The Ago del Torrone (Cleopatra's Needle).

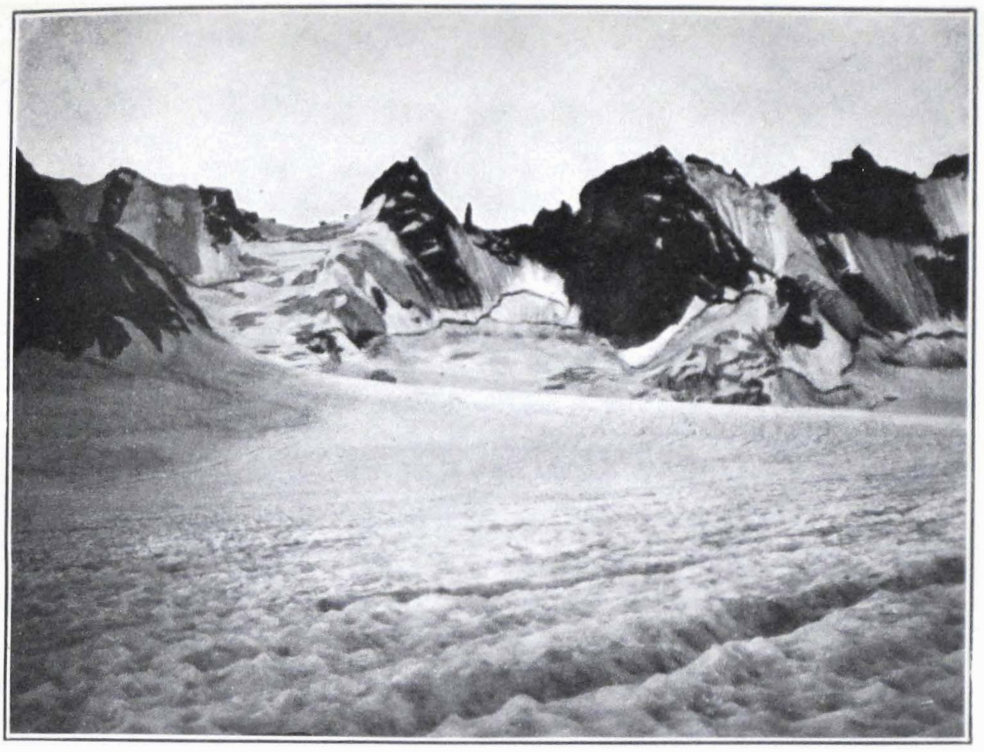
By N. S. FINZI.

As one ascends the Forno Glacier from Maloja, a striking view of the mountains at its head bursts suddenly into view (Fig. 1). Not the least remarkable object in this view is a sharply pointed rock needle lying just to the W. of the Torrone Orientale. It is known as Cleopatra's Needle, or the Ago del Torrone, and it deserves its name. Until this year one was always informed that it had been tried many times and no one had succeeded in scaling it.

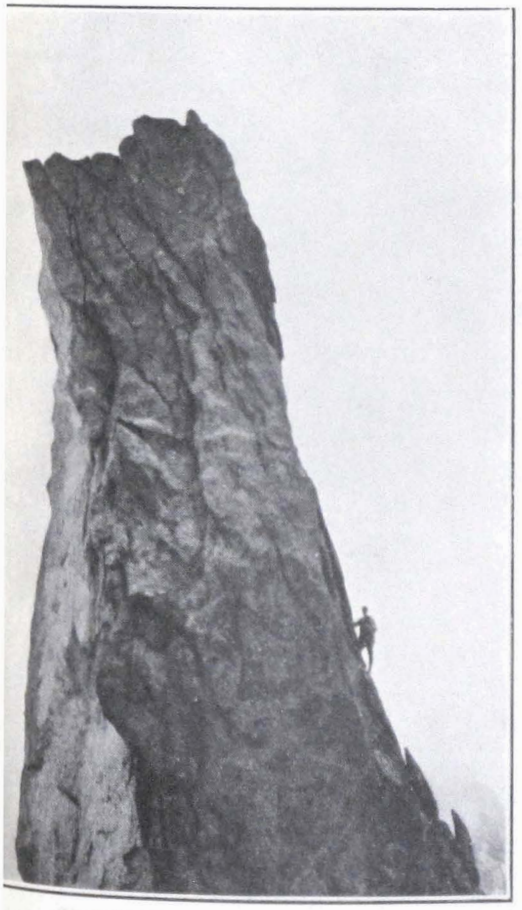
In 1921 I had intended to have a look at it on my last day, but, owing to a stupid mishap the day before, I was unable to do so. In 1922, however, I mentioned the matter to my guides, and one of them, Franz Josef Biner of St. Niklaus, was immediately very keen on making an attempt.

The Needle lies on the Colle del Torrone, quite close to the Torrone Orientale, which looks like an enormous thimble (Fig. 1). The col is difficult of access from its N. side, which is a very steep sheet of ice about 1200 ft. high. Its S. side, not very difficult climbing, can be reached from the Allievi hut.

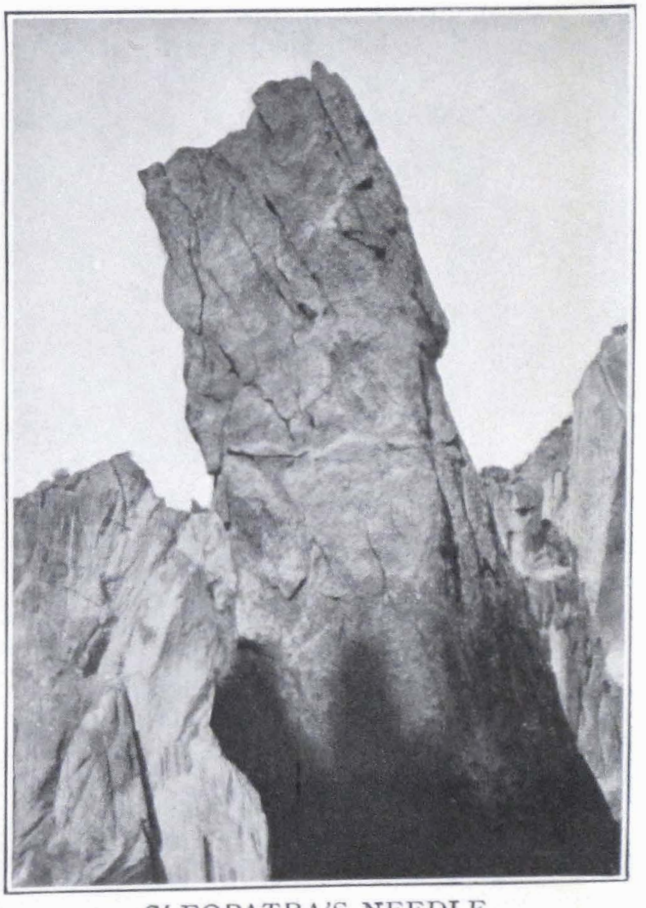
Our first reconnaissance, on August 5, 1922 (my friend Rudolf, Franz Biner, and myself), sought to establish an easier way from the Forno hut to the Colle del Torrone, but ended in our arrival at the gap between the Torrone Centrale and a gendarme which, when seen from the N., resembles a sitting hen. We reached this by the rocks to the W. of the Torrone Glacier, and, owing to their looseness, deposited much of them on the glacier below. Arrived at the gap, we found four courses open to us. We might have tried to climb the gendarme, which would be extremely difficult: it is absolutely vertical on both N. and S. faces. We could have descended on the S. side and made a difficult traverse into the couloir leading to the correct col. Franz had a look at this and, as he described it as difficult, Rudolf and I decided it was beyond our powers. We could have descended further to a point where the couloirs met and then climbed up again: there was, however, no time for this. Finally, we could return—and we did. All we bagged was a photograph (Fig. 2) (which hardly distinguished between the Needle and the Torrone Orientale lying behind it), and a



TORRONE ORIENTALE, CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE AND TORRONE CENTRALE,
from upper slopes of Forno Glacier



CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE,
from S.W. face of Torrone Orientale.



CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE,
from W. ridge of Torrone Orientale.

new route which no one will adopt owing to its vile looseness. I have doctored this photograph in order to show our subsequent route.

After Rudolf's return home, I made another attempt, on August 8, with Biner and Peter Almer. Both the guides were in favour of a modification of our previous route, but I would have preferred to go over the Torrone Orientale. As I was in the minority I allowed them to take their route. We took to the rocks just above the bergschrund on its W. side and worked up to a sloping ledge. When this ceased we cut a few steps up in the ice and then a number of steps directly across to the rocks below the col—a sensational traverse. On reaching the col the weather, which had gradually been growing more threatening, broke completely. A tempest of wind and rain rendered a reconnaissance impossible. Biner climbed up the rocks on the S. face of the Needle, but could find out little. On our return Almer had the misfortune to get a large stone, which was loosened by his rope, on to his forearm, and this prevented his doing any more climbing for some weeks.

About a fortnight later Biner, an Engadine guide, and I started on another attempt: I think the date was August 22. This time I insisted on approaching the col by traversing the Torrone Orientale as low as possible: this happened to be a few feet below the summit. Owing to the state of the glacier at that time and to the fact that the second guide was put on to lead up it in order to save Biner for the actual attempt, we did not reach the col until more than six hours after leaving the Forno hut.

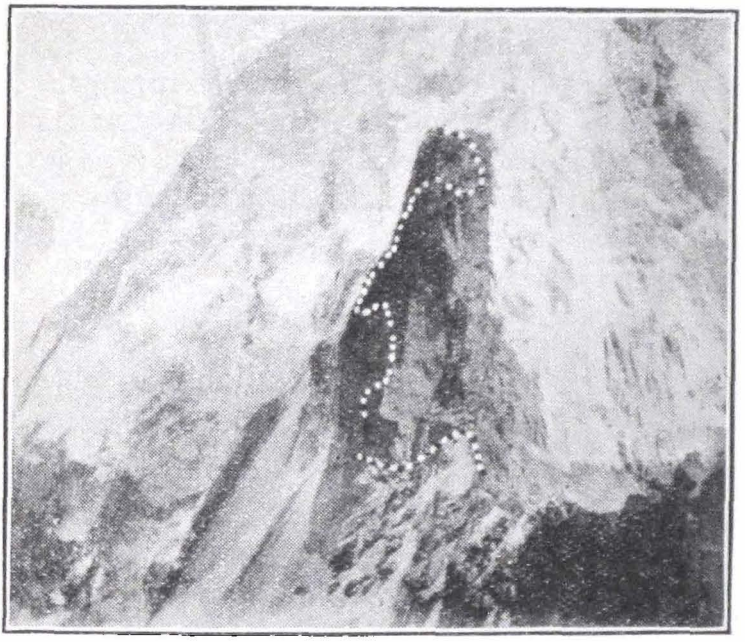
Now the Ago is perched at the top of the Torrone Glacier, within a few metres of the ice. Seen from the E. it is a squarish tower canted to about 5° from the vertical, so that the S. face is actually overhanging. The view from the W. is similar, and both E. and W. faces are absolutely vertical, without anything on their lower portions which could be construed into a hold even by the most ferocious rock expert. The S. face is shored up by rocks which reach rather more than one-third of the way up the peak, and, though these can easily be ascended, it is doubtful whether a traverse on to the N. face could be found by fair rock-climbing, while a direct ascent of the E., S., or W. faces without artificial means is liable to be interrupted by the transfer of the leader to another world. From the Forno Glacier it looks as if the N. face were seamed from top to bottom by a chimney, but this proved eventually only to be a wide open gully. This N. face is

undercut below, at the level of the col or a little lower, on both its E. and W. sides, and it is this undercut which has probably foiled all the previous attempts. We realised that the N. face was the only solution likely and, as a traverse from the S. face did not seem possible, Franz decided to have a go at the overhang from the W. This overhang is well seen in Fig. 2.

Franz then had a two hours' fight with the rock, and eventually succeeded, by standing on the second guide's head, in pulling himself on to the face by means of one handhold, and that only took two or three fingers. From here he reached a good place a few feet higher, but the second guide refused to follow. Franz then proceeded to a point where there was a difficult traverse which he did not feel justified in tackling without some security from the rope. I doubted my capacity to give this myself, so we returned, not, however, without securing a photograph at a lucky moment when the mists which had descended upon us formed a wonderful background to our peak (Fig. 3). We determined to renew the assault another year with a more courageous second.

In 1923 Rudolf, Biner, and myself had some preliminary training in the Dolomites, which included an abnormally difficult route up the S. face of the Marmolata. We reached Maloja on Thursday, August 2, where we were joined by our porter, Roman Lagger of St. Niklaus, a sturdy fellow, who looked to be equal to his job, and was. We took some time to get ready, and started after 7 P.M. for the hut, which, owing to the darkness of the night, we didn't reach until nearly 11 o'clock. We started the next morning at dawn and found a good passage on to the Torrone Orientale, my route being adopted on this occasion. We crossed a little lower than in the previous year, and on our return lower still. In fact, each time we have adopted this route we have crossed the Torrone Orientale at a lower level than the time before. We were just descending on to the col when the weather got so doubtful and so cold that we decided to give up the attempt that day. We returned to the hut, not before getting wet-through in a thunder-storm. The following day we started from the hut at 5.42 A.M., and our steps, cut the previous day, enabled us to reach the Colle del Torrone at 10 A.M., having taken several photographs *en route* (including Fig. 4). After a leisurely lunch we donned our *kletterschuhe*, and zero was at 11 A.M. *Throughout, the only use that was made of the pitons was to ensure that the leader should not fall more than* 8 *or* 10 *feet and to thread the doubled rope.* Arrangements for safeguarding the leader took half an

hour, and this time he was on the face at the first attempt. The fact that our second man (Lagger) is over 6 ft. high and very steady made this less extreme than in the previous year. From here a point low down on the N.W. ridge was attained, where there was a good stance for one man. The double rope was fixed at a higher point, and was used as some assistance. I, being the last man, was hauled up like a sack of coals. From the point on the ridge the route led obliquely upwards to the E., and, after some reasonable climbing, a difficult traverse was reached, the key to which was to lean out as far as possible,



(2) From the Gap between the "Sitting Hen" Gendarme and the Torrone Centrale

relying on a handhold and a foothold so as to enable one to get the right knee on to a little ledge. I tried this, but the handhold departed from the rock, and I with it. However, the rope brought me up without damage on the opposite wall of the shallow gully, referred to above, which this traverse crosses. The gully itself looked unclimbable; the rocks were like a number of enormous sausages with all the rounded ends turned downwards: it would be possible, however, to traverse lower down than we did. The other side of the gully, the climbing was again reasonable and led to a broad triangular ledge on which three people can stand in comfort, just below the point where Biner is standing in Fig 3. For a few yards above this is the only easy climbing on the peak, and then there

is a vertical pitch with no reasonable holds which Biner considered not very difficult, but which Rudolf and I would not care to tackle without a rope in front of us. This led to the top of a slab, well seen in Fig. 4, which gave uncomfortable but sufficient standing-room. From this point the first man must make a traverse, below the overhang seen in Fig. 5, on to the W. face: this even Biner admitted to be extremely difficult. The rest of us came over the overhang with the help of a doubled rope around the summit itself, which the last of us reached at 2 P.M. We rested an hour or more on the top and built a cairn. Lagger had had the temerity to bring with him a bright-green cap, and this formed so fitting a finish to our cairn that it remains there.

For the descent we used three double ropings. The first took us down to the easy rocks above the triangular ledge, where we unroped in order to allow sufficient rope for the next man. The second took us to a few feet below the place where the handhold came away, and the third down to the spot from which we got on to the N. face.

English climbers sometimes complain that the climbing in Switzerland is not difficult enough. Well, let them try Cleopatra's Needle. I think they will find all the difficulties they need. I do hope, however, that it will not be hung with ropes and spotted with pitons. I take off my hat to anyone who can lead this climb as it is at present; I can't. The discovery of the route is entirely due to a very rising guide, Franz Josef Biner of St. Niklaus.

Forno hut, 5.42; Colle del Torrone, 10.0; start on Ago, 11.0; summit, 14.0; descent started, 15.05; Colle del Torrone, 16.25; Forno hut, 20.15.

The Obvious Passes Across the Western End of the Mont Blanc Range.

By R. L. G. IRVING.

THE man who describes the obvious invites his audience to write him down a genius or a bore. Even without that sentence, you, Reader, may have been able to make your choice! And if you ask me how it comes about that I have offered to fill the pages of such a rare and costly journal as this with matter that is admittedly commonplace, I can