

## KORNET ES SAOUD

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The name, I imagine, is unfamiliar. Few mountaineers would recognise it, though its alternative—Grand Lebanon—might ring a muted bell. Yet it has some claim to distinction, for it is a peak of 10,136 feet and the highest summit between the Taurus, 200 miles to northward, and Mount Sinai, 400 miles to southward.

A harking-back is necessary, to the dark days of 1942 and the raid-alerted coasts of the Levant. Sick leave and the unexpectedly generous results of a "survivor claim" in January set me looking for mountains. An unauthorised attempt to get at Mount Hermon (9,150 feet) had ended, some months previously, in my arrest by the Palestine Police on the Syrian frontier; but there were mountains in Lebanon accessible to a British naval lieutenant with gall and time enough, and it was whispered that ski-ing might be had there. I joined forces with another ski-minded sick-leaver and we bulldozed our way through Baalbek and Beyrouth to Tripoli, 700 miles of sufficiently adventurous travelling. Nearly 6,000 feet above Tripoli is Les Cédres—the Cedars of Lebanon which may be read of in the First Book of Kings—and here in pre-war days the wealthy Lebanese had built a large hotel for their winter sports. When we reached it, it was half-buried in snow and packed with Australian soldiers learning to skit for the greater discomfort of Adolf Hitler on some remote part of his battle-front. But above it rose the vast snow-covered ridges of the Lebanon, and behind these (though I only learned it after our arrival) was hidden a genuine peak: Kornet es Saoud, the veritable highest point of the Lebanon ranges, the crest, or crest unto the crest, of the Middle East.

I spent the first day falling about on ski. There were 200 Australians doing the same. The enormous and lovely trees, whose ancestors supplied the wood for Solomon's temple, were used as the sticks of a slalom course. An hour's upward ski-lauf, however, lost the licentious soldiery in a huge and undulating landscape of white, and I gained a little pass at about 7,000 feet from which I had my first view of Kornet es Saoud. There was a long wall of white precipices cleft by a 1,000-foot gully leading to a col, and over the rim of the col appeared the upper part of a slanting rock-ridge ending in an attractive little horn. It had to be climbed, of course, but it would take the whole of a short January day at least—and I had no proper equipment. The upper part of that 1,000-foot gully was gleaming dully with ice, and the final ridge might prove too tough for a climber shod with thick-soled nailless boots (Petty Officers' issue) and lacking windproofs or climbing companion.

The run down was delightfully easy and needed no expert turns. My only fall was the customary one for the purpose of stopping when I reached the hotel. I was able to meditate on the way, and so mature my equipment plans. A room-to-room search with a screwdriver produced fourteen woodscrews, and with these driven half-way into the soles of my Petty Officers' boots I had the semblance of nailed footgear. Ice-axe there was none, but a reasonably sharp ski-stick might etch the steps for me in that iced gully. At daybreak next morning I was away, alone.

My fellow sick-leaver had declined to join in my attempt, but he and two others intended to try and gain my col on ski, using skins. I had passed my viewpoint of yesterday and was nearing the foot of the gully when they came in sight, black pepper-grains on the white cloth of the snow far beneath me.

It was a grey and hazy day and very cold. I climbed fast on a good surface, zigzagging up the lower half of the gully and using my wood screws with crampon effect. The upper half was not easy. Just below the top, when step-scratching with the ski-stick began to take a very long time, I nearly resolved to turn back, but was urged on by vanity when I saw that the skiers below me had halted on finding the gully too steep and slithery for their skins. At two o'clock, after five hours' climbing, I chiselled my way out of the gully and into a strong and freezing wind.

The rock-ridge looked miles away and my trousers might have been wire-netting by the way the wind blasted its unhindered way through the cloth. At intervals sheets of powder-snow rose like ghosts from the snow-filled *wadis* between me and the peak, and I had no compass or map. If there had been no one to boast to on my return I would certainly have turned back. As it was, I ploughed on into the tilted wilderness of ravines.

At once my objective was lost to sight. After half-an-hour's wallowing in drifts and slithering up and down banks and hollows, I was ready to find myself back where I had started from. But some instinct, or fool's luck, kept me in the footsteps of that long-ago Hittite who presumably made the first ascent, and the twentieth snow-slope up which I floundered revealed itself as the veritable root of the summit-ridge.

And the ridge was a benevolent fraud. The imposing flank of broken red limestone that had fronted my approach hid a crest considerably wider than that of Crib Goch. The wind squealed and kicked like a horse as I clambered along the crest to the cairn on the highest point, whose rocks were decorated with long horizontal icicles.

It was great, up there. At that time I had never climbed above 10,000 feet before, and there is a peculiar satisfaction about fitting one's highest-peak-to-date into an interlude between bouts of a World War. The view was of unnumbered, unidentifiable summits and ridges flowing into a purple haze, and it was far too cold to stay there for long. There was a small but solid icicle depending from my nose when I started down.

Fortunately the drifting snow had left some few of my footprints still discernible, for the maze of ravines below the ridge was now filled with white mist. With my icicled nose bent continuously on the trail, I reached the top of the gully without mishap. After the first few careful steps at the top, I glissaded it in a variety of positions and so, a little after sunset, waded victoriously through the snow-wreaths to the door of the hotel.

The Lebanese hotel-keeper withered my laurels with a sentence. "En été," said he, casually, "*les ânes font l'ascension du Grand Libanon.*"

