

THE SALBITSCHIEN

BY H. ST. V. LONGLEY-COOK

CONTINENTAL rockclimbers from Norway to France and Italy are fairly familiar with the ridges and towers of the Salbitschijen ; either from personal visits or from articles and illustrations in their club journals. But British mountaineers seem, on the whole, unaware of the magnificent rock climbing available on this peak and so far I think no article has appeared on the subject in this country. I must confess that it was only in 1947 that I heard the curious name ' Salbitschijen ' and my friend and companion Hans Trüb of this club tempted me with stories of its delectable rock. I cannot, therefore, claim a long acquaintance with the mountain but with me it has been a case of love at first sight and I have done my best to see as much as possible of its granite ridges during the past three years.

The Salbitschijen is in the Urner Alps and lies three miles to the west of Göschenen on the north side of the Göschenertal. Göschenen is the starting place for all expeditions and there is an excellent and impressive view of the mountain from the station platform, the South ridge being seen in silhouette. Most of the exploration work and easier routes were carried out in the twenties of this century, but the traverse of the South ridge was not completed until 1935¹ and that of the West ridge not until 1948. The Salbitschijen is not a big mountain for Switzerland, being some 9800 ft. high, and as the rocks are very steep it is often possible to climb there during a fine spell early in the season or when the high Oberland or Valasian ridges are snowbound. The rock is granite and in general of excellent quality. Most of the climbing has been done in Kletterschuhe or Vibrams so that there are not many nail marks to follow. The routes are on the whole easy to find as there is not often a choice of ways. Some of the pitches are severe and exposed by British standards and in places pitons disfigure the rock ; although some of these are unnecessary, a few actually are required. For myself I was very glad of any assistance I could lay my hand on. We ourselves put in one piton when we retreated from an awkward position on the East ridge, but we took it out again before leaving. For two climbers 120 ft. of rope was always sufficient but an abseil cord of about 150 ft. is useful as abseils are necessary on nearly all routes.

There are three great ridges to the mountain, all of which provide fine climbing. The East ridge is not so difficult as the others, with the exception of a fantastic rock bastion which may be turned on the south side. This bastion overhangs nearly all the way round but it can be climbed by starting from the ridge on the side nearest the summit of the Salbitschijen and climbing the south-west edge of the pinnacle.

¹ *A.J.* 48. 172.

It is not easy and a certain amount of artificial aid is considered necessary. The South ridge provides a climb of sustained interest and difficulty. There are alternative routes by which the chief difficulties may be avoided, but the ridge taken as a whole is very fine. The West ridge is truly formidable, the whole traverse has only been accomplished once, in June 1948, and took $3\frac{1}{2}$ days. Each of its famous five towers and all the gendarmes were, however, climbed, separately before the complete traverse was made. Certain of the towers give magnificent climbing although artificial aids are often required. Tower I, the lowest, yielded to the first attack; but Tower II, which is the most imposing, resisted many fierce attempts until in 1930 it succumbed to a very strong party. The ascent of this tower alone, compares in difficulty with some of the famous Chamonix rock climbs.

Towers III and IV also present considerable difficulties although they are regularly climbed from the Salbi hut. The climbs up the Towers start from a steep gully which runs down on the north-west side of the ridge. The lower towers are best attempted from the Horfelli or Voralp hut which are in a branch valley forking north-west out of the main Göschenertal. Tower IV has also been climbed from the south-east side by a strenuous and exposed route. New routes are attempted and made each summer by enthusiastic climbers so that I may well be out of date.

The 'Normal' route for the ascent, which no one would willingly use as a way up, is by a long steep stone couloir leading to the north of the East ridge and opening out on to a little glacier. It is the best way to come down and while tedious in a dry summer provides a good glissade when full of snow. An axe is not really necessary either for the glissade or the glacier. From the glacier a short but truly abominable climb over loose rock leads to the top at the junction of the three ridges. The actual summit presents quite a considerable problem as, like Inaccessible Pinnacle in Skye, it is a rock needle overtopping the main mass. It is very slender, about thirty feet high and overhanging. It is climbed by the east side. This edge is foreshortened as you look at it, but a good foothold can be reached about half-way up; from here it is best to layback up the last few feet. The exposure at the top is extreme and one's chief concern is how to get down as you feel rather like a monkey up a pole. A rope passed over the top and held below can, however, safeguard the descent.

In the summer of 1948 after a week of mixed weather but fine climbing in the Bregaglia, I found myself northward bound through the Gottard for Göschenen and the Salbi hut. I had always felt that for pure rock climbing Switzerland did not really compare with Skye, and my stay in the Bregaglia, while it had weakened, had not altered, my opinion. I looked forward with considerable excitement to what the Salbitschijen would produce. Would the Göschenertal rival Glen Brittle?

At Göschenen a vast amount of delectable food was ready to be packed into our rucksacks and whatever else might happen it was clear

that we should not starve. As we staggered out of the station under this load Hans pointed out our objective. The Salbitschijen dominates the village on the west, its granite spires soaring skywards and giving, even after the Bregaglia, an impression of abruptness and inaccessibility. We set off along the broad path to Göschenen Alp, but after about half a mile turned right between chalets and climbed steeply over pastures and then through forests. There are no half measures about this path, it intends to get you up and does so. It is steep even for the Alps, but it is not long and the first part is the worst. Just over half-way up is the chalet of Regliberg and it is as well to enquire whether the cowherd is at the upper chalet, otherwise fresh milk should be purchased here. The path above Regliberg is more open, with charming views over the Göschenertal. Heavily laden, we took about 2 hours to reach the hut, which is nearly 7000 ft. above sea level and 3000 ft. up from Göschenen. The guide book says $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours by a rather longer but less steep path, which turns off higher up the main valley. My friend Herr Kiessling, station-master at Göschenen, does it in just over the hour, but he has plenty of opportunity to keep in training.

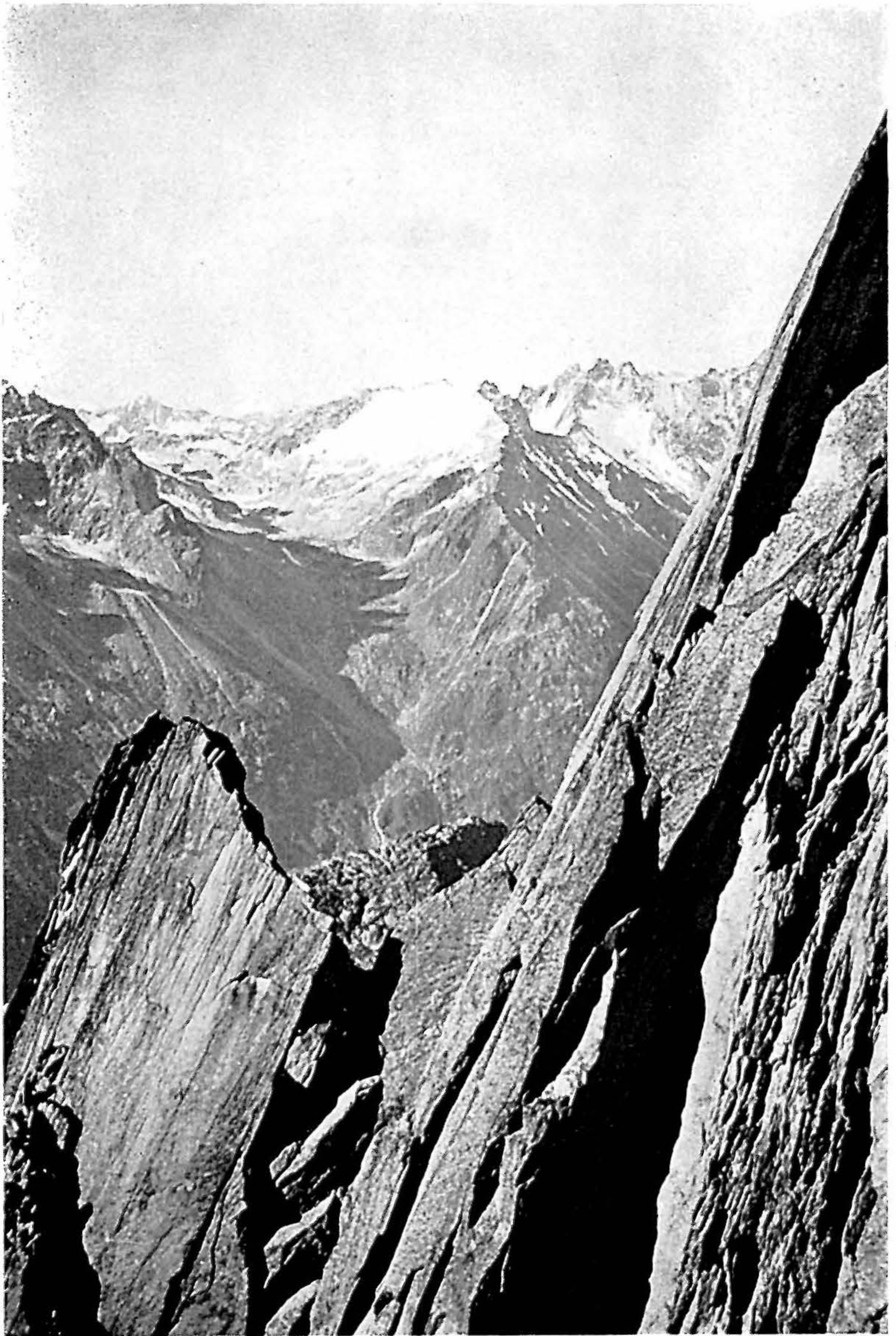
The Salbi hut is delightful. It is small, with a hay loft and, unlike some of the big new huts, you cook for yourself over an old iron stove. All around is open alp and just out of sight round a corner is an upper chalet where usually in the summer a cowherd lives. He is a charming old man who will sell you quantities of milk and cream. He lives all alone with his animals and if you can understand his patois you will find him a true philosopher and friend. The little terrace outside the hut provides a fine belvedere from which to view the Göschenen mountains, and of course, the Salbitschijen. Seen from the hut the mountain bears a resemblance to British hills, particularly if cloud obscures the upper towers. The brown slabs rise almost directly from the boulder-strewn alp, with little intervening scree. The appalling smoothness of these slabs is outstanding, but it is to the South ridge that one's eyes are drawn as it can be seen in all its glory from the hut. The East ridge is very foreshortened from here and the West ridge cannot be seen at all. This is perhaps as well for one's peace of mind.

We were joined at the hut by Herr Kiessling and Emil Zwissig, both of the Aarau section of the S.A.C., to which Hans and I also belong. It was the 1st of August, so we spent a cheerful evening celebrating and paying our respects to the Swiss Confederation by letting off fireworks and explosives on the terrace of the hut. The heavy thud of exploding gelignite pealed and rolled round the hills like thunder, the rockets soared skywards and the flares lit up the hut with a lurid glare. We ate and drank to repletion and then tumbled into our hay loft and fell fast asleep.

We overslept, but not badly, and after breakfasting off bacon and eggs and packing iron rations, set off across the open alp for the south ridge. The weather was warm but looked watery; the summer of 1948 however, taught one to make the best of things and we were duly

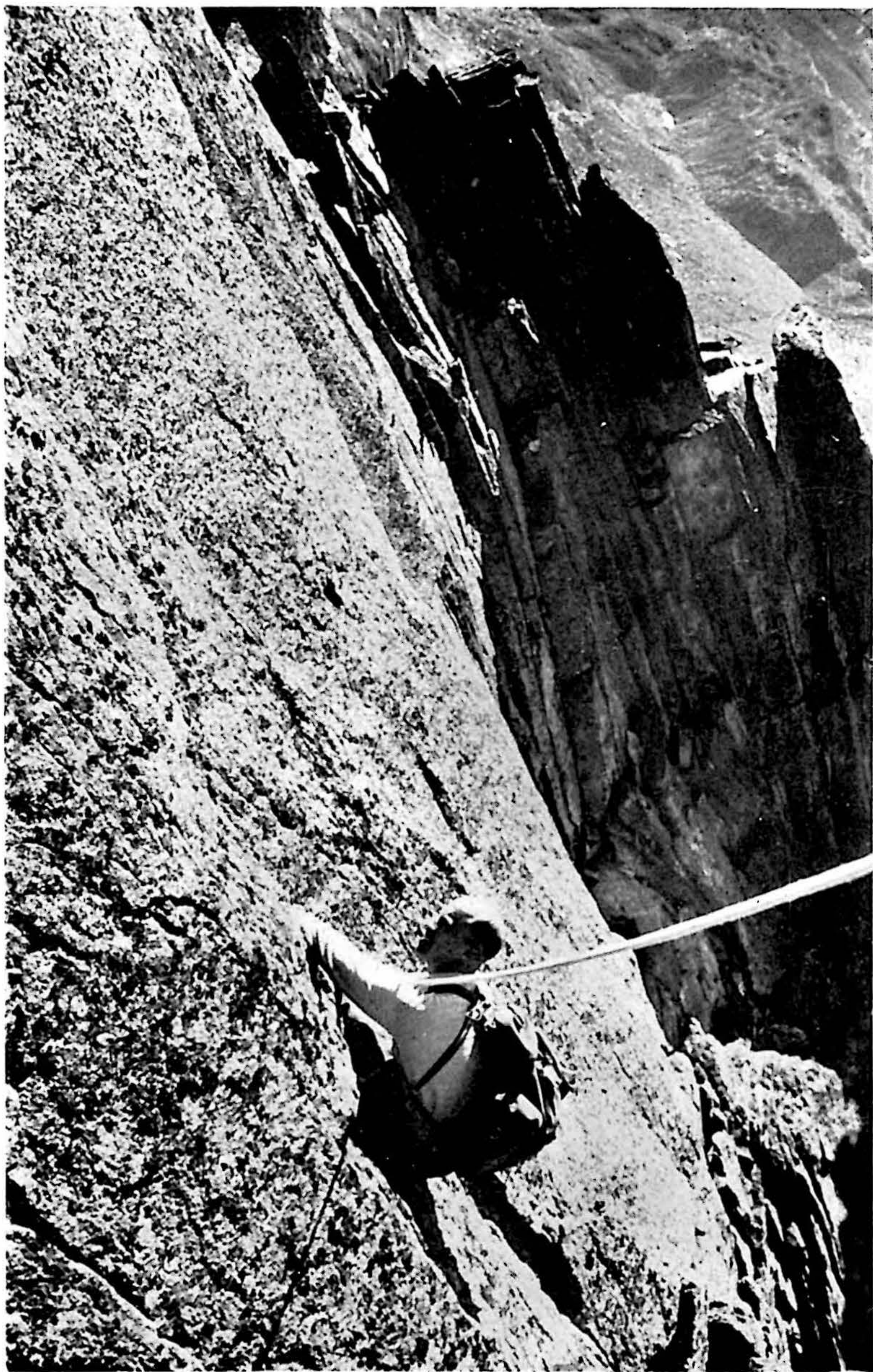
thankful for small mercies. After about an hour's uphill walking across the alp and a short scramble over scree and up steep grass slopes and easy rocks, we reached a saddle which marked the start of our climb. Hans changed into Kletterschuhe and set off up steep slabs with a grace which made the rock look easy. I was soon disillusioned. Burdened with our gear and joint ice axe and in 'Vibrams' for the first time, I mounted unsteadily in awkward rushes on what seemed to me thinnish holds. After a time the climbing became easier, I got the rucksack under control and my Vibrams felt less novel and awkward. Our companions in the Aarau section, who had started in front of us, had now traversed left to turn a formidable bastion blocking the ridge; we, however, bore to the right and changing the lead went up a chimney on the east face of the ridge. This 60 ft. chimney is the crux of the first stage of the climb. The start is not difficult and half-way up an unnecessary piton and then a rock bollard give running belays. The last few feet are awkward as the chimney opens out and there is an absence of good holds to keep one from falling out. Hans called out that there was another piton here, but it was no longer in existence. However, with much cheerful comment from our companions, who had regained the ridge at the top of the chimney, I reached a good stance. Hans, encumbered with our gear, followed up quickly and easily. From the chimney we proceeded without much difficulty to the summit of a flat topped gendarme—the Salbi Tooth—which marks the end of the first stage of the climb. Here we stopped to eat some chocolate. Herr Kiessling, who was climbing in American basket-ball boots, was loud in praise of his footwear which, he said, knocked spots off our Vibrams or Kletterschuhe.

A short abseil brought us to a tiny col which is one of the distinctive features of the South ridge. It is practicable to join the ridge here from the scree below on the east side. The slabs leading up are not easy, but it makes a shorter way of reaching the col from the hut. The finest and most difficult part of the ridge starts above the col. It was this section which remained unclimbed until 1935. Before then, a route was made by traversing below the ridge on its west side, regaining the ridge much higher up. The col acts, therefore, as a sort of cross-roads, and as the weather by now looked definitely unsettled we decided to follow the others along the old route and leave the main part of the ridge for another day. For a time it was more in the nature of a scramble up steep grass couloirs, over slabs and up loose and greasy chimneys that ended in grass. The South ridge almost overhangs this part of the route. Before long the climbing improved, we no longer traversed along below the ridge but engaged the south face of the mountain. Here with each move upward the rocks steepened and became more difficult so that instead of moving as we pleased, we had to pick our way. We were now very close behind the other party and I found myself standing just below Herr Kiessling on a vertical pitch. Owing to the steepness of the rock I was unable to see what was happening but Hans, below and further out, had a good view. Something was holding up



THE SALBITSCHIEN—SOUTH RIDGE—PLATTENTURM.

To face p. 548.



THE SALBITSCHIEN—SOUTH FACE.

our friends and Herr Kiessling was apparently unable to move up or down. A torrent of strong language flowed to and fro and Hans was both highly amused and concerned. At last it became clear to me : one of the wonderful basket-ball boots had jammed and its owner could not let go to bend down and unlace it ! Fortunately I am very tall and I was able to move up and assist, but we did not let Herr Kiessling forget the remarks he had made about our footwear. I haven't seen him since climbing in basket-ball boots. The climbing was now fairly strenuous with one or two awkward pitches, but we laid back up cracks and scrambled up slabs until at last we reached easier ground just below the south ridge. There is a large cave here where one can shelter if necessary. We crossed over, or rather almost passed through, the ridge by a deep cleft and along easy rocks on the east side reached the summit.

The descent northwards from the Salbitschijen is not pleasant. The rock, or rather rubble, is steep and very loose and it is easy to take a nasty toss or kick down stones on one's companions. The route varies with the season as the slope is constantly changing, but it seems best to descend fairly direct to the glacier keeping slightly to the east at first. The glacier has receded leaving an awkward smooth band of rock which drips with water. Once the glacier is reached difficulties should be over. There are usually tracks, but it is important to make a wide detour and descend on the far (north) side so as to avoid stone falls from the Salbitschijen which may sweep right across the lower part of the glacier. In 1948 the glacier was snow covered and the couloir provided a long glissade, so we were back at the hut in about an hour from the summit.

The next day the weather looked definitely unsettled ; it was overcast and inclined to rain when we got up and we decided to leave the main South ridge for another day in the hope of better weather. We accordingly set off to climb the East ridge. Hans decided that we had insufficient ironmongery to tackle the overhanging ' Bastion ' which is such a remarkable feature of this ridge and we planned to turn it on its left (south) side. The climbing was interesting without being unduly difficult and we made good progress along the ridge until the ' Bastion ' blocked further advance. We descended about 100 ft. down the south side of the ridge and continued forward traversing well below the Bastion. Owing to a mistake on my part we attempted to regain the ridge slightly higher than is usual and we soon found ourselves in an exposed and awkward position on boiler plate slabs with the holds all the wrong way. I tried one way but in vain. Hans tried to force himself up over as nasty a slab as one could wish to avoid and had to hammer in a piton (which he recovered) to safeguard his retreat. It was no good, clearly we should have joined the ridge just above the ' Bastion.' A nasty traverse over the slabs and we reached a comfortable chimney full of loose rock but easy enough ; up this we went and soon rejoined the ridge which felt delightfully firm and airy after the slabs. We continued along the ridge, made a cautious descent to the glacier, sped round it and glissaded down the couloir.

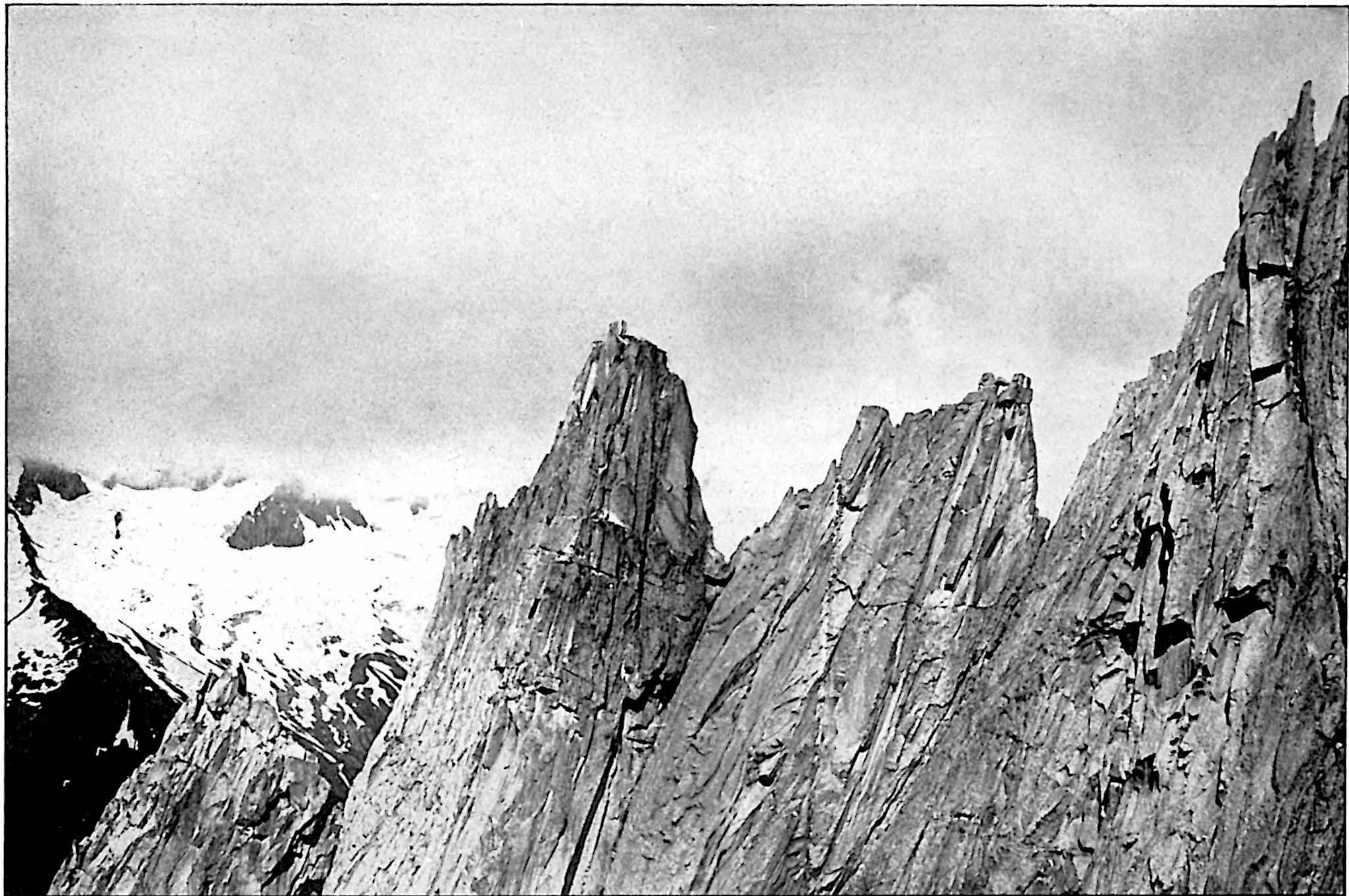
Back at the hut, Hans collected a litre of fresh cream from the herd and whipped it up with sugar and kirsch. After a vast meal of rizotto and fried eggs we consumed the cream with tinned apple purée. That evening, for the first time in my life, I felt slightly mountain sick and Hans also seemed affected by the altitude; however a glass of brandy each put us right.

We woke early to the sound of pouring rain. A brief survey showed visibility practically nil and rain coming down in buckets. We returned to our hay and much later breakfasted at leisure. Still the rain poured down and the barometer in the hut fell. Any slight rift in the cloud showed our mountain draped in snow wherever snow could stick on its steep rocks. We played 'Yass' all day and turned in early only to wake once more to the sound of drenching rain. This was too much and so packing our rucksacks we fled down to Göschenen.

I did not expect to see the Salbitschijen for at least another year, but I did catch a glimpse of the lovely South ridge as my Lugano bound express stopped at Göschenen in the following December. It had been a fine autumn after a bad summer and the ridge looked in first-class condition. I talked of the future with Herr Kiessling and we agreed that the South ridge must be tackled as soon as possible. It was not until the middle of August 1949, however, that I once more tightened my belt and stepped out for the Salbi hut. Hans unfortunately could not be with me, but I had as companions Herr Kiessling and Emil Zwissig. In Hans's absence I could not have wished for nicer colleagues. It was really climbing 'de luxe' as Hans had arranged for a stalwart youngster of some 14 years to carry my rucksack up to the hut. This we felt was in the best traditions of the club (also it was my first climb without my appendix!). The commissariat arrangements, too, bore a close resemblance to the 'Golden Age.'

The next day was perfect for rock climbing, a few light clouds took away some of the great heat from the sun and it was obviously going to be very fine. We walked leisurely across the alp to the base of the slabs below the little 'cross-roads' col. Here we roped up. I found the slabs deceptive and not as easy as they looked; this was probably due to my lack of training. However, without much effort we reached the col and the ridge in all its glory rose before us. It certainly looked good. Great slices of warm hard granite sprang upwards in a series of near-vertical steps and it was clear that while the work would be strenuous and exposed, it would be on excellent rock with no difficulty in finding the route, for there was only one way.

The difficulties commenced at once. The first slab, which is typical of the climbing provided by the whole ridge, is split by vertical fissures where one leaf of rock overlays another. It is not often possible to jam in these fissures, but by bracing with the feet against the rock and pulling outwards with the arms strenuous but steady progress can be made. When nearly at the top of this slab we traversed to the right round an overhanging bulge into an open corner which, although short, is very strenuous. There is no good resting place before this corner



SALBITSCHIEN : SOUTH WEST RIDGE.

nor can one see it before entering it; perhaps for these reasons I found it more difficult than the slab further up which is generally considered to be the key position. The exposure is considerable, but sundry pitons enable the leader to safeguard himself. Above this difficult pitch a good stance enables one to get one's breath. Another steep face up and we descended to a narrow cleft from which it is possible to escape from the ridge by an abseil on the west side. In front of us another steep rock face blocked our way, but it was not so difficult as the first one and, after climbing it, we were able to continue up the ridge for a short time without any violent variations until a short descent brought us to the base of a great slab of grey granite rising nearly vertically above us. This slab, which narrows gradually to a point at the top, is some 60 ft. high and is split into sections by three thin horizontal cracks which go right across the face. These cracks give good handholds and, in places, provide tiny ledges for footholds. A short climber may need a shoulder to reach the first ledge, but the move is without exposure. From here small vertical fissures provide good undercut holds and the next ledge can be reached without much difficulty. The only place on which one can stand on this ledge is a few feet from the left side of the slab. A flake of rock now provides another vertical fissure and more undercut holds which continue upwards and leftwards until they run out on the edge of the slab. A strenuous lay-back enables one to get up this fissure but at the top holds are few indeed. The position is now one of great exposure and a difficult move up the edge (pitons and rope slings) must be made to reach a little stance behind the face and not visible from below. This stance is surprisingly good and startlingly airy as the rock cuts away below it. Without it the climb would be much more difficult and I confess that I stood panting on it gathering my strength. The next move is across the face with the hands in the top horizontal crack and a foot in a rope sling (being very tall I didn't need to use it) until reaching up you can get your hands into a vertical crack. Pulling up with the hands to gain height enables one to get one's feet into the crack on good holds. From the top of this crack handholds can be reached on the summit of the slab. The rock is superb but the last half of this pitch is strenuous and it would be very difficult for a leader to get back if he felt his strength going. Long reach is, I think, an advantage here, and I did not find the slab so hard as the corner below, but most climbers will not agree with me.

From the top of the great slab we continued along the ridge without meeting any special difficulty, until a level luncheon shelf invited us to feed with the pleasant feeling that although we had still some way to go the main difficulties were below us. After lunch we climbed on up to the base of a slender needle which is a prominent feature of the ridge as seen from the hut. Ascending about half or perhaps two-thirds of the way up this, an awkward step enabled us to turn the left (west) side on to the adjoining great Plattenturm, a vast rock bastion which bars the ridge. More undercut holds and more heaving, with an awkwardly

exposed move higher up, brought us to the top of this tower, and it was clear that the ridge was won. The next tower which was below us was clearly not worth climbing as it would only be a walk and an abseil, so we roped down an overhang and, turning this little tower on its west side, joined our route of the previous summer coming up from the slabs below us. I was very tired now and found the long climb up the South face more difficult than memory had allowed for. But holding on and laying-back had become a habit and we went up steadily to the summit.

The climb down to the glacier was even more a moving heap of stones than in 1948. Even as we watched a large stonefall from the East ridge swept down right across the lower portion of the glacier and over part of the scree the other side. The descent took us much longer than before as the couloir was a dreary stone gully with streams of water roaring down it. I was glad to get down on to the alp and walk along a path again. Out to meet us came the hut guardian's small son and with one last spurt of energy I lifted him on to my shoulder and carried him back to the hut. I wished heartily that he hadn't come so far to meet us.

Herr Kiessling's railway called him and I had to be in Göschenen Alp for the night to start a fresh climb from there the next day. Emil and I ran down to the Göschenertal and turned our weary feet uphill towards the Alp. It was now evening and we stopped for refreshment opposite the mouth of the Voralptal. Far above us the great lower towers of the West ridge, still bathed in sunlight, stood out serene and seemingly inaccessible. No doubt the time will come when the traverse of the West ridge is an 'easy day' and beginners will romp up the slabs of the South arête. Yet I shall still remember the thrill I have had from them and the pleasure of companionship with friends who have shared climbs which, though small indeed in the annals of this club, are writ large in our memory and, which perhaps is more important, have been good fun.

A HYDROGRAPHIC APPROACH TO THE ALPS. Reference ALPINE JOURNAL, Vol. 57, No. 280. The next instalment of this article will appear in the ALPINE JOURNAL, May 1951.
