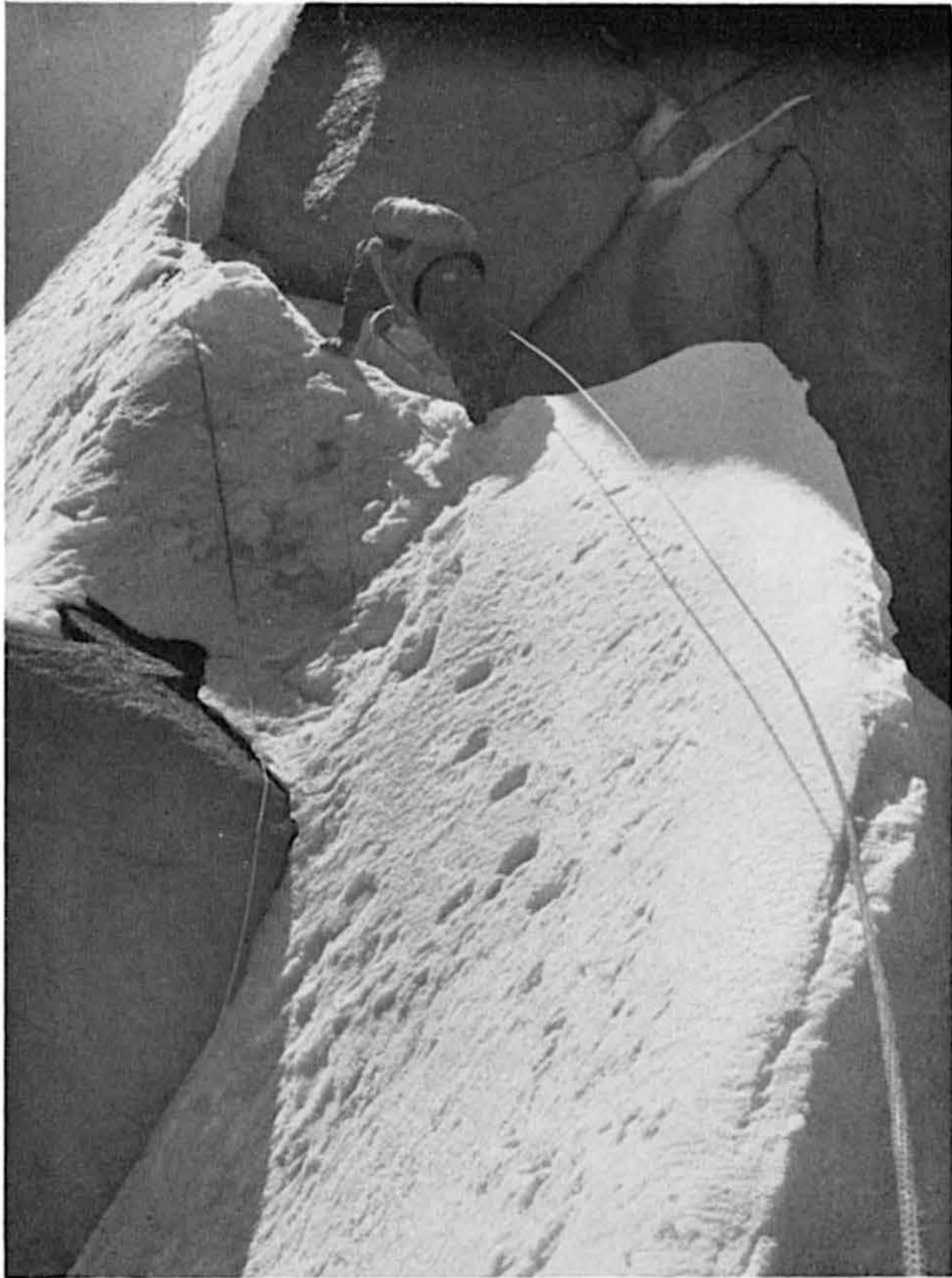
During the expedition, Robert Baillie and I built a small, excruciatingly painful bivouac at about 16,500 ft. on the South-east face of Nelion. This is alongside the ordinary route up the mountain and is on the only place that can be called a ledge—about the area of three card tables in the shape of an L. This was a contribution to safety, to



*Photo: T. B. H. Phillips]*

BATIAN (17,058 FT.), *Left*, AND NELION (17,022 FT.), *Right*. THE GRAND TRAVERSE WENT UP THE WEST RIDGE OF BATIAN (*Left SKYLINE*) AND DOWN THE SOUTH RIDGE OF NELION (*Right SKYLINE*).

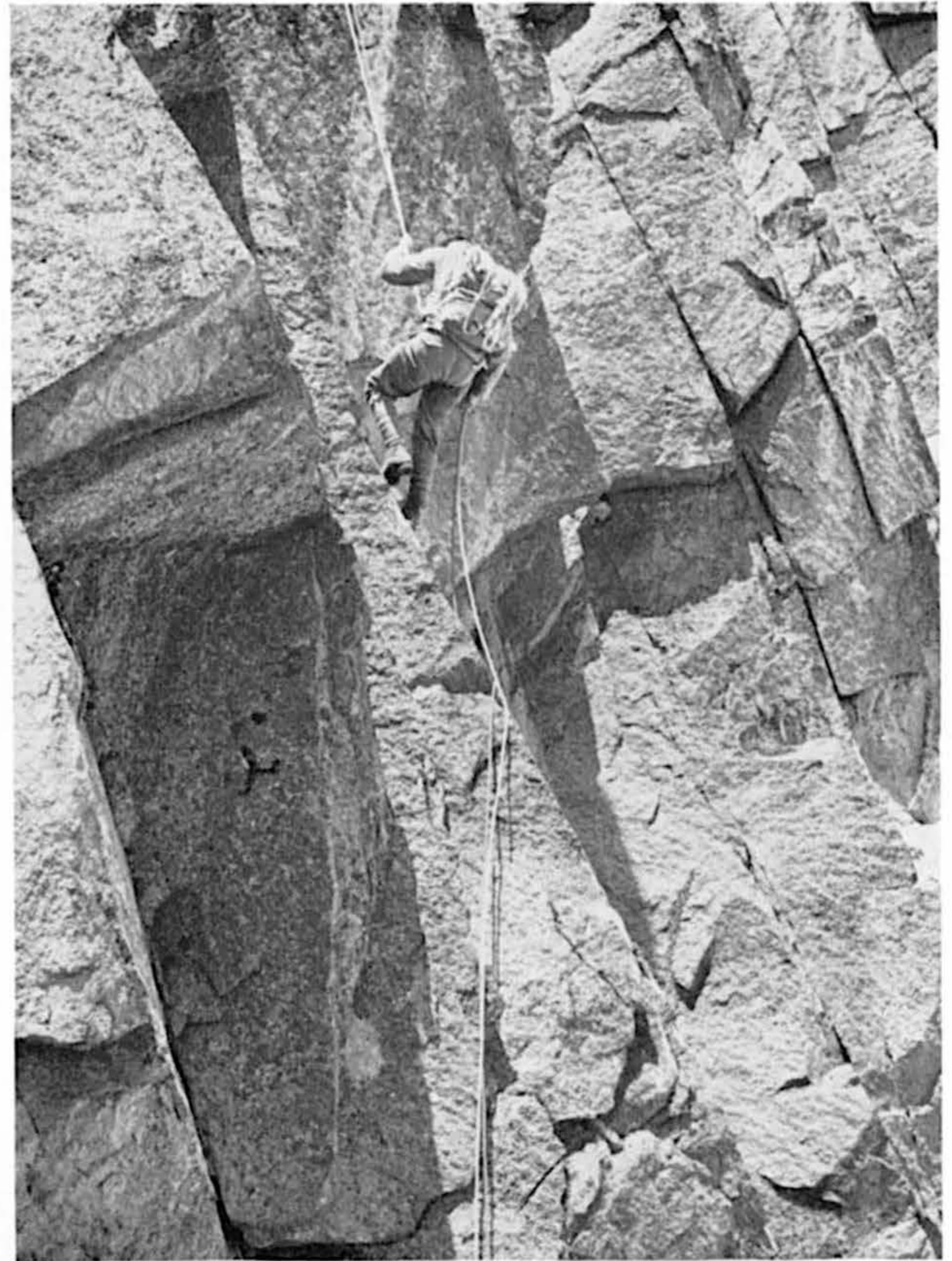
(No. 86)



*Photo: T. B. H. Phillips]*

IN THE GATE OF THE MISTS, BETWEEN BATIAN AND NELION.

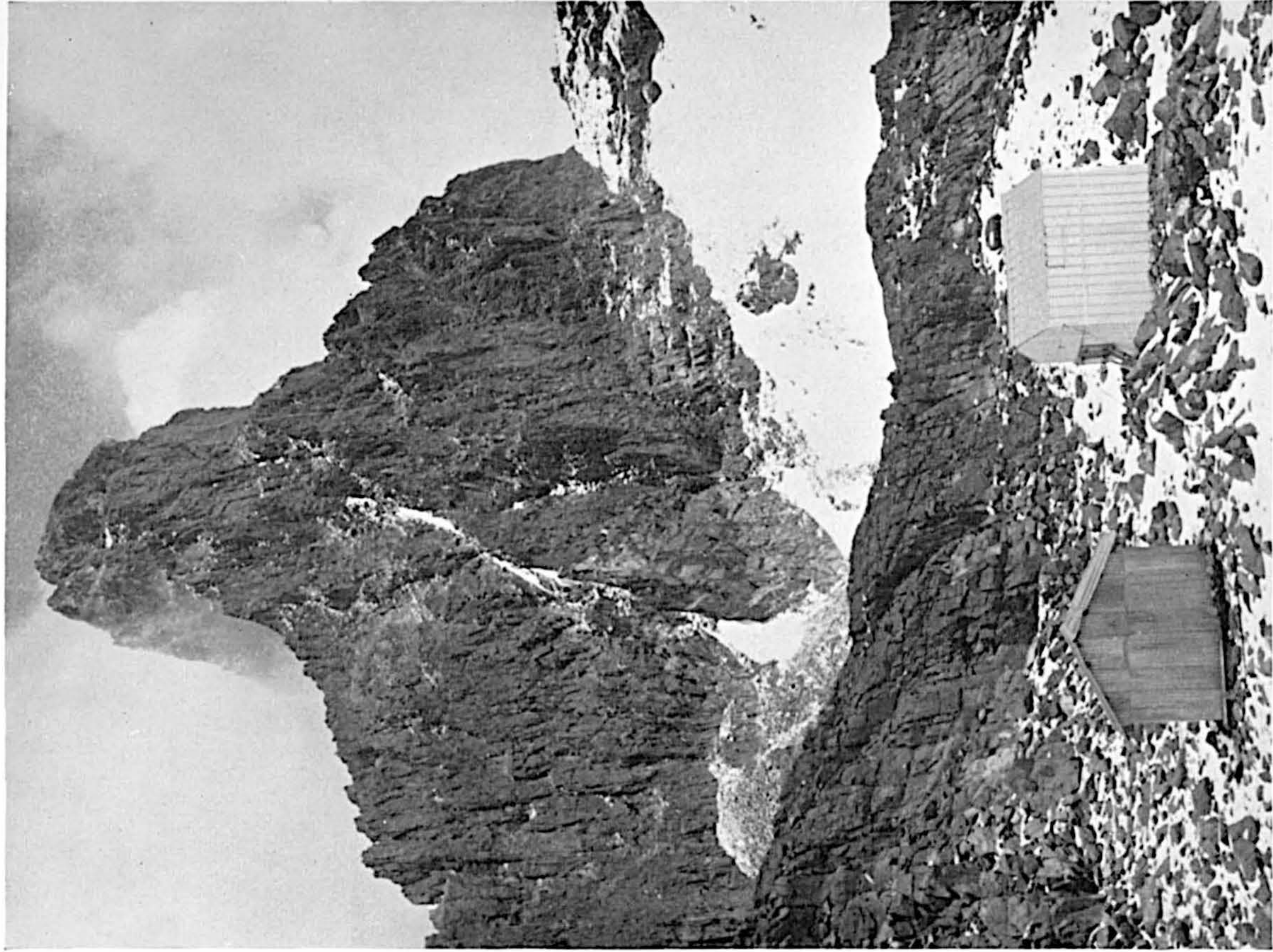
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*Photo: T. B. H. Phillips]*

AN ABSEIL ON THE SOUTH RIDGE OF NELION.

(No. 88)



*Photo: T. B. H. Phillips]*

SOUTH-EAST FACE OF NELION. IN THE FOREGROUND, TOP HUT AND ARTHUR FIRMIN MEMORIAL HUT.

(No. 89)

offer benighted climbers an alternative to descending in the dark, the cause of at least one fatality. To our chagrin one party, at any rate, has already spurned the use of the facility proffered, the descent in the dark proving the lesser evil!

Our chief pleasure, though, was a traverse of the four main peaks of the Mount Kenya massif. These have the logicity of all being 'carved out of the central plug filling the conduit of the extinct Mount Kenya volcano'. Linked by a switchback of ridges, they gave us three days of the best mountaineering in Africa.

No night I have spent was like our bivouac on the summit of Mount Kenya the second day out. Proof against hunger with our petrol stove, and against cold with our duvets and elephants' feet, and on a fine ledge beneath the Uhuru flag, we were completely comfortable. We both slept like logs, and in the morning the eastern sky was filled with flaming strata of scarlet and gold; Kilimanjaro was clear as crystal two hundred miles to the south.

The first day we loped over the degenerate rock of Point Pigott (16,265 ft.) and down to Firmin Col without special difficulty. In the middle of a cold bivouac Baillie's crash helmet unaccountably took wing and we watched it trundling to an icy doom down the Tyndall glacier.

The brunt of the route was on the second day, the West ridge of Batian. This was under winter conditions; that is to say, the sun was south of the Equator, which Mount Kenya straddles. Thus, instead of playing its heat on the easy northern traverses and the several subtle *mauvais pas* which turn the more imposing gendarmes of the West ridge, it was shining on the virginal southern flanks.

We were therefore plying through unknown country for the most part. The Petit Gendarme yielded easily to a southern traverse on warm, golden rock. Our only pause was to take a candid picture of Baillie's right hand, corroded to a steak by recent climbs. The Grand Gendarme was taken by direct assault in six pitches of increasing difficulty (Difficult to Very Severe), and we built a little cairn on top.

Dark, and we were 100 ft. from the summit. The guide-book said easy rocks led to the top. But these easy rocks now subtended a curtain of the most critical morphosis of H<sub>2</sub>O possible, akin to High Holborn the day after the thaw, only vertical. Progress could only be achieved by making steps the size of Third Cave on Kilimanjaro, cut with a planned wastage rate (by collapse down to the glacier below) of two steps in three. Even Baillie was ominously lost for a comparison. He launched up into the night and placed a most extraordinary piton by hammering it against the rock until it empirically discovered itself a niche, then hammering it harder. Just what perverted species of gravity held it there we never discovered; in the dark I could not find it again after

unclipping. That took us one and a half hours; and a further half hour was spent while I went down again to recover Baillie's rucksack which he had left behind in a step and I had not seen on the way up.

The highlight of the climb was finding on Nelion a complete roll of plaster left behind by the Uhuru party, and with this we mummified our vestigial hands. Nevertheless, climbing down the South ridge of Nelion and up onto Point John, the last peak, was delightful. We had completed the first ascent of the South ridge a fortnight before, very straightforward climbing save for a battlement requiring three pegs of progression. Artificial means, but no more so than the nearby ladder we discovered, perpetrated we believe by J. H. Melhuish in the 1920's.<sup>1</sup>

At 3.30 p.m. on the third day we downed sacks and sprinted for Point John, Baillie's enthusiasm perhaps outstripping Baillie himself, who was followed by me. By an uncharted Very Severe gully and other means we were on top at 5 p.m. Within the hour we were back at Top Hut.

<sup>1</sup> Reference is made to Melhuish's unsuccessful use of a ladder in an attempt on the South ridge of Nelion in the *Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro* guide-book (1963), p. 114.—EDITOR.