Tragedy in the Ortler

JOHANNA MERZ

(*Plates* 49–52)

The Königsspitze (3859m), which dominates the Ortles-Cevedale group of mountains, is not the highest peak in the range but it is undoubtedly the most striking. Rising in a great dome of shattered, rust-coloured limestone, topped with a coronet of snow, it looks majestic when seen from a distance and awe-inspiring when you stand directly beneath it. A long and steep ridge of rock and snow divides its southern side from the difficult N face on the Stelvio side of the mountain. The normal route from the south attains this SE ridge by way of a narrow snow gully, prone to rock-fall, leading up to a shoulder, the Passo della Bottiglia (Königsjoch) at 3293m. The section of the route leading from the shoulder to the summit is steep but, given good snow conditions, it is not difficult. When the snow is out of condition, however, it can be very dangerous.

When I arrived in Bormio towards the end of July, my friend and guide, Maurizio, came round to the hotel in the evening with the news that the Gran Zebrù (the Italian name for the Königsspitze) was in perfect condition and that we must certainly attempt it the next day. I had hoped to start with something easier; however, I was very keen to climb this 'king' of mountains, and I readily agreed with his suggestion.

I had first met Maurizio two years before, when I came to Bormio for a skiing holiday and particularly enjoyed the run down from the 3000m Cima Bianca. From that splendid viewpoint I had seen an enticing-looking range of mountains along the NE skyline and had decided, there and then, to return in the summer to investigate. One of the ski instructors introduced me to Maurizio Zappa ('the best guide in Bormio') and we arranged to climb for a few days at the beginning of my Alpine season the following September. When I returned to Bormio in the late summer, I hoped to climb the three highest peaks of the range – the Cevedale (3769m), the Gran Zebrù (3859m) and the Ortles (3905m) – but in the Alps things rarely turn out as planned.

We had walked up to the Rifugio Casati but, on arrival, we heard that someone coming down from the Cevedale, unroped, had fallen into a crevasse. As the smallest guide in the hut, Maurizio volunteered to go down. An hour or two later I watched from the windows as the sad litle rescue party returned with the news that the man had died from a 40m fall – with the rope still coiled round his shoulders. The following morning Maurizio had to help to retrieve the body, but first he arranged for me to join another party to climb the Cevedale. The mountain was in deep mist, so there was little chance of having a look at the other peaks in the range. However, I was assured that the Gran Zebrù was out

of condition (too icy). I decided to cut my losses and come back the following year, and I made a date with Maurizio for the end of July 1989 – a whole week, this time – to make sure of really getting to grips with this out-of-the-way and intriguing range.

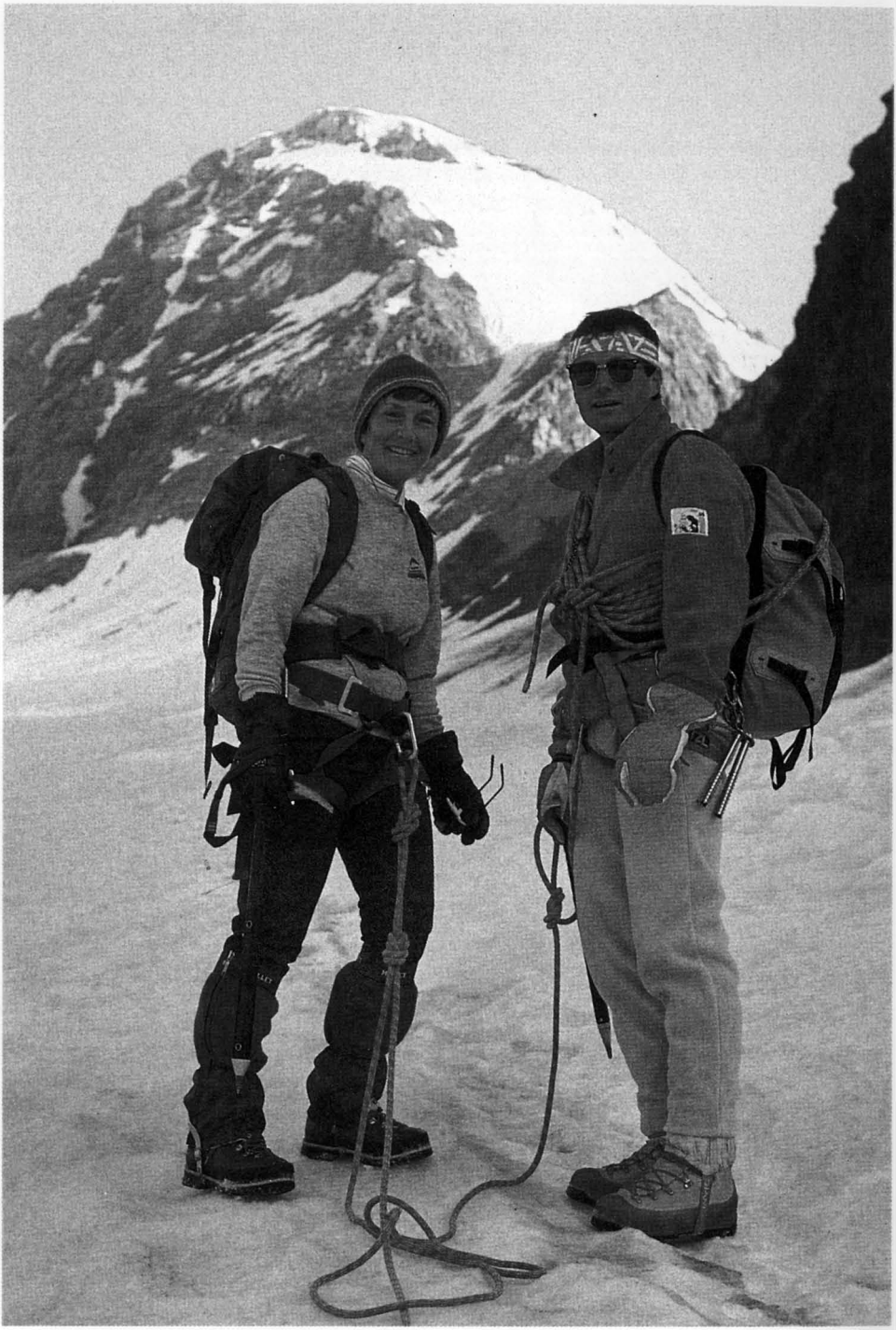
In the meantime I found out a bit more about the Ortler group and looked through some early accounts in the *Alpine Journal*. In the very first volume, Francis Fox Tuckett gave a detailed description of the range as a whole and, in particular, of his first ascent of the Königsspitze in 1864. In a later volume (1918), Claude Wilson wrote about some superb ridge expeditions:

> [The Ortler] is, *par excellence*, the land of the ridge wanderer. One can walk or climb over summit after summit along every one of the sky-lines of the district . . . in the Ortler *all* the ridges 'go'. And yet the mountain forms are grand, and the outlines often singularly bold, and few can have examined Mr Tuckett's beautifully drawn panoramas in the first volume of the *Journal* without experiencing the desire to ascend those striking peaks.[1]

When July came round I made a new plan. We would start with a three-day traverse of the '13 Cime', which curl round from the Pizzo Tresero, above Santa Caterina, to the Cevedale. But, on the first evening, my plans were already changing and I had agreed to start off with the Gran Zebrù.

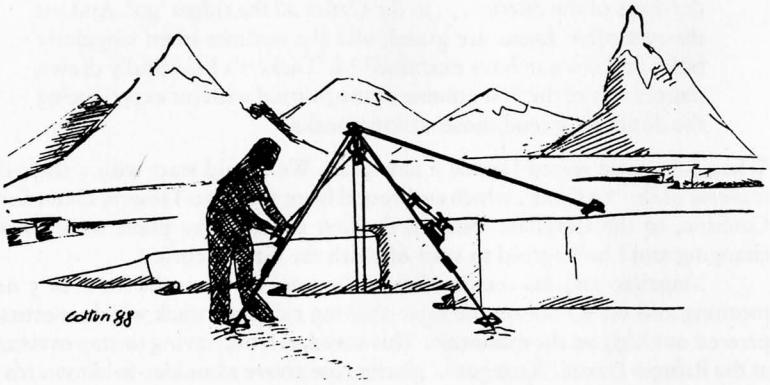
Maurizio and his cousin Nino picked me up from the hotel at 5 next morning and we set out on the bone-shaking ride up a track which eventually petered out high on the mountain. This saved us from having to stay overnight at the Rifugio Pizzini. A tongue of glacier rose above a boulder-field towards an unlikely-looking narrow snow gully. Once we were actually on it, the gully turned out to be less steep than it appeared to be from below. The surrounding rocks were described by Tuckett: 'The fact was that a more utterly disintegrated, rotten, and untrustworthy collection of stones professing to be rocks I never saw . . . doubt and distrust were the garment of our minds.'[2] However, apart from odd bits of falling rock no bigger than a golf-ball, the gully presented no difficulty, and we soon attained the Passo della Bottiglia. The SE ridge rises another 500m above this shoulder and, though steep, it was by no means desperate. My main problem was a touch of altitude sickness, on this my first day, combined with a splitting headache. But after eating and resting on the summit I felt a lot better. Tuckett considered the view from the top 'of the grandest description, and . . . must be decidedly the finest in the whole district'.[3]

Several other groups had passed us on the way up and now, one after the other, we all moved off. One of them, a party of four young men, was making heavy weather of the descent; they seemed to be rooted to the spot, unable to proceed. We edged our way past them, and then Maurizio said, 'I really think I should help those people, because I'd rather do so now than have to arrange for a helicopter to take them off later on.' So Nino and I continued down very slowly and carefully, while Maurizio secured the young men over the difficult bit. They were grateful for his help and certainly not too proud to accept it. It's not often, I thought, that a guide is willing to help another party and I admired his initiative. Once down the gully, the young men were able to continue on their own.



49. Johanna Merz and Maurizio Zappa, the Gran Zebrù (Königsspitze) behind. (Nino Zappa) (p 98)

As we made our way down the glacier, Maurizio told me about his own and Nino's involvement in the mountain rescue service for the Valtellina. Maurizio is head of the Bormio team and trains the younger guides in advanced mountain rescue techniques. Nino looks after the necessary administration, records, accounting, etc – all on a voluntary basis. In addition, Maurizio spends 24 hours once a fortnight on stand-by duty at Sondrio, with a helicopter pilot and a doctor, ready at a moment's notice to go wherever they are needed. Maurizio and Nino have even designed a special wigwam-shaped structure, made of collapsible steel poles, which can be placed over a crevasse so that the victim can be pulled clear more quickly than by conventional methods. Their system has now been adopted and used successfully all over the Valtellina.



The following evening Maurizio called at the hotel to discuss further plans. I still wanted to do the 13 Cime. 'It's not difficult,' Maurizio said, 'But it's very long and, with the present humid temperatures and thundery weather, I would not recommend it.' For the last day or two the thermometer had not fallen below zero. He suggested, instead, that we should go up the Pizzo Tresero from which, if all went well, we could continue to the Punta San Matteo via a snow and rock traverse, and from there return, in a triangle, to our starting point at the Berni hut. This was, in any case, the first leg of the 13 Cime.

We set out the next morning at 5. The hotel owner's wife, Claudia, again insisted on producing breakfast at that uncivilized hour, which I felt was way beyond the call of duty. As usual, Nino came with us and was useful as a photographer – he kept grabbing my camera, and also took plenty of pictures of his own. (In the end, he made me a present of all the slides he had taken – a typical example of the spontaneous kindness of the Italians.) As we parked the jeep outside the Berni hut I was full of anticipation, having been re-reading Tuckett's account of his first ascent, in 1865, of the two peaks, the Punta San Matteo (3678m) (which he called the Pizzo della Mare) and the Pizzo Tresèro (3594m):

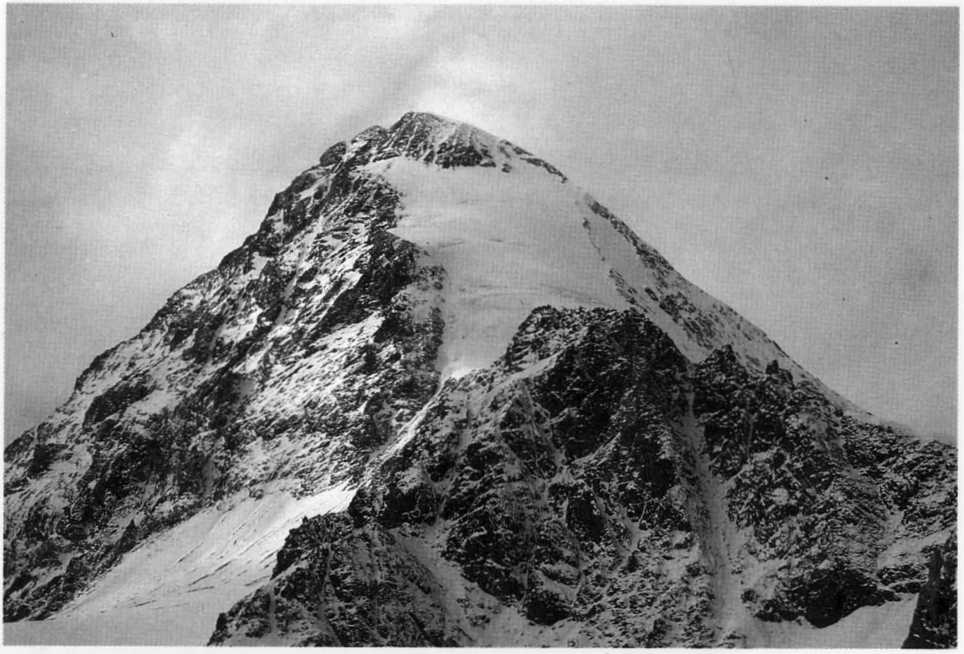
> We started at 1 this morning, and at 7.30 stood on the summit of the Pizzo della Mare, a peak lying behind the Tresèro . . . The

> atmosphere was wonderfully clear, and though the wind was high and extremely cold, we contrived to get sufficient shelter to enable us to spend three hours on the summit in the enjoyment of one of the most wonderful views that I have ever beheld. Not only were the mountains of the Orteler group, the Lombard Alps (Presanella, Adamello, etc.), the whole range of the Dolomites, and the Bavarian and the Engadine peaks perfectly clear, but Monte Rosa, Mt. Blanc (distant 185 miles), and Monte Viso (distant 210 miles) were distinctly visible to the W., while in the E. the eye ranged as far as the Gross Glockner and even beyond . . . Having gazed our fill, we next proceeded to attack the Tresèro, reached its summit without any serious difficulty, spent another delightful hour there, and then dropped straight down upon this place [ie Santa Caterina] at 5 o'clock. Two new peaks, each nearly 12,000 feet in height, accomplished in one day, and under such perfect conditions of weather, are a prize that only rarely falls to the lot of the mountaineer, and you may imagine that we are jubilant in proportion.[4]

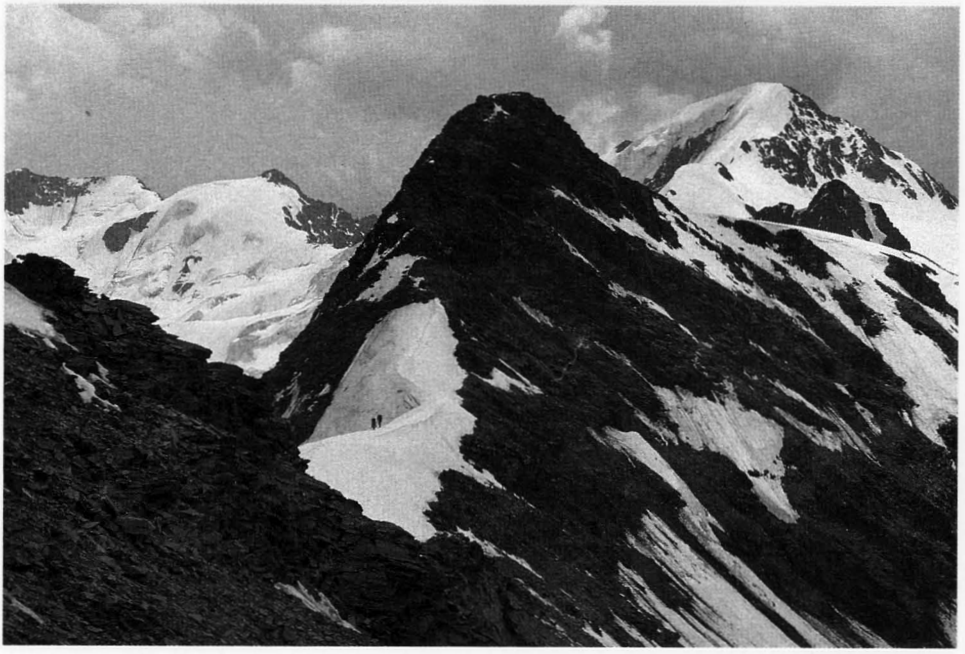
We planned to follow Tuckett's route in reverse and, having crossed the bridge 'over the Gavia torrent', we circled around the massif, following a waymarked path which mounted higher and higher towards the beginning of the glacier. As we gained height, the perfect cone of the Tresero gradually revealed itself above us, while, to the west, Tuckett's wonderful panorama started to unfold. First the Disgrazia, with its long and graceful Corda Molla route clearly etched against the skyline; then the Adamello and Presanella and, coming into view higher up, the Bernina.

At the glacier we roped up and, in an hour, reached a col on the SW arête. From this vantage point we looked down on several other parties making their way up the Tresero by way of the glacier on the other side of the ridge. Above our heads, the shattered limestone of the SW ridge reared up towards the summit, like a series of flying buttresses. Our route mounted the very crest and mostly we moved together, but there were several short sections which required a belay. These added interest to the climb and the time flew by; it took us three hours of scrambling to reach the summit.

We were blessed with a marvellously clear day, like the one Tuckett enjoyed on the first ascent. Not only were the peaks which he saw laid out before us (though I was only able to identify a few of them), but I gained a clear view and appreciation of the 13 Cime which I had so nonchalantly believed I could toss off during my first three days in the Alps. A delectable-looking snow ridge led off to the east, broken by the rock pile of the Cima Dosegu, and continued to the elegant San Matteo. As my eye followed the other summits, curving majestically round to the pure snow dome of the Cevedale, I realized that in scale and grandeur this was a much larger undertaking than I had imagined when studying it on the map. Maurizio had been most tactful, and instead of saying bluntly, 'No, of course you can't do the 13 Cime,' he had allowed it gradually to become self-evident that my original scheme was, for the



50. The Gran Zebrù (Königsspitze), 3859m, out of condition. (Johanna Merz) (p 98)



51. The Pizzo Tresero-Cima Dosegu-Punta San Matteo traverse; the '13 Cime' behind. (Johanna Merz) (p 98)

moment, impracticable. He himself had only done the circuit once the previous year, and *that* had been when conditions were perfect and with a very strong party!

By now it was already midday; the weather was humid and the snow soft. It seemed prudent to return straight down the glacier and to forget the two-hour-long traverse to the Punta San Matteo. Maurizio reported our position over the radio and was told, in turn, that elsewhere everything was *a posto*. We would have a carefree afternoon descending the long glacier on the E side of the ridge and eventually joining up with the path on which we had started, near the Berni hut. We could see an enormous black cloud coming in from the north, so we hurried down and were just clear of the glacier when it started to rain, hail and thunder! But this in no way spoiled the splendid mountain day we had enjoyed.

Back at the hotel, Maurizio and Nino were immediately involved in a long, unintelligible conversation in double-quick Italian with Nino's brother, the proprietor of the Hotel Dante, and someone from the guide's bureau. They all rushed off and Claudia, Nino's sister-in-law, told me what had happened. There had been a terrible accident on the Gran Zebrù. On the steep bit, just below the summit, a snow-slide had swept away the guide, Valentino Sosio, and his three clients. One of the clients had survived and was in hospital with serious injuries, from which he subsequently died. After supper, Maurizio and his wife Marisa joined me for coffee. It seemed that the three friends, with their guide, had fallen over 500m down the mountain and a rescue team from Solda had recovered the bodies and flown the survivor to hospital. This was not the first time, Maurizio said, that people had been killed at that particular point; he had often urged that a rope should be fixed over the steepest section (like the one on the Matterhorn), but nothing had been done. I asked the inevitable question: 'Would *you* have taken a party up the Gran Zebrù today in this humid weather?' 'No,' Maurizio replied, 'I wouldn't have wanted to take anyone up there in the present dangerous snow conditions.'

The next morning we went rock-climbing. There are several good crags around Bormio and Maurizio had in mind a nice, easy route for me at about Grade III. It turned out to be VS, but somehow, with much help from above, I managed to struggle up it. Later we talked of what was on both our minds. The Italian newspaper reports had spoken of an avalanche, but now Maurizio had been given an eye-witness account. While descending the steep section below the summit, on the normal route, the first client on Valentino's rope had tripped and fallen forward over his crampons. The second man had little chance of arresting such a fall and was wrenched from his stance, followed by the third man and finally by the guide. There was nothing Valentino could do to hold the fall of the three men, particularly in such soft snow, and they had all disappeared down the steep slopes on the N side of the mountain.

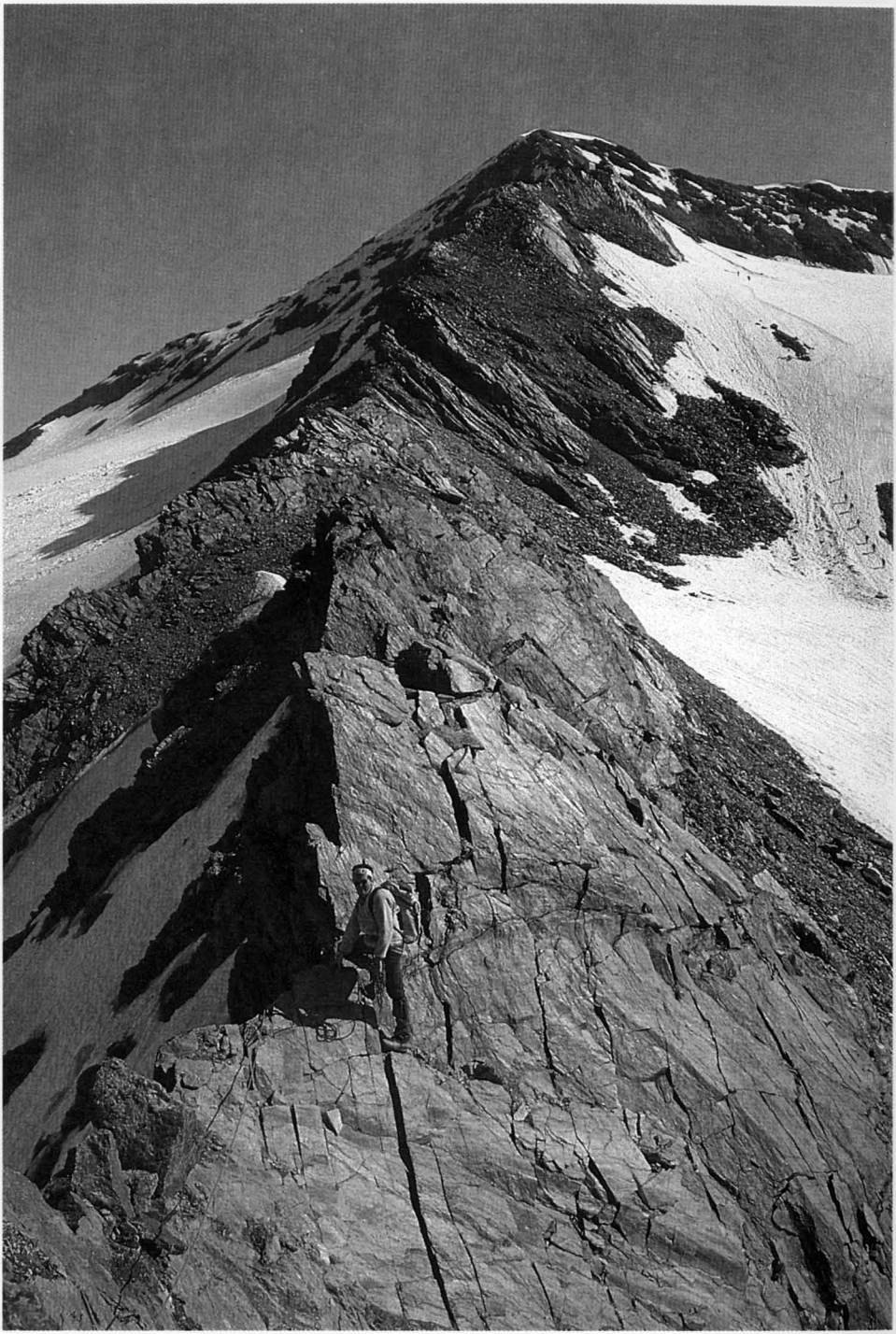
As a climax to our week we had hoped to climb the Ortles, the highest peak in the range. But this plan now had to be abandoned, since Maurizio and Marisa – who had been close friends of Valentino's – were spending the nights at the house of his widow and her two children. However, we could climb another one-day route, and we decided on the Cima Viola in the Val Dosdè.

The following evening, Maurizio and Marisa invited me to their house for coffee. Everything was immaculately clean and tidy, even though Marisa works all day in a dress-shop. You could have eaten a meal off their kitchen floor! Maurizio returned to the subject of the accident, which was still very much on his mind. He was barely on speaking terms (he said) with the other guides, who all persisted in declaring that the accident was simply *la destina* and nobody's fault. None of them was willing to try to establish the true causes of the accident, both direct and indirect. Being so much involved with mountain rescue, Maurizio was particularly sensitive about these issues and he felt resentful that financial considerations were sometimes allowed to override the highest standards of safety. A few years ago four people and a guide, all on one rope, had fallen on the Matteo. Many bones were broken but fortunately, on that occasion, no one was killed. But now he believed that if only certain changes had been made then; if the guides' tests had been tightened up; if climbs had no longer been undertaken in bad weather or adverse snow conditions; if clients had been required to establish that they had the necessary experience for a particular climb; and, above all, if the ratio of clients to guide on the steeper climbs had been fixed at no more than 2:1; then the present accident, he believed, and the death of his close friend, might have been avoided.

I was having plenty of 'rest' days, which I spent going for long walks, and I felt in excellent form when Maurizio and Nino presented themselves at the hotel early on my last morning. Soon we were enjoying a beautiful dawn from the Val Viola, which runs from the Valdidentro, west of Bormio, right up to the Swiss frontier. We parked the jeep near a farm at the foot of the Val Dosdè, which branches off south-westwards and, following the stream, circles round to reveal, after an hour or so, the remote Cima Viola (3374m). The peak is not part of the Ortler range, is little known and we had it all to ourselves. The mountain is well named – it's a shy violet hiding itself away at the top of a remote valley. It is even viola-shaped, with a snow dome flanked on each side by lower rocky outcrops. The Capanna Dosdè, which we reached in two hours, is magnificently sited with views over the western Dolomites. We paused here while Maurizio made a brew, and then we started up the mountain itself.

It was a delightful climb – varied and interesting – a boulder-field, followed by some enjoyable rock scrambling on soft granite, a tramp over a gentle snow-slope and, finally, a long, wide glacier which we took in one continous movement without stopping. In no time we were mounting the summit rocks and, suddenly, there was the cross which marked the topmost point. Maurizio reported our position on the radio. It was still only 11am, but we didn't stay too long on the summit as the weather looked uncertain. This was the first climb any of us had done since the accident and, although nothing was said, all three of us were being exceptionally careful, especially on the descent. Nino led, with Maurizio as anchorman. When we reached the boulders we were able to relax and stop for a second lunch.

On the way back up the long valley we stopped again by the river, where there was a little bridge, and refilled our water bottles. The sun had come out now, and I thought that, in spite of the shadow cast by the accident, what a pleasure it was to be there, pleasantly tired after climbing a delightful and



52. The Pizzo Tresero, SW ridge. (Johanna Merz) (p 98)

little-known mountain with a romantic and appropriate name. Circumstances had prevented us from achieving the highest peak in the Ortler range; but the Ortles would still be there another year – something exciting to lure me back to this beautiful and challenging range of mountains, and the friendly people of Bormio.

REFERENCES

1 C Wilson, in 'The Ortler in 1911'. *AJ32*, 176, 1918.
2 F F Tuckett, in 'Contributions to the Topography of the Orteler and Lombard Alps'. *AJ1*, 406, 1864.
3 Ibid, 405.
4 F F Tuckett, *A Pioneer in the High Alps*. Arnold, 1920, p237.