MOUNT OLYMPUS

BY M. G. MEADE-KING

It has been a curious result of the world war that Mount Olympus has been climbed by more British in one year than ever before. Olympus makes an irresistible appeal to the traveller in Northern Greece, whether he be bumping over an excruciatingly bad road in a complaining army truck from Larisa to Kozani or sailing on or flying over the waters which lap its eastern spurs en route from Athens to Salonika. And the view of Olympus across the bay from Salonika in the soft light of evening is one which the memory will always retain.

Thus it was that I had not been in Salonika for more than a day, bound for Western Macedonia, before permission was obtained for a visit to Olympus. The journey by road to Litokhoron seemed sadly bumpy at the time, especially as the 'road' from Katerini onwards apparently took little interest in life and for considerable distances disappeared altogether; but one had not to stay for long in Greece to discover that this was a normal feature of the country.

Litokhoron is a pleasant village, with a neat little square and an air of aloofness from the world, which belied the vigorous Communist activities of its inhabitants.

The path upwards from Litokhoron wastes little time in getting down to business, climbing steadily as it does up the slopes of Stavros in order to give access to the great valley of Dhionisios which provides such a magnificent and fitting approach to the throne of Zeus. To our backs, grown unused to the carrying of heavy loads, the weight of our rucksacks, laden with two days' provisions, sleeping bags, etc., seemed hard to bear and the intense heat produced all but unquenchable thirsts. The start of the path can easily be missed, as we learnt to our cost after a struggle up through steep brushwood to regain the path on the Stavros spur, but from here onwards the route was sheer joy. The path wound in and out along the northern side of the great valley, shaded by the magnificent pines which grow in profusion on these slopes and with occasional sweet chestnuts to provide patches of lighter green amidst the sombre green of the pines. Few approaches to the Alpine peaks can rival the grandeur and beauty of the approach to Olympus, and the luxuriant vegetation is all the more appreciated after the barrenness and dust of the Macedonian plain. And the sound of the torrent far below amongst the rocks and trees is music to the ears in this waterless country.

A sad reminder of the war is provided by the ruined buildings of the monastery of Agios Dhionisios, bombed by the Germans under the impression, so it is said, that it was being used as a Greek guerrilla headquarters. Nestling as it does in the trees at the bottom of the valley, halfway to Olympus, one cannot but feel a little grudging admiration for the accuracy of the bombing.
STEFANI (2909 M.) AND MITIKA (2917 M.) FROM SKOLION (2911 M.)
IN STAVROITIA en route to Bara. SUMMITS OF OLYMPUS, L. to R.: SKALA, MITIKA, P. ILIAS AND KALAIA.
Owing to our late start from Litokhoron, we decided not to attempt to reach the Hellenic Alpine Club’s hut that night, and an idyllic camping site was found close to the point at which the ice-cold water of the torrent gushed out of the solid rock. We were, however, not lacking in company, for not far away was a primitive settlement of goatherds, who spent the summer months in this remote spot living with their families in extremely scanty lean-to shelters which are not designed to withstand an unexpected rainstorm. The sight of two Englishmen making a fire and carrying out the usual camping routine was too much for the curiosity of the goatherds, who sat around, as close as they dared come without touching us, and gazed in complete silence at our antics. They finally went off highly satisfied with the gift of an empty bully tin. These strange people, clad in their black woolly cloaks, make one wonder if things have changed at all in these parts since Homer’s day, and the sight of one, sitting under his shelter playing on primitive pipes, was hard to believe in this present age.

Next day, we continued on our way to the hut, perched so commandingly at approximately 7000 ft. on a spur pointing E. towards the sea—a discouraging little speck of white, high up on the mountainside, to those about to set off from Litokhoron. At the hut, we found a party of Scottish troops nearly at the end of ten days’ mountain training under Captain Nicholson of the Lovat Scouts, they having that day climbed the two highest peaks of Olympus. As clouds were already down on the summit, as was so often the case during the midday hours in the hot weather, we postponed going on to the top until the next morning. A comparatively early start was made and the last part of the ascent from the hut took but little over two hours, travelling light as we now were and stripped to the waist under the warm sun. Snow was still lying in large patches on the upper slopes below the final rocks and skiing would have been possible for anyone with the energy to carry ski so far. The approach to the summit from the S. provides a pleasant scramble, not without a certain feeling of airiness when on the crest thanks to the great precipices on the western side, but there are no difficult passages. The view from the top is in some ways disappointing owing to the absence of any neighbouring high peaks, but there can be few other peaks of comparative height which can give one so great a sense of being on top of the world. To us the ascent was made all the more interesting by reason of the fact that we had not long previously been on top of the Corno Grande, Italy’s counterpart to Mount Olympus south of the Alps.

The descent was made down a steep and extremely loose gully on the E. face, starting immediately to the N. of the summit peak, and thence back to the hut. Rucksacks were shouldered once more and the descent continued to a beautiful little green alp, with a spring of water, on the slopes of Stavros, and here once again a perfect night was spent under the stars with the calm waters of the Aegean slumbering far below. Next morning found us once again bumping along in our truck, lost in clouds of dust en route for Salonika.