

## A DEVILISH HOLIDAY

BY EUSTACE THOMAS

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As members of our Club are aware, it has been an obsession with me for some years past to complete the ascent of all the peaks in the Alps which are above 4000 metres in height. As far as I have heard only four people have completed a similar quest—*viz.* Blödigg, Pfann, Horeschowski, and Blanchet; but their list was a shorter one and did not, for example, include the Aiguilles du Diable. My friends had done all they could to extend my list, and of this extended list there remained after 1930 only the Aiguilles du Diable. It was desired to make the traverse of the five Aiguilles in one day, as had been done twice before; and this was considered to be possible only if they were dry and free from snow and ice; and as two of them were climbed by the north face, this state seldom existed. The Aiguilles du Diable had been my principal object on four previous visits to the Alps, but during these visits the traverse had been impossible.

In 1932 my long drawn-out programme was at last completed. I had been unable to plan my holiday in advance, and it was not until the middle of August that it was possible to get to the Montanvert. Joseph Knubel, who had been my guide when collecting the other four-thousands, and to whom I am affectionately attached, was engaged in another party for the next fortnight; but I had been lucky enough, at such short notice, to find Alexander Taugwalder free; and he accompanied me during the whole of the holiday. Joseph Knubel was to have joined us when he became free, but failed to do so through a mistake for which he was solely responsible.

I was quite untrained and felt very unfit. But the weather, which had been so bad in the earlier part of the season, had improved, and any long delay before making the great attempt was obviously risky. Hence on Tuesday, August 16th, Taugwalder and I left Montanvert at 5 a.m. for a day's training work on the Moine. The summit of the Moine lies on the great southern ridge which descends from the Aiguille Verte to the Mer de Glace. We travelled up the Mer de Glace; and well before reaching the foot of the ridge we could see, on looking upwards, that a second ridge





SOUTH WALL OF THE MARMOLATA  
(I—First Terrace    II—Second Terracc)

appeared to start from somewhere near the summit of the Moine, on the left-hand side, and to descend more or less parallel to the main ridge—a couloir being formed between the two. In the upper part this couloir was further split into two parts by a third massive ridge between the other two ridges. The right-hand branch formed a snow couloir, and had been climbed by Claude and H. Wilson, Wicks, Carr, and Morse in 1890. I have not found any record of the left-hand branch being attempted, and it was to this that Taugwalder directed his attention. There was no difficulty in reaching the point where the couloir branched right and left, keeping well on the left side of the lower couloir.

We tried first to ascend in the bottom of the left branch, but found the way stopped by a huge block dripping with water. Not wishing to get wet through in forcing a passage, we returned towards the branching point and then saw that there was a sort of groove or channel running right up the right-hand wall of the left branch of the couloir—*i.e.* the left or western wall of the middle ridge. We got a good distance up this, but the climbing was getting very hard and we had no certainty that we could carry on with it. After a particularly hard pitch, I stopped at a convenient cross flake on which I could sit straddle-legged, and Taugwalder went on by himself to see if it would go higher up. He found it pretty bad and an unpleasant route to return by. He finally got out on to easier stuff, and not caring to return the same way, found a parallel course more to the right looking upwards, and descended by this. He was away more than an hour, and then I heard him calling from the other side of a smooth wall of rock on my right. By descending from my flake towards the right, by a rather delicate traverse, I was able to get past this wall and join his new route, which was easy enough to ascend. We now found no great difficulties in the ascent until we were approaching the top of our centre ridge, where it joined the left-hand one. The upper part of the left-hand ridge turned in towards the summit of the Moine, but there was a big break at the top end. Before reaching this we could have descended easily to the snow in the right branch of the couloir, and so have reached the top of the Moine. But we wished to continue on the ridges by which we had come so far, if possible, and this led us into some very difficult pitches. At one place the only way up was by a steeply inclined slab, with a very

small hold for one foot and another small one for the fingers of one hand. Taugwalder raised himself gingerly on these and was just able with his left fingers to reach a more or less horizontal crack and make a hand traverse for a yard or two to the right where matters improved. Later we were on the top of the ridge and this stretched in front of us, inclined upwards, like the edge of a huge axe, the smooth walls dropping steeply away on each side. Taugwalder balanced his way up on hands and feet on the very edge. But that was too much for me, and I went over the side and worked my way up holding on with my hands and one arm over the edge. It was not far to a break or notch where we could rest and look at what was to come. Just beyond, the edge went up much more steeply and apparently without any definite holds at all. It was only a few feet and Taugwalder just managed to horse-back up it by knee and hand grips, and lay out over the top for a while to get his breath back. This was the end of the serious difficulties. We were now near the end of our ridge, at the break between it and the Moine. We abseiled down over smooth rock to a ledge on the left-hand side ; and by traversing this got down on to the snow at the top of the right-hand branch couloir. We had some food and twenty minutes' needed rest, and then made our way by an easy chimney and broken rocks to the summit of the Moine.

We descended by the ordinary route to the new Couvercle Hotel, which I saw for the first time. After a meal we returned to the Montanvert, which we reached at 7.30 p.m. after fourteen-and-a-half hours' strenuous work. It had been a pretty severe first training day for an unfit man.

The following day, Wednesday, we rested. But we had had a good view of the Aiguilles du Diable from the Moine ; and although it was obvious that they still carried an undesirably large amount of snow on their north faces it did seem as though our chance were coming at last, and we were terribly afraid of a change of weather.

On Wednesday, Cachat—who had made the first complete traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable with Underhill and Miss O'Brien, and with Armand Charlet as first leader—happened to turn up at the Montanvert, and it at once occurred to me to engage him to join us for the next week at least. He did so, and remained with us till we left the Montanvert. We made a very happy party and I

shall always have pleasant memories of Cachat and Taugwalder as excellent companions and good mixers, as well as for their good climbing. So on Thursday we went up to the Col du Géant, to the Torino Hut, proposing to continue the training work on the needles themselves. We arrived at the Torino at noon, and I spent most of the afternoon and evening in my bunk resting and recruiting for the following day. At 1.15 a.m. on Friday we started out in brilliant moonlight, and did not need lanterns. Where we left the glacier for the steep snow slope leading to the Col du Diable we crossed without difficulty a small bergschrund. The ascent after this was made obliquely towards our left. We found crampons useful, and were sometimes on snow, sometimes on rock, and often had to cut steps in ice. At last we arrived at the top of the col, and found ourselves some way from the first Aiguille, the Corne du Diable. A fairly long and quite sharp snow ridge stretched from us to the foot of the Corne. In some parts of this there was powder snow with ice below, and we had to take to the top of the ridge. Eventually we reached the broken rocks at the foot of the Corne, and worked our way over these and upwards to the left, towards the col between the Corne and the next Aiguille, the Chaubert. We had a little difficulty with ice on the way up.

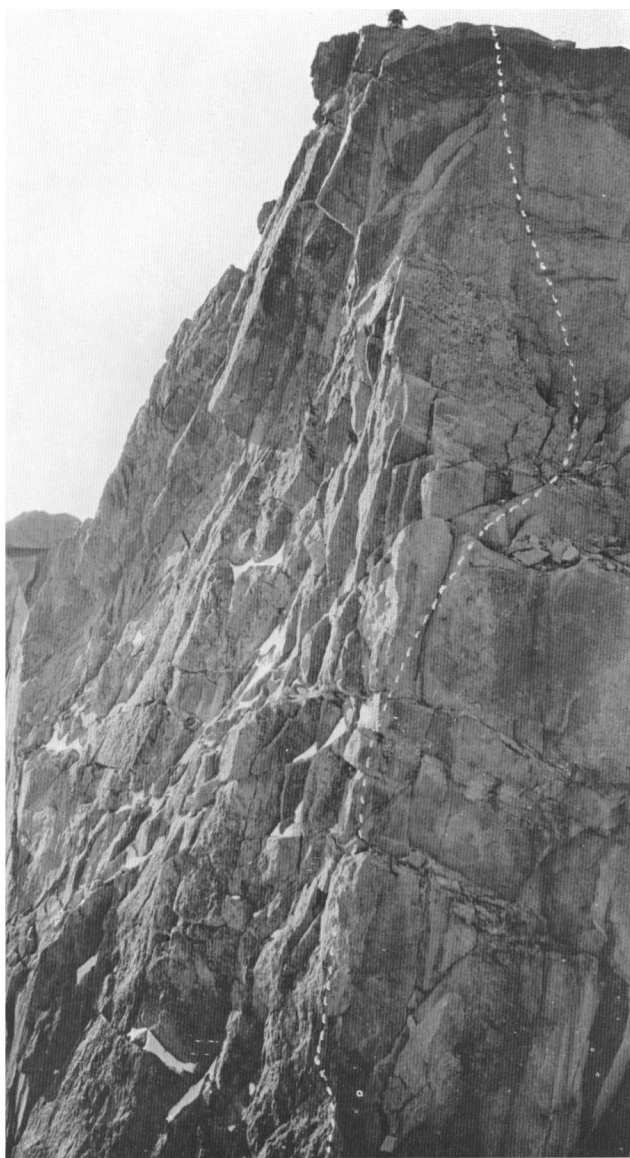
We took off our crampons at the col. The ascent of the Corne commenced by an easy crack with good holds in a nearly vertical wall. The way after this was quite easy to the top, and not long. We were naturally very pleased at being at last on the top of one of our Aiguilles ; but we were eager to get on, and did not stay there long. The descent was made by the same route to the col. Here there was a short traverse of a few yards, and then a steep slab faced us with very little in the way of hand or foot holds in the lower part. For this Taugwalder leaned up against the slab, and Cachat climbed on to his shoulders and could then reach better holds. I followed ; but Taugwalder found a couple of microscopic holds for one hand and a foot, and came up without help from the rope. A rather exposed ridge followed, ascended mostly on the left side, but there was no serious difficulty to the top of this, our second needle—the Chaubert.

The col between the Chaubert and the next needle, the Médiane, was much deeper than the col between the first and second needles, and the Médiane looked a rather grim problem from the Chaubert.

We descended to the col by two abseils, which took rather a long time. For the benefit of those who may do this traverse in the future, it is worth while to say that it is advisable to have plenty of rope and some material for slings. We had 60 metres of abseil line, but cut a number of pieces off this to act as slings, as we did not care to trust the existing ones. Our climbing rope was 35 metres long and this was not enough for three people. When abseiling Cachat went down first, but had to wait in an intermediate position because the rope between him and me was not long enough. I had similarly to wait for Taugwalder. Thus each abseil was broken up into stages, and I should say that in general we took longer descending from the summit of one Aiguille to the foot of the next, than we took in climbing to the summit. Snow lower down and in the col greatly increased the difficulty and delay. For four people, climbing on two ropes is ideal if it can be managed.

At last we reached the col, traversed some unpleasant snow which under good conditions would not have been there, and were in front of the broad wall—facing roughly east—of the *Médiane*. There were a number of shallow ledges on this which made a fairly easy staircase up to a platform on the north-east ridge. Here we lost a good deal of time. The usual route I believe is on the north face. There was much snow on this and it looked particularly unpleasant. The east face, however, was quite dry; and fairly close to the north-east arête there was a sort of narrow broken flaky ridge going up very steeply. Taugwalder experimented with this; he found it loose and unpleasant and came down again. The north side looked no better than before, and after a while Taugwalder again attacked his ridge and progressed slowly up, testing every hold and throwing down a good deal of loose stuff. After ascending perhaps 60 or 70 ft., he descended a little and made a delicate traverse across the wall to the north-east arête, where he got an excellent stance and could safeguard Cachat and myself on our way up. I believed then, but am now doubtful, that this was a new route made by Taugwalder; and being on the dry east face, it is much to be preferred to the one on the north face which is so often spoiled by snow.

The continuation from the position reached by Taugwalder was not so bad as the first section, but had enough difficulties—a traverse with few holds, a steep slab 15 or 20 ft long, and some



*Miss M. O'Brien*

THE CHAUBERT FROM THE MÉDIANE  
(Showing the route of descent)









*Miss M. O'Brien*

CARMEN FROM MÉDIANE



MÉDIANE FROM CHAUBERT

(Showing the route of ascent in each case)

difficulty when we were on the northern side of the ridge with snow and ice. Near the top there is a platform and one passes out between two blocks and reaches the summit by the western face.

The descent was by abseil and commenced on the north face. There were ice and powder snow, and the first man had a difficult horizontal traverse to make to land in the col connecting the *Médiane* to the *Carmen*. The whole descent and traverse were difficult and took a good deal of time. Under better conditions, and without snow, we should probably have romped down and across to the *Carmen*.

The ascent of the *Carmen* was straightforward enough if rather strenuous. There were perhaps 60 ft. of steep climbing with good holds. The ridge was then followed for a while, and after that followed a rather stiff and steep climb for perhaps another 60 ft. We then came to a platform with two summits rising from it. The first was formed by an upright slab, and Cachat and I climbed over Taugwalder's shoulders, got our hands on the top edge and muscled up. The second, however, was the true summit. A somewhat smooth and holdless ridge led up to it, and this could be ascended by a rather strenuous horseback action. But Taugwalder found enough roughnesses on the less vertical side and the actual ridge to climb it by normal methods.

We now descended again by abseil to the deep-lying col between the *Carmen* and the *Isolée*. The traverse of this col was made difficult and unpleasant by some very steep snow which overhung on one side in a cornice and felt rather rotten.

We had started the day with the idea that my training was insufficient for the whole traverse, and that we should probably only nibble away at one or two of the *Aiguilles* and complete the traverse on a second visit. But after once starting I think we quite forgot this, and were highly keyed up to complete the whole thing at the one visit. But now that we were faced by the last and most difficult of the *Aiguilles*, after a day's work that had already been strenuous, we frankly looked at it with some dismay and dread. For it was evident that there was ice about, and we had been told that it was impossible unless quite dry, and bad enough even then. I think Cachat considered it unjustifiable in its existing state.

However, Taugwalder was more adventurous, and knew how much I had desired this traverse. He decided at least to try it. Actually the lower part was strenuous but not too difficult, though ice in some of the grooves did not help matters. Arrived at the flake he spent perhaps twenty minutes experimenting with this, and fixing an ice-axe into a fissure behind it. He did not pull himself up on this but found some hand holds on the right and left of the flake, and pulled himself up by these, getting his foot and knee into the gap between the flake and the main wall. In this way he raised himself sufficiently to be able to stand on the head of the axe which he had planted behind the flake. Above him on the left a *piton* had been driven in and he attached to this a *carabiner* and passed his rope through it. On his left was a ridge going upwards very steeply, and he had to swing himself to the other side of this. There was a tiny hold for his left foot and some hold for his left hand. There should have been a hold for the right hand in a fissure, but this was filled with ice. However, he found something for his right hand, and took the swing over the ridge, and got on to a good stance. It should have been relatively easy to get up from here, but there was ice, and he had left the axe behind the overhanging flake. However, he managed to throw a loop of rope over a projection above him, and with this worked his way up. It was all quite easy beyond. He brought Cachat and me up, and presently the last of the Aiguilles du Diable and of my four-thousands was *dans la poche*.

It was now about three o'clock. We had something to eat and made our way up the Arête du Diable to the east summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul. It was in worse condition than when I was there before; it was rather hard work and some step cutting was necessary. After a rest on top we slogged and swayed our weary way down that soft snow track which goes on and on, apparently interminably, to the Géant ice-fall, and the Requin hut, which we reached at 7.45, *i.e.* after eighteen-and-a-half hours of hard work.

I was very pleased, and thankful to my splendid companions for having made it possible to complete this very strenuous course in spite of the short training. The weather had been ideal, and, as it turned out, the day was the best we could have chosen. Later days, we noticed, were colder, or more windy, or in other ways less suitable. But on the other hand there was much more snow

and ice present than there had been in the other traverses made ; and it is not discreditable to Cachat to say that but for Taugwalder's adventuresomeness and his keen desire that I should not be disappointed, we should not have carried the traverse through.

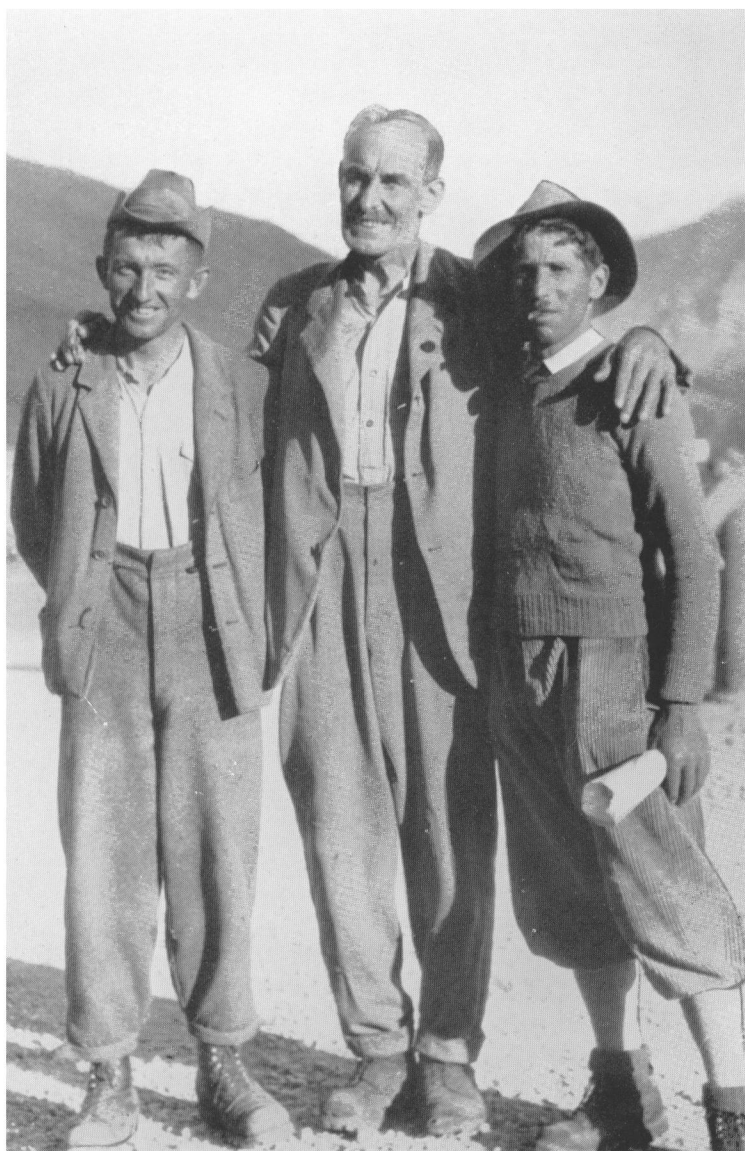
At the same time, I am inclined to think that any of our tiger group of climbers, if acclimatised, and if undaunted by the reputation of the Aiguilles, would find the rock climbing difficulties under *normal* conditions none too great for a guideless expedition. The approach and the finish however require snow and ice experience, and make the whole expedition one of the finest possible in the Alps. I believe that Charlet is planning a tour in the reverse direction, and this could be started by ascending the couloir which lies to the west of the Isolée. With Joseph Knubel we made what was I believe the second ascent of this in 1929. The bottom of the couloir was filled with ice, and it was not quite easy to get out of it at the top end. But I should not hesitate to take that way again, and it is far shorter than by going over the top of Mont Blanc du Tacul.

We returned to the Montanvert on the following day, Saturday, August 20th. On the following Monday we went to the new Couvercle Hotel, and much appreciated the improved accommodation. On Tuesday we traversed Aiguilles Ravel and Mummery. This was my second ascent of the Ravel, but the route followed this time was entirely different from that followed previously—keeping more on the centre of the west face during the earlier part of the climb. It was my first ascent of the Mummery. The two make a very fine mountaineering expedition with rock-climbing to satisfy ardent rock-climbers. The outlook from the top is magnificent. Fabric soled shoes are desirable. The rock is good and grips well. My hands were very sore after the Moine, the Aiguilles du Diable, and the Ravel and Mummery.

Some work had followed me to the Montanvert, and I had two days' writing. We then went on the Friday of the second week to the Cabane de la Tour Rouge on the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon. This cabin has not long been constructed. It is a very simple affair with mattresses on the floor, and without stove, chair, or table ; and was erected by four men in two days, I believe. It renders, however, a very welcome service for a number of climbs. We left the cabin on Saturday morning at 5 a.m. when it was just

light enough to see. The ascent to the Brèche Balfour-Grépon gives great variety in climbing—face work, traverses, chimneys, and cracks. The face is always steep, but there is no superlative difficulty till the very end. Here, there is a choice of three routes to the top. One, on the Mer de Glace face, is the famous Knubel Crack. When we were there, there was a rope hanging down this to aid the ascent. A second way is on the Nantillons face by the Lochmatter chimney. Yet a third is by the Dunod chimney on the same face. I was told that this chimney had only once before been climbed without a rope from above. We had intended to take the Lochmatter chimney. The traverse into this was rather delicate however, and while we were hesitating over it Taugwalder began to experiment with the Dunod chimney. This is really a long crack. In the lower part where we were, it is as though a huge block had fallen out of the right-hand wall looking upwards, leaving here a wide V-shaped chimney going up to a roof. Just level with this roof, the left-hand side of the crack is less vertical, and has a sort of inclined step on it with one or two notches or roughnesses. It was necessary to climb up the V-chimney to the roof, and then to traverse out on to this notched step on the left wall of the crack, stand on it, and thence climb the crack, right side to the rock. Cachat climbed a little way up the V-chimney to give Taugwalder a shoulder when traversing to the notched step; and with this help Taugwalder made a clean ascent of the crack. It is a very sensational, exposed and strenuous climb, and it was a very fine lead by Taugwalder.

When we completed the traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable I wrote Burton for a programme for a week's tour in the Dolomites. So on Sunday, August 28th, we left Chamonix and arrived the same night at Bolzano. There were then some irritating delays over an attempted arrangement with a local guide, and through the loss of a wallet containing a good deal of money on the Rosengartenspitze. However, on Thursday we left the Karersee Hotel at 7 a.m., arrived at the foot of the Vajolet Towers at about noon, engaged a local guide at the Gartl Cabin, and traversed the three towers from foot to foot in two hours twenty-five minutes. It was all excellent guiding, without any thought of hurry. But a slight drizzle was coming on, and there was no inducement to linger. There were seven abseils, and the guide was the best man



LES RESTES DU 'DIABLE'





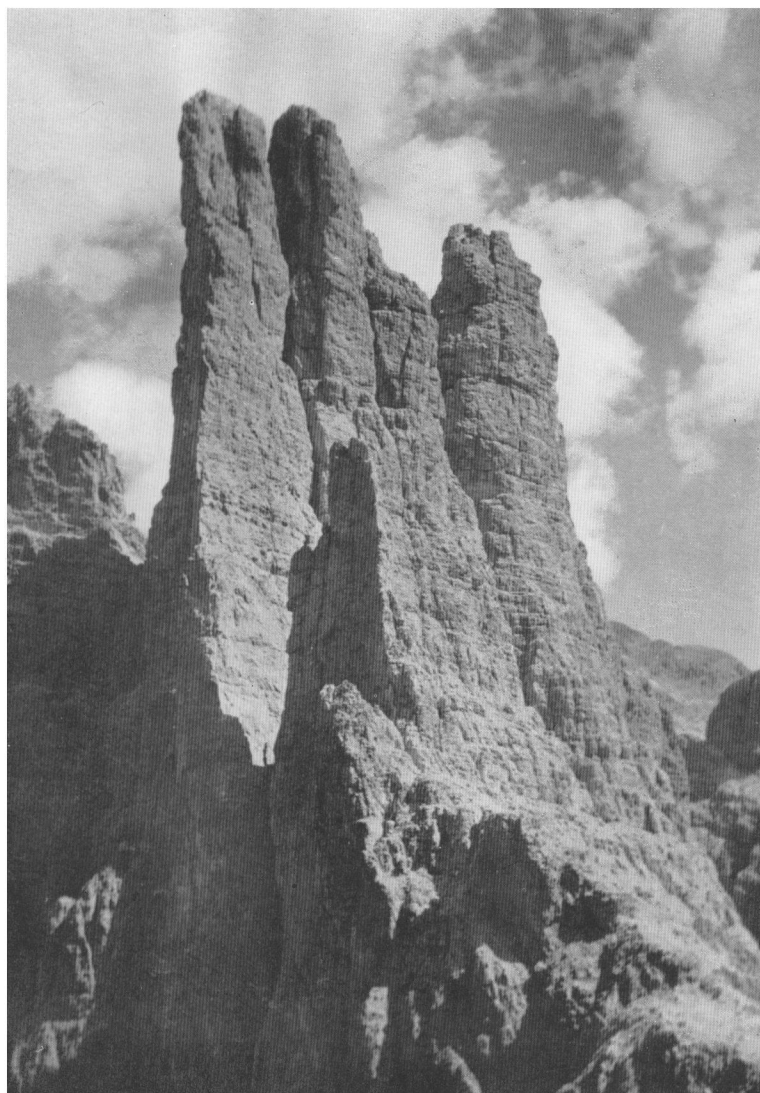
at these that I have ever met. He introduced me to a new abseil, by the way.

The following day we descended to Perra and thence went by car to the Sellajoch. Taugwalder then led the ascent of the Fünffingerspitze by the Schmitt Kamin very efficiently in two hours, and we descended by the easy Daumenscharte route. That afternoon we descended by bus to Canazei and after some shopping there (Taugwalder wore out two pairs of shoes in our holiday) we went up to the Contrin Haus. Leaving there at 5 a.m. with a most excellent local guide, Luigi Micheluzzi, we reached the foot of the Marmolata South Wall in an hour and a half. The ascent of this wall took two hours fifty minutes, and equalled I believe the best previous time for a party of three. We loitered for three-quarters of an hour on top, and then ran down to the Contrin Haus in another three-quarters of an hour, arriving there at 11.15, six and a quarter hours after leaving. As we had so much of the day clear and I was anxious to ascend the Third Sella Tower, we telephoned down for a car to meet us, after a meal and the descent from the Contrin Haus; drove to the Sellajoch, and made a leisurely ascent of the Third Sella Tower. On the top we discussed at length our plans for the next day, Sunday, and at last got Micheluzzi to agree to lead the north-east face of the Langkofel. He was a strong Catholic and was not very willing. That night he and Taugwalder went down to Canazei for early mass the next morning. They were back at the Sellajoch before 8 a.m. and at 8.15 we left for the Langkofel. The ascent of this from the foot took five hours. It was misty most of the way and we descended by the ordinary easy route in violent rain and a thunderstorm. From foot to foot the ascent and descent took seven and a quarter hours, and we re-entered the Sellajoch Hotel nine and a quarter hours after leaving it.

This was my first experience of Dolomite climbing. The Vajolet Towers, the Schmitt Kamin, and the south face of the Marmolata, were all delightful climbs. The north or north-east face of the Langkofel, though very long and at places very difficult, was *not* a delightful climb. The rock was too bad and left one always anxious. It was very well led by Micheluzzi, though I suspect that at one place he got off the correct route and the lead became very difficult and dangerous. Taugwalder said of this part that he

did not know how Micheluzzi had dared to lead it. I learnt afterwards that the King of the Belgians had made the ascent a day or two before, and the guide I had been trying to secure in Bolzano was with him.

This holiday in 1932 developed accidentally into what was almost a purely rock-climbing holiday. It was certainly not planned as such beforehand, but the development was quite natural. It will always be remembered as one of my most lucky holidays, and, incidentally, its very successful issue helped to remove the deep mental depression in which it had been started. Quick times were made on several of the courses. This was not due to hurry or racing, and I am sure such times could be easily beaten if a first-rate young climber wished to beat them and had equally efficient guides. The good times followed naturally without any attempt or appearance of hurry, through efficient leading and an entire absence of hesitation or fumbling.



THE VAJOLET TOWERS

*Rudolf Rolfes*

