

SAMPLING THE EASTERN ALPS.

BY MIRIAM E. UNDERHILL.

THERE are two classic methods of mountaineering: climbing from a centre, and making a continuous tour on foot. We chose neither for our trip to the Eastern Alps last summer (1932), but developed a third method more suited, we thought, to the character of the climbs and the interest they present to the mountaineer. No serious climber would care to settle down for the entire season in any one centre in the Eastern Alps outside the Dolomites, or possibly the Kaisergebirge; and even the Kaisergebirge are very small in extent.¹ And the continuous walking tour, while full of charm for the pedestrian, would afford real meat to the mountaineer for only a very small portion of the time. Our method was that of the moving centre, a combination of the two classic theories made possible by the motor car, that speeded up enormously the work of seeing the best of the Eastern Alps in part of one season. Ah, this vicious modern fetish of speed! But after all, why not? Life is short, and there are far too many mountains in the world for each group to be studied with that minute care that one might bestow on the Chamonix Aiguilles or the great peaks of the Valais. The Eastern Alps' mountains are not of that calibre. They are pleasant peaks, splendid for getting into training. Their moderate altitude makes them an excellent practice ground for the beginner in guideless climbing. There are, of course, occasional serious climbs, but in general—always excepting the Dolomites and the Kaisergebirge—their seriousness is due more to objective dangers, such as that of falling stones or ice, than to difficulty.

The Eastern Alps consist of a large number of small massifs, making up, roughly, three parallel ranges, running east and west. The upper range, the Nördliche Kalkalpen in Bavaria and Austria, includes such groups as the Bregenzer Wald, the Allgäu, the Lechtal, Wetterstein, Karwendel, and Kaisergebirge, to mention only the more important. The Inn and Salzach Rivers form the southern boundary of this chain.

¹ While agreeing in principle, we would suggest Suldén, Carlo Magno (for the Brenta-Adamello-Presanella) and perhaps Mairhofen, St. Anton, and Ober Gurgl as noteworthy exceptions, for part at any rate of a season.—*Editor*.



Photo, Miss U. Corning.

BRENTA GROUP FROM SUMMIT OF PRESANELLA.

[To face p. 75.]

Below it lies the central range, in southern Austria. Of this, some of the better known groups are the Oetzal, Stubai, and Zillertal Alps, and the Hohe Tauern, which includes the Rieserferner (Vedretta Giganti) group, and the Venediger and the Glockner groups. The Drave River, the Eisak (Isarco) and the Adige separate this set, on the S., from the southern chain. This last in Italy and Jugoslavia comprises especially the Ortler, Adamello and Presanella groups, the Brenta, Dolomites and the Carnic and Julian Alps.

We had, roughly, the first half of July and the last half of August allotted to guideless climbing in the Eastern Alps. We first questioned whether it might be possible to do one climb in each group, a question quickly answered when a preliminary study of the *Hochtourist* revealed some seventy-seven groups! We then planned merely to choose our climbs each from a different group, and to get characteristic samples of the more important massifs of the three ranges. The Dolomites, we felt, might well be omitted altogether, since both my husband and I had visited them several times before. As it turned out, we did eight climbs in eight non-Dolomite massifs, five climbs in the Dolomites, and one at Zermatt. But I am anticipating.

We took a Buick two-seater to Europe and ran it some 5000 miles, and over 38 Alpine passes. For the first part of the summer, we were only three people in the car; for the last part, four. Four people in a two-seater, with all their accompanying bags, rucksacks, spare boots, ice axes, crampons and ropes, seemed at first to be quite a lot, but we soon learned efficient systems of packing, while all four of us were sufficiently good mountaineers to climb in and out of the car without opening the doors, which were more or less permanently shut by the bags tied on the running-boards. Our system, in ideal practice, was to drive to a climbing town, or a hut if possible—and it sometimes was—climb the next day, and drive on that same afternoon to the next point of departure. Distances in the Eastern Alps are not great, and it is possible to drive about almost anywhere in the northern and southern chains—provided always that the driver is a specialist in hairpin turns. The central chain is not quite so readily accessible. There are, of course, good motor roads along the northern and southern edges of this range and, from these, small roads lead off up side valleys that penetrate into the range. There are perhaps half a dozen such valleys on each side now open to motor travel, and more are being opened every day. Just which

roads are open and which are *gesperrt* to motor vehicles is not always easy to determine in advance. We made a practice of buying all available road maps, and if any one of them indicated that a certain road was open, we drove up it. Crossing the central chain completely, from N. to S., is not easy. There is no through automobile road from the Brenner Pass E. to the Tauern and Katschberg Passes over the Niedere Tauern, about a hundred miles. The new *Glocknerstrasse* will no doubt be open shortly, a magnificent road, providing an intermediate through route across the central chain, from Bruck-Fusch to Lienz. It is also possible to cross from Bad Gastein to Mallnitz by the railway. You just drive your car up a special gangway on to a truck, which is then attached to a train and pulled through the Karawanken tunnel.

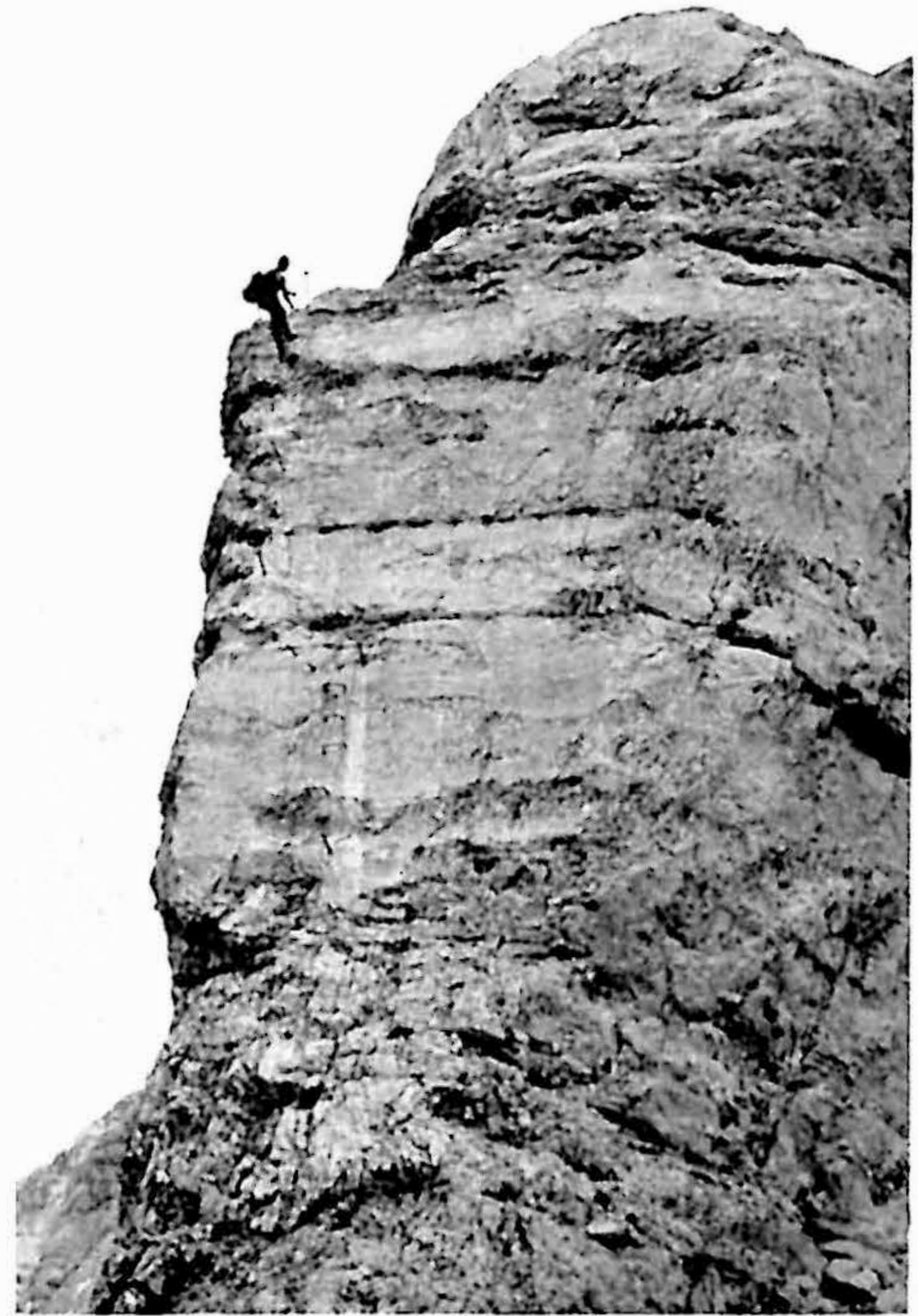
The enormous convenience of the car, as compared with the trains or public diligences, either horse-drawn or motor, for getting about in these regions can hardly be exaggerated. A private car travels about three times as fast as the public 'bus, and starts when you are ready ; there are no connections to be made, no waits and no time-tables to adapt to. The travelling that we did would have taken extra weeks by public conveyance, and have left us no time for climbing. And it is so much more fun. It is very pleasant to run up to Zell-am-See for lunch, for instance, or into Fulpmes to buy ice axes (at ridiculously low prices), or just to drive to some near-by point of beauty or interest. Not the least of the summer's pleasure came from the motoring itself. The country is delightful, with much more quaint picturesqueness than is found in the more travelled western part of the Alps.

We started our season in the Allgäu group—which was a mistake, because the local authorities, to preserve the business of the horse-drawn vehicles, have barred a lot of roads that could be traversed by motor in one-tenth of the time or less. The system is therefore defeated. Nor did we do a climb. In three days of snow and rain, we got from Oberstdorf as far as the Waltenbergerhaus, but seeing no mountains thereabouts (we were seeking the Mädelegabel and its neighbours)—only snow and drifting clouds—we walked down again. Had we known that it was going to snow and rain more or less continuously for the next month, we might not have been so easily discouraged. Our July climbs were nearly all carried through in bad weather conditions. (In fact, from June 20, in Munich, to the end of July, we had only *four* days, June 27, 28, and July 4, 5, when it did not either rain or snow.)



Photo, Mrs. Underhill.]

LOOKING DOWN HINTERERGRAT OF ORTLER.



Photo, Mrs. Underhill.]

DESCENDING A GENDARME OF ALPSPITZE-
ZUGSPITZE RIDGE.

Note continuous line of lightning-conductors !



Photo, Mrs. Underhill.]

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ALPSPITZE, HOCHBLASSEN (BEHIND), AEUSSERE AND MITTLERE HÖLLENTALSPITZEN.



Photo, Mrs. Underhill.]

SOME OF THE 44 HAIR-PIN BENDS ON TIRAFOL SIDE OF STELVIO PASS, AS SEEN FROM THE ORTLER.

We then moved over to the Lechtal, where practically all the mountains (such as the Valluga) are ski mountains. We did one so-called rock-climb (the Rockspitze), not hard enough to require a rope, however. Our only excitement occurred on the way home, when, in shorts, we sank down into the melting snow that filled the gullies in the pastures. That afternoon, motoring from Zürs over the Flexen, Arlberg, Fern and Griesen Passes, we reached Garmisch, in the Wettersteingebirge, where we started our training by walking over the *Jubiläumsweg* from the Alpspitze over the three Höllentalspitzen to the Zugspitze. We even put in an extra peak, on our own, by getting off the route and traversing the Hochblassen as well. In defence it may be said that spring snow still covered the track, and some (apparently) erring footprints led us astray. This Jubiläumsweg is draped all along with lightning conductors in the form of iron ropes, ladders, and bars. At first glance we assumed they were placed there to assist the climber, but we discovered their prime function during a violent little thunderstorm. I do not agree with those mountain lovers who indiscriminately decry all artificial aids: some of the lightning conductors here serve a real and useful purpose in equalizing difficulties. Most of the route is very easy; there is, however, an occasional step so disproportionately difficult that, without the lightning conductors, it might require that the party be roped as for a real rock-climb. Such steps, however, are so infrequent that it would hardly be worth while to carry a rope on their account. Still, it is fair to say that there are more lightning conductors than are needed even for this purpose.

Our next stop was in the Karwendel group, a most charming region for the walker. (Sometimes I have envied the walkers who wander in peace through delightful mountain regions without being distracted by thoughts of climbing!) The Karwendel rock, however, is said to be very loose, and on the one sample we tried, the W. face of the Lamsenjochspitze, it was. The face, although steep and mildly interesting, would have been easy enough if any of the holds could have been counted on to stay in place.

The Kaisergebirge² are perhaps the only massif on our exploring trip last season that we long to revisit some time—revisit, that is, in summer as well as in winter. The rock-climbs there are of course famous, and justly so. The rock

² See *A.J.* 37, 279–300.

is much like that of the Dolomites, but harder and smoother, affording extremely interesting climbing. Anyone who values his life, however, will avoid the Kaisergebirge in July and August, and on any week-end or holiday throughout the year. At those times there are more climbers per square inch in the Kaisergebirge than in any region I know, and the stones that come down . . . ! Although often compared with the Dolomites, there are much fewer of them. (The Wilde Kaiser consists of a single group, some eight miles long and two miles wide at the widest part.) What they lack in extent, however, they make up for in the intensity of the attention that is paid to them. There is scarcely a potential handhold that does not form part of some recognized route. It is said that the Totenkirchl (2193 m.) alone boasts seventy-six distinct routes. The huts as well as the rocks are much overcrowded, since they are frequented not only by climbers, but by hordes of families on walking tours. We spent two or three days in the Kaisergebirge, watching the rain. Finally, in desperation, we did a climb anyway, the *Heroldweg* on the Totenkirchl, not, alas, one of the most interesting, but all we dared attempt—only two of us, and entirely unfamiliar with the region—in thick cloud and misty rain.

From Kufstein, the base for the Kaisergebirge, we drove to Bad Gastein, but suddenly realizing that rain had delayed us somewhat, and that we had only a few days left in this period of our trip, we decided to omit our Gastein climb. We therefore drove out again, not without a backward look or two at this charming summer resort, and over the Tauern and Katschberg Passes to Spital, Heiligenblut and the Glockner Haus.

We did three climbs in the Central Range—the Gross Glockner, the Dreiherrnspitze in the Venediger group, and the Hochgall in the Rieserferner (Vedretta Giganti) group. These were all too easy, and boring. There were more difficult routes that we might have taken—except that it rained or snowed all the while, on all of them—but we understood that the difficulties are due largely to loose rock, which does not attract me particularly, and that they are subject to the danger of falling stones. The best routes are the snow and ice climbs up the walls and couloirs—like the *Pallavicinirinne* on the Gross Glockner—inevitably dangerous, but perhaps not more so than such climbs elsewhere. They are, in any case, shorter than similar climbs in the Western Alps. A car can be driven direct to the Glockner Haus, although from Heiligenblut the road—a toll road—was under construction, and one was allowed up only at the odd hours and down at the even hours. The

Glockner can be done from the Glockner Haus, or from any one of some dozen other huts in the region. We went up the little rock ridge that crosses the ordinary route on the E. face—mostly a long pile of loose rocks—and then up the snow to the final peak.

In the Venediger group, the Venediger itself is obviously a ski mountain. We hoped the Dreiherrnspitze would be better, but it had the same long, gentle snow slopes that should never be plodded up on foot in the summer, but taken on skis in the spring. Incidentally, a new road is being built from Windisch Matrei west into the Virgen Valley. We drove along it until we came to a tunnel, not yet bored through to the other side. Here, perforce, we left the car, and were gratified, on our return, to find it carefully wrapped in burlap—the road-gangers, to whom we had entrusted it, having been afraid it would get wet in the rain that had come on in the meantime. For the Hochgall, we drove all the way up to Riva di Tures (Rain), opening and closing innumerable pasture bars on the way. Campo Tures (Taufers-im-Sand), in the valley below, might have been a more conservative stopping-place; we wondered when the car would slide off the slippery mud of the steep, unfenced road into the seething waterfalls below. In dry weather no doubt the road would be quite all right.

The Zillertal,³ the Oetztal and the Stubai Alps we were to save for the end of August, when our climbing party should consist of four people instead of two. But when, on August 17, we met Mr. and Mrs. Dean Peabody in Innsbruck, we persuaded them—with no difficulty, it must be said, after they had heard our tales of our other climbs in the central chain—to toss aside all the plans we had made in long winter evenings at home and omit the Zillertal, the Oetztal and the Stubai altogether. We would, instead, take a little holiday and have some fun down in the Dolomites. Oh, those good little Dolomites! How we loved them, and how outstanding they seemed after all the mediocrity that we had been through. The Peabodys were just off the steamer, without training, and we broke them in, thanks to the car, with three climbs in the first three days. In the Dolomites, especially, a car immeasurably facilitates climbing. It is often possible—although sometimes not comfortable—to drive all the way to the *attacco* of a climb, and change one's shoes on the running-board. The Italians, unlike the Germans, never forbid a

³ The political frontier, running along the main ridge, has spoilt or prevented access to many of the best climbs.—*Editor*.

'road' to motor cars, even the remains of the old war-time tracks up in the mountains, but take the attitude that if anyone is foolish enough to drive up, let him. The keepers of the Rifugio Principe Umberto, at the base of the Zinnen, however, regarded us with mild surprise when the Buick arrived in their front yard one morning, while in the afternoon, when we got safely back down again to the main road, we were *all* surprised.

After five good climbs in the Dolomites, we decided to spend the rest of our too-short time in the Ortler group, where we had designs on three of the peaks. The first was the Ortler itself, the highest summit in the Eastern Alps, which we traversed *via* the *Hinterergrat*—and may I be preserved from doing anything so dull as that again! It consisted mostly of easy and uninteresting snow slopes, with a little loose, easy and banal rock. (There are more difficult routes on the Ortler, such as the *Marltgrat*, but these are notorious for their extremely rotten rock.) We came down the broad, beaten track of the ordinary route, dodging as best we could the falling stones of its lower part. We were unanimous: we did not want to do any more climbs in the Ortler group;⁴ we wanted to end up with a good climb on a big mountain; we had time to drive over to Zermatt, and it did not seem very far in proportion to the reward for going there. So, for our last guideless climb in the Alps, Mr. and Mrs. Peabody did the Matterhorn, and my husband and I the *Viereselgrat* of the Dent Blanche.

But we should like to go back to the Eastern Alps some time in winter or early spring, and do these mountains as most of them should be done—on skis. What an endless Paradise for the skier! We should also like to visit the Julian Alps, and the Kaisergebirge again, and perhaps seek other harder climbs, outside the Kaisergebirge, on firm rock or on ice. It was but an introduction to a charming region.

[We would express our warm thanks to Mrs. Underhill for her entertaining article.—*Editor*, 'A.J.']

⁴ We venture to disagree with the writer, although many of the finest climbs were spoilt by the construction of 'paths' during the war. But the traverse of the Thurwieserspitze-Trafoier Eiswand by the *Bäckmanngrat*—path or no path—makes up a splendid day, while the traverse of Königsspitze-Zebrù-Ortler will always be a great expedition.—*Editor*.