

BOOK REVIEWS

Mountain Holidays, by Janet Adam Smith. 194 pages, with two maps and 32 additional pages of illustrations. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1946. 15/-.

Janet Adam Smith, like her husband, Michael Roberts, is known to many readers on both sides of the Atlantic, but perhaps to comparatively few of them as a mountaineer. Reviewing *The Ascent of F6* for *The Criterion* (January 1937), she showed in at least one comment the sort of special knowledge that few non-climbers would have; she contributed an essay in Alpine history to *Grand Tour*, edited by R. S. Lambert (New York, 1937); in a wartime issue of *The Listener* (23 November 1944), she had a pleasantly nostalgic essay entitled "Return to the Hills." Now, having before us a whole book that reflects both her tendency to read and write and her tendency to go among the hills, we have occasion for great rejoicing.

The mountain holidays began in Arran, "The April Island." There, for years, the author's family spent Easter; and there, to her and to many other young friends, the late W. P. Ker showed the way to the hills and communicated a feeling for them. Later by several years came her first visits to the Alps. They seem to have been natural—almost inevitable: her father had known Zermatt in the '80's and had met her mother at the Riffel Alp, and Professor Ker went to the Alps every summer. There were also crossings of the four great passes in the Cairngorms. Then, in 1934, Janet Adam Smith discovered "New Ways in Savoy," climbing with Michael Roberts and the guide Othon Bron of Courmayeur. With them we enjoy the happily recurring summers, marred only by the news in 1938 of Othon Bron's death on the Col du Géant. We make some classic ascents—the Matterhorn, the Grépon, the Dent du Requin (what a good day that was!*) ; we learn also of the sweet, memorable pleasures to be found in the less trodden Graians. Plans to visit the Val d'Isère at the first opportunity begin to form themselves in our minds. Aiguille Pers, Grande Sassièrè, Tsanteleina, Pélaou Blanc—these names become familiar to us; and so do the people of

* A view that the two editors of this journal may be permitted to express with some feeling when it is explained that they were there on the same day with André Cachat.

the country, and even some of the feelings that we ourselves might expect to have there. Something of the Robertses' own manner of enjoying the hills is suggested by a chapter heading—"The Alps without a Suit-Case"—and by the account of the schoolboys and masters who found (thanks to the Robertses, be it said) "that mountaineering was not just a rich man's game."

The not exactly unexpected interest in books and pictures and people—even, at times, in towns—reinforces the reader's wish that *Mountain Holidays* did not have to end. Janet Adam Smith is likely, for instance, to have the *Chartreuse de Parme* or *The Golden Bowl* in her sack; and she tells us why she likes to read Stendhal and Henry James "in the intervals of a mountain holiday." She finds herself suddenly in a scene known to her from a recently acquired drawing of the Mer de Glace in 1781 by Francis Towne—one of the many artists and writers whose past experiences in the mountains have enriched her own. She introduces such arresting figures as M. Florian, mayor of Tignes; and M. Flandin, who did not like to be beaten at Polish draughts and who found Flaubert's *Trois Contes* "not very nice"; and Max Costa, who would leave the Val d'Isère in winter to work as an electrician at the Odéon. There are longer associations with Professor Ker, and Othon Bron ("toujours souriant," said one of the press cuttings, "et à la lèvre, toujours la blague"), and William Empson, whom we overhear on one occasion, in the Félix-Faure refuge, chatting about propositions of the form *A is B*. There is also, of course, Michael Roberts himself, with his villainous black hat—"Mais voici," protested the gendarme who demanded passports at Bellegarde, "quand on voit un type comme ça avec un chapeau comme ça . . ." The *type* with the hat, who is reported by his wife to be rather fond of "a nice French row," is by no means lacking in regard for other things French: " 'I should like,' he said, dealing out the second bottle of red wine, 'to give my name to a village square somewhere in France. The Place Michel-Robert needn't be very large, and the villagers needn't remember why they named it after me. It'll do if one of these days they answer, when asked who Michel Robert was: 'Un zèbre quelconque.' But there must be plane-trees, and a café, and the sound of someone playing bowls.' "

Read *Mountain Holidays*. It is most delightful. And perhaps we shall be meeting one day in the Val d'Isère? D. A. R., Jr.