

THE CAMPANILE BASSO DI BRENTA, 1899-1959

BY L. M. MIDDLETON

SOME six miles south-east of Madonna di Campiglio, approximately on the 8,500-ft. contour, the main ridge of the Brenta Dolomites thrusts a titanic finger of rock into the sky. On its north and south sides rising almost 1,000 ft. above snow-mantled cols, known as the Bocchette, and on its east and west soaring 2,000 ft. above the scree, the effect of the Guglia on the beholder is almost overwhelming. Moreover, it presents the rock-climber with an irresistible challenge.

The pioneers looked for a natural route to the summit, climbing without artificial aids, except for the use of running belays as safeguards. The Campanile Basso and its neighbour the Alto offer an abundance of this free climbing, the standard of difficulty varying widely. Only experts at the peak of their form attempt the most severe of their courses. Impelled by a sheer love of adventure, they gain the reward of experiencing the joy of overcoming great physical difficulties. The peculiar fascination of this type of climbing is well described by Ruedi Schatz in an account of his ascent of the Torre Venezia by its 2,000-ft. South wall (see *The Mountain World* 1956-7).

Towards the end of the last century the Guglia, as it was then called, became a veritable lodestone to skilled amateurs of that day. However, it was not until 1899 that this tower, the last unclimbed Dolomite, was ascended.

On August 18, two Austrian students, Otto Ampferer and Karl Berger reached their goal, forestalling the Italians Carlo Garbari, Antonio Tavernaro and their porter Nino Pooli. Two years previously the Italians had pioneered the curiously complicated route right up to the final wall, but they had unfortunately been unable to return to solve the last and the most difficult problem.

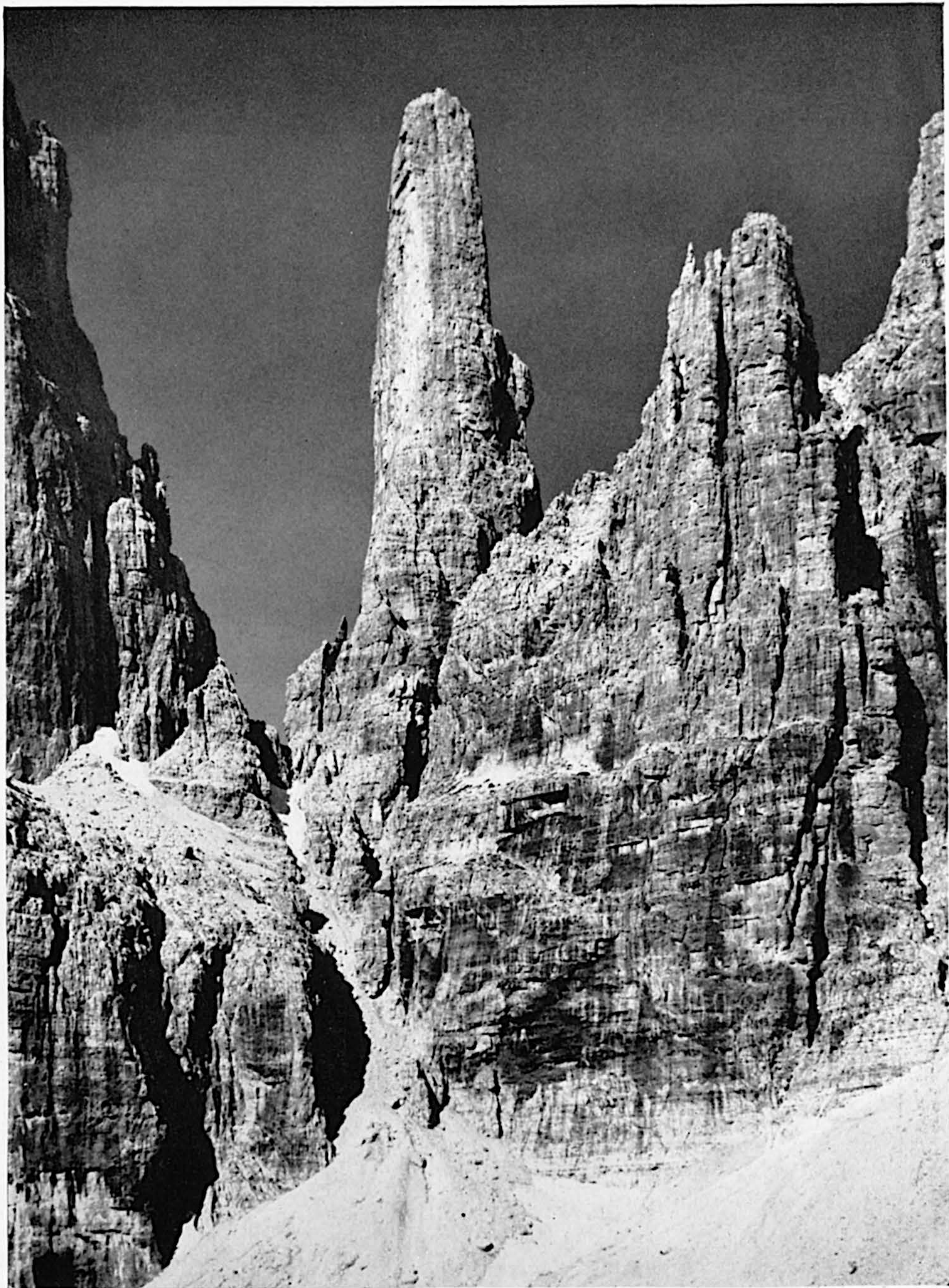
To visit the Brenta Campaniles it is convenient to stay two nights at one of the excellent C.A.I. Rifugi, the Brentei, the Tosa, or the Pedrotti. Our party chose the Brentei, having heard that it was delightfully situated, and furthermore that the hospitable warden, Signora Nella Detassis, was renowned for the excellence of her cooking. Set on a sunny shelf overlooking the Val di Brenta, its vicinity abounds with *Dryas octopetala* and other alpine flora. Family parties of choughs feed on any thrown-out scraps, and at other times indulge in playful antics on the wing. Diving, side-slipping and spiralling in the up-currents, they constantly set the air ringing with their joyful trills.

An interesting route from here to the Campaniles leads by way of the airy Sentiero delle Bocchette, reached from the Bocca dei Armi by an iron-laddered approach up steep rocks. Let into and contouring the almost vertical buttresses of the Brenta peaks, a more charming natural promenade could hardly be imagined. Sometimes banks of cloud form quickly, only to dissolve as suddenly, disclosing silvery-grey and tawny precipices falling away into misty depths. The path is maintained in a safe condition by the C.A.I. for the whole of its mile and a half course.

A more direct but less interesting way leads to the Campanile in only an hour via the head of the Val di Brenta. One day-break in August 1958 our party of four set out by this track, hoping with some notes kindly supplied by the Detassis brothers to find the tortuous *Via Comune* to the summit. After a short rest on the Bocca, where we saw a wall-creeper on the wing, dusky-brown with crimson flanks, we took to the broken rocks on the south side of the tower. Soon an easy 100-ft. chimney trending east for which we roped, brought us on to a little terrace leading to a pulpit at the base of an imposing yellow wall. We were now well on to the East face, which was bathed in glorious sunshine. This problem, the Pooli Wall, is one of the two major difficulties of the climb. However the leader was soon standing on a minute terrace 70 ft. above us, belaying himself to a piton. 'Quite harmless,' he called down; but knowing his proclivity for understatement we were not surprised to find the pitch severe. Particularly difficult was the exposed move off the wall on to a minute pulpit below an overhang, so disposed as to push the climber out of balance. While appreciating the need for care, we reckoned that the move was not one to tarry over.

Having foregathered, we continued the right-hand trend by easier rocks, soon reaching the foot of two deep-cleft diverging chimneys, the left-hand of which was chosen. This gave us a 100 ft. of steep, strenuous climbing before bringing us out on a spacious detrital terrace, perhaps a yard wide. It was at this point that Paul Preuss, in the year 1911, considered that the way straight up looked more attractive than that taken by the earlier pioneers. Alone, he arrived triumphantly at the summit. Such skilful route-finding proved him a mountaineer rather than simply a rock-gymnast. Our two friends of the Fell and Rock C.C. who chose his line for their first ascent, found this East wall's 300 ft. of unrelenting steepness most impressive. Although the route is well pitoned for running-belay, it remains formidable enough to be graded V(-). To its right and left lie the even more difficult North-east and South-east climbs, of Grade V and V(+) respectively.

Our way however, lay to the right. O. G. Jones records an amusing incident in his memoirs of climbing in the Lake District in the 'nineties.



Photo, Fratelli Pedrotti, Trento]

THE CAMPANILE BASSO FROM THE EAST. PAUL PREUSS MADE THE FIRST ASCENT OF THE EAST FACE, CLIMBING SOLO, IN 1911.

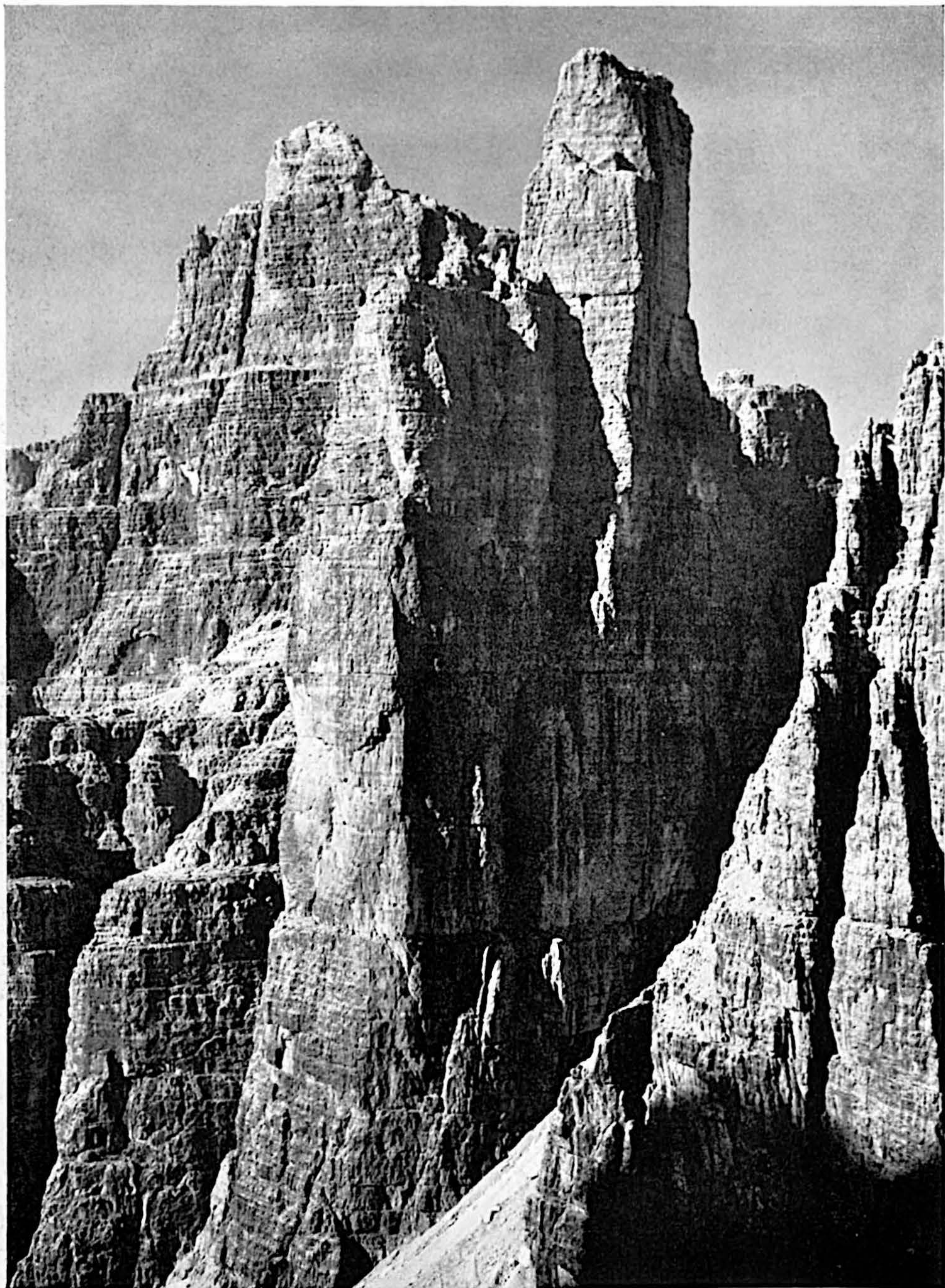
His party was strung out high up on an unclimbed Scaffell buttress of extreme difficulty. One of a party of ramblers enveloped in the mist below shouted, 'Hi, you chaps! Is there a road up there?' Now had he been addressing his enquiry to a party halfway up the Campanile, he would have received the assurance, 'Indeed there is, and a very excellent one!' We were on the Stradone Provinciale, the Country Highway, which extends horizontally right-handed from the South-east Edge to the Great Western Shoulder, a distance of 300 yards.

From the shoulder, a deep-cleft chimney rises obliquely to the right. Two hundred feet of interesting climbing in this brought us without difficulty to an upper detrital terrace known as the Albergo Alsole. This seductive highway often misleads parties, broadening and levelling out enticingly towards the South-west Edge where it fades away on to the south precipice.

A route from this point would appear hardly possible, but in a case of 'necessity being the mother of invention', a very severe one was worked out by the guide, Pierre Blanc, with C. F. Meade in 1909. The full story of their strange adventure, 'Losing the way on a Dolomite', appears in Meade's *Approach to the Hills*. The sight of two ringed pitons misled them into supposing that they were on the Via Commune. Karabiners were unknown in that day, and in consequence their rope jammed when passing through the first of these. This necessitated Meade attacking the initial slanting overhang with a great coil of slack rope drooping below him over the unnerving precipice.

Were he to come off, Meade knew that they would both be precipitated into space. Notwithstanding his qualms, all went well; but their trials were not yet over for Blanc experienced great difficulty in surmounting the pitch above the upper piton. They learned subsequently that their daring forerunner, as a result of his strength failing here, had fallen to his death. It was only three days after the accident that Blanc and Meade accomplished their remarkable *tour de force*. The 1949 C.A.I. guide book now describes the climb as 'Very attractive and open'!

A consultation of our notes indicated that we were approaching the celebrated crux, the Ampferer Wall, the route by which the summit was reached in 1899. From the Albergo Alsole we had access to the South, West, and North walls of the final tower. The South and West wall routes, the Blanc-Meade 1909 and Pooli-Trenti 1904, Grade V(-) and V(+) respectively, would certainly have proved beyond our capacity. The latter course ran 120 ft. up a cracked yellow face rising sheer above us. It looked extremely formidable, the hazards increasing with the height and culminating in an overhang. We therefore climbed left for another 40 ft. to gain the narrow Terrazzino



Photo, Fratelli Pedrotti, Trento]

THE CAMPANILE BASSO FROM THE SOUTH-WEST. THE GREAT WESTERN SHOULDER BUTTRESSES THE WEST WALL. FROM THE SOUTH END OF THE TERRACE ABOVE IT, PIERRE BLANC AND C. F. MEADE MADE THE FIRST ASCENT OF THE SOUTH WALL IN 1909.

Garbari, thence continuing this trend until we reached a flat pulpit perched airily on the North-west Edge.

Named in memory of Albert I, the King of the Belgians' Terrace commands a splendid view of the great South face of the Campanile Alto. Almost vertical, this sunlit terraced wall leads the eye 3,000 ft. upward in one sweep. From the South Wall climb (W. Paulcke's of 1897), a fine open route (Grade 3) of more than usual exposure and length, Preuss' route and sections of the Via Commune can be studied. The climbing is always interesting, and satisfying holds turn up obligingly whenever they are most needed. An attractive feature is the traverse about 400 ft. below the summit by an exposed ledge which takes one horizontally across the wall from east to west. The Alto is a shapely peak, its rugged convex ridges affording a contrasting backdrop to the clean lines and satisfying proportions of the Basso. From the west, the 3,000 ft. ridges are seen to perfection, soaring majestically to meet at a twin-spired summit.

As I have implied, the Ampferer Wall gives the Via Commune a magnificent finish. From the King of the Belgians' Terrace, a line of holds runs upward to the left for five yards to vanish at a corner which looks like the end of all things. Although this initial move is decidedly less delicate than that of Abraham's Traverse (1900), Crowberry Ridge of Buchaille Etive Mor, which it somewhat resembles, the pitch as a whole is so much longer that it need not fear comparison. In either case a tremendous exposure stimulates the leader to take the necessary care. Should he find himself disposed to hurry, let him pause, if not for long, the better to appreciate that he is poised almost 800 ft. directly above the Bocchetta.

After rounding the corner, the leader must seek lodgment in the open groove immediately ahead. Very steep it is, and even more exposed than the traverse. He ascends 23 ft. on small holds to a running-belay piton. Thence a short traverse to the left on much less difficult rock, brings him to a welcome ledge affording ample room for two. The next pitch goes straight up a cleft on the right to a minute terrace, no difficulties arising, whence the route continues right by slanting rocks which lead out on to the spacious summit plateau.¹

Grateful we were for the brilliant sunshine and warm rocks we had enjoyed. Sometimes through unforeseen changes of weather, parties have found themselves in jeopardy. Miriam Underhill relates in her memoirs, *Give Me the Hills*, how she and her guide Angelo Dimai were storm-bound in 1927 high up on the West wall of the Campanile. Marooned on a 6-in. ledge for over an hour, they were not only soaked and chilled but were almost struck by lightning. They both felt the impact of the flash, and Dimai, who was standing on small holds above

¹ This haven is approximately 9 yards across.



Photo, Fratelli Pedrotti, Trento]

THE CAMPANILES FROM THE NORTH-WEST. CAMPANILE ALTO IS IN THE CENTRE, CAMPANILE BASSO ON THE RIGHT WITH ITS JORDAN GAP AND PISGAH.

the ledge, must have thought their situation to be critical. Their subsequent ascent to safety was rendered extremely dangerous by the freshly fallen snow. 'We glanced up', writes Miriam Underhill, 'and saw the great wall above us sheathed with snow and ice. All this began to melt quickly, and showers of water and wet snow poured down on us, with slabs of ice as well.' However, by dint of resolutely attacking the appalling conditions, Dimai eventually gained access to the Western Shoulder, where they could rest and recuperate.

Cyril Machin, who could claim the record for the fastest descent of Ben Nevis, if not disqualified for having inadvertently taken advantage of an 800 ft. avalanche, wrote the following account of his first attempt to ascend the Campanile. He was the leader, and the party was on the Albergo Alsole deliberating as to the correct route. 'Our ruminations', he writes,² 'were suddenly interrupted by a loud thunder clap. Storm clouds were rapidly rolling up the valley, so we shed all our ironmongery, placing it under an overhang, and retired to another overhang at a safe distance. Almost immediately the heavens opened with a deluge of rain that soon turned to snow; the thunder becoming incessant and reverberating from wall to wall of the precipitous peaks around. Lightning zig-zagged down adjacent pinnacles with vivid blue flames. It was a most impressive sight from an impressive position, for we were in the centre of the storm. It was well over an hour before this ceased and we were able to creep from beneath the overhang and retrieve our equipment.

'Time was getting on and the party, having quite lost its appetite for climbing, was anxious to descend. To add to the difficulties, a thick fog developed, reducing visibility to a few yards. Reluctantly a sling was made with a spare rope, and an abseil started down Long Chimney, the sling being looped round a bollard. Later, ringed pitons offered themselves for abseils. We groped our way along the Country Highway, abseiled down further, and made our way towards the final abseil. In the fog it was an hour before we found the cairns placed in the morning and were able to use our last two abseil pitons.' The following season, 1954, Machin enjoyed better fortune, this time successfully leading the same party to the summit.

On arrival there one's attention is engaged by the carillon, dedicated in 1952 as a memorial. The brothers, Bruno and Catulo Detassis of Madonna di Campiglio, well-known guides, wished in this way to commemorate their friends fallen in the mountains. It is customary to sound the chimes not only in thanksgiving for a safe passage but also in memory of 'All who have fallen in the mountains'. To those who gave their lives in a valiant attempt to save others', the four winds add their own tribute:

² M.A.M. Journal. 1958.

'Aloft a fresh breeze swings the vane
To chime a sad though sweet refrain.
O listen! for the vale profound
is overflowing with the sound.'

WORDSWORTH (*adapted*).

Hard-by is a diminutive shrine occupying a natural alcove. The smooth slab of detrital limestone serving for the altar, is graced by a vase of yellow Alpine poppies placed beneath the cross. This is replenished from time to time by climbers from their flasks. These alpinists, which flourish on the limestone debris of the summit plateau, make a gay foreground to the magnificent views. Breath-taking towers and walls of nearby Dolomites afford vistas over green valleys and forests to distant ranges of snow-capped mountains.

Having contemplated the scenery awhile and enjoyed a rest, we moved off with some reluctance to the point of departure. The first abseil is made from a convenient ledge 20 ft. below the summit and just west of the North-west Edge. Here we found the grandfather of all ringed-pitons. We had unroped on the summit. Now, by joining our spare length to our climbing rope threaded through the ring, we made a doubled rope of sufficient length for the 120-ft. abseil. The coils were cast over the west precipice.

Although the rocks at first shelve away quite gradually, the downward prospect of the screes 2,000 ft. below, at this moment unveiled by a dissolving cloud, was considerably impressive. Not having abseiled for eight years, I was glad to find the take-off from this ledge to be a perfectly simple matter. As the abseil proceeded the descent became more interesting, the rock gradually receding from my feet until I was suspended in mid-air. This I found at first rather disconcerting, but I was soon enjoying the novelty of the situation and the uninterrupted view into the valley far below. As I was reflecting on the relative shortness of the rope, the loose ends of which I was approaching, an airy little terrace appeared, offering a timely landfall. Here we foregathered. Two more abseils brought us to the Long Chimney, which as I have said, rises 200 ft. from the Western Shoulder. We descended by a further eight abseils before reaching the easy lower rocks which rise from the Bocchetta.

It had been for us a memorable day's mountaineering, full of interest and enriched by a certain element of adventure. Summing up; while much of the climbing is of only moderate difficulty, the ever-changing situations and views give the climb a unique charm. Moreover, with regard to the finish, all but the most hard-bitten of experts would concede that the Ampferer Wall fully merits the epithet 'tremendous'.