

CROZZON DI BRENTA

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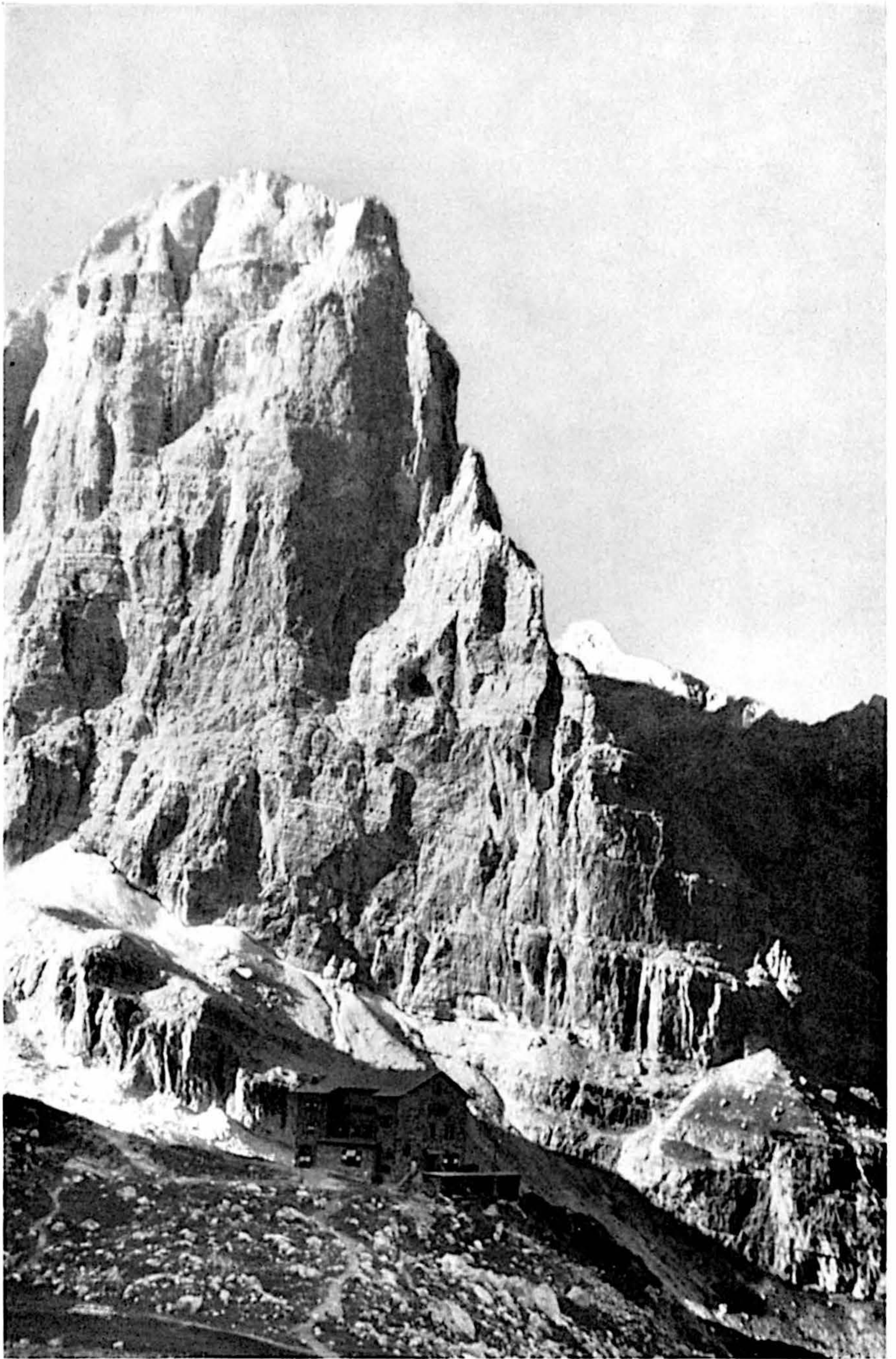
MY 1961 holiday came late and was uncertain. Even when it came, I only had a week. It was September. Charles Warren and David Brown were in Austria but I was still undecided. Charles sent me a postcard from there, a picture of a fearsome needle prodding the sky. I admired it in a non-personal sort of way and turned it over. Charles had written out a contacting address and then, more or less as an after-thought, he wrote, 'This is the Campanile Basso. I think we should climb it.' Naturally I was terrified, but I couldn't admit this to Charles, not in so many words; and I had to approach the problem more obliquely.

We spent the first few days in the Adamello range. The weather was perfect and we climbed the Adamello and Presanella, two easy but beautiful mountains, traversing the Presanella all the way from the Mandrone hut to Pinzolo. Next day, while David was retrieving his car from the head of the valley, Charles and I set off for the Brenta.

In the meanwhile I had been dealing rather unsuccessfully with my problem; I mean the Campanile Basso. I had developed all sorts of enthusiasms for all sorts of other climbs, but all to no purpose: Charles was politely disinterested. And then one day someone mentioned the Crozzon and he was enthusiastic. The Campanile Basso, he said, was only a stunt climb. What we wanted was a real mountaineering route like the Crozzon di Brenta.

I began to have misgivings. I am never quite happy about the term 'good mountaineering route'. To me it is a term used patronisingly by the gymnasts when referring to a long and difficult climb up an otherwise unclimbable face. They are patronising because they hate to admit that they have followed the easiest route, no matter how difficult it may be. Then Charles suggested that we should employ a guide—'not because of the difficulty, mind you, but because you can lose so much time route-finding on these long Dolomite climbs'. This didn't please me overmuch either. I had reckoned that if Charles could lead, I could follow, but there was no certainty that I could follow a guide.

We met him in a café in Madonna di Campoglio. His name was appropriately enough Guido Alimonti. We looked him up and down and were impressed. He looked us up and down and was perhaps less impressed. After a few leading questions, he suggested that the Crozzon di Brenta might be too difficult. 'What about the Campanile



Photo, I. Ogilvie]

THE CROZZON DI BRENTA AND THE BRENTEI HUT. THE CLIMB FOLLOWS THE SKYLINE.

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Basso? If all went well, we might do the Crozzon next day.' I realised that I had escaped only from the frying-pan.

The new path into the Val Brenta starts in the Vallesinella to the north and doesn't follow the bed of the valley as the old one used to do. We climbed the zig-zags steeply, first through mixed forest, then among the tall firs, over the red earth and past the green pastures. The summer rabble had gone, and we had the autumn to ourselves. At 1,000 ft. up, we passed a restaurant. The rabble had left some beer. A little higher up we came to the ridge. As we crossed it, there it was, high above the trees: the Crozzon di Brenta, 4,000 ft. of sheer rock, red in the evening light, magnificent and frightening. The path continued, now in the Val Brenta, winding round the ridges and into the gullies, clinging to the steep valley side, as the red glow faded from the rocks.

When planning a holiday far in advance, I find it is all so easy. I can accomplish vast numbers of very difficult climbs with great courage and very little difficulty. But as the time approaches the hazards loom greater, the mountains grow out of all proportion and even the weather seems to deteriorate. There comes a time, however, when things have to be sorted out into their true perspective and the mountain properly sized up, for if we are to climb it aright we must approach it aright and think it aright. As we drew near to the hut, this is what I was trying to do.

The standard is Grade IV, never more and not often much less, at least not for very long. The height, about 3,500 ft. The problem, then, was one of staying power, not of gymnastics, and could be compared with doing, say, the Crevassed Rib on Tryfan about six or seven times in one day with a great deal of exposure added. Comparing notes afterwards we both agreed that while we would have enjoyed leading any part of it, neither of us would have liked to lead it all.

Dawn on the mountain would be better if it didn't happen so early. There is no glamour in it, and in one's inevitable state of mind it is difficult to find beauty. That must wait until sunrise. This one was typical. Awful stumblings in the dark, sliding scree, the cold echo of disgruntled voices. We crossed the valley down and up. We struggled upwards. How vile can mountains be? At the foot of the climb it was light enough to see, and we uncoiled the ropes.

'You'd better go next the guide', said Charles, 'as you're the better climber.' Not being the better climber, I was suitably flattered and fell for it. It meant that I had to pull up about 4,000 ft. of Charles' rope and at the same time, for he seldom waited, pay out and look after about 4,000 ft. of the guide's rope. I was expected to look after it, as he reminded me once or twice when the double task was proving too onerous.

The first pitch went steeply up on clean rock, then there was a long

upward traverse along a narrow, rising ledge behind some flakes. We had reached a steep, open corner. The rope ran out for 100 ft. and I followed; steep at first, then vertical, up a long crack all on layback holds. This proved my undoing. I suppose I must still have been half asleep. At any rate there was a running belay on a piton, and I climbed past it without taking out the rope. I was 4 ft. above it when the rope came tight and our guide, feeling the jerk, took the strain. I nearly came off, but not quite. I was still on the layback but could get no further. I shouted out in my best Italian, 'Hoy, there! Ne tirate pas la corda si bloody tight!' He misunderstood me and, convinced that I was in real trouble (which I was), he (as he thought) took all my weight. For a few minutes I was much preoccupied. I was determined not to fall off as I climbed slowly down the layback to the piton, assisted by the rope. When I reached the piton I was pulled hard onto it, and hanging onto the layback with one hand I tried to get the rope out of the snaplink. I struggled. I snapped the snaplink on my fingers. I struggled on. At last it came free, and then there was the layback to do again; 20 ft. of it. Now I was glad of the rope. When I reached the top I was out of breath, my heart was pounding and I had a splitting headache. I was speechless and Guido, as far as I know, is still convinced that he saved my life.

It was fully an hour before I had recovered, by which time we had climbed quite a lot further. Having suffered the dawn, I had missed the sunrise. I hadn't even noticed it. But now I noticed that it was broad daylight and that life was becoming tolerable again. Steep pitch followed steep pitch with easier bits between. As we got higher, the easier bits became shorter and less easy, and then they stopped. So did we. We had climbed, I suppose, about 1,000 ft. and were at the foot of a huge, flat vertical face with nothing on it; nothing to hold onto at all. Our guide satisfied himself that he was well belayed and then stepped round the corner, round to the left, round onto the face above the Val Brenta.

This was our first real taste of exposure, just a foretaste of what was still to come. We were on a narrow ledge above the huge slab side of the Crozzon, dropping 1,000 ft. below us into the valley. Above us it was just a little less steep. Twice the rope ran out as we climbed by formidable-looking cracks with surprising ease, as the rock was beautiful. Now we were back on the ridge again above the step. It continued, bending slightly to the right and getting steeper and narrower. The next great step was now in sight, but still a long way above us. This huge face, two or three times as high as the last, stood right across the ridge, overhanging where they met, vertical above. The only weakness was a great chimney which rent it from top to bottom and in fact missed the ridge continuing down the face at the foot, on the left.

As the ridge steepened further we traversed right, then, turning left, we climbed steeply back, reaching the crest just where it meets the face. Before I followed I could hear the ominous sound of a piton hammer. Guido was making sure of his belays.

When I reached him, my belay was carefully inspected. He went up a few feet and secured a runner on the edge of the chimney, with a long stride got his left boot onto the far side and then, bridging the chimney, climbed slowly up and in. When my turn came I was impressed. The face was slightly overhanging here, so that I could look down a long way between my feet before I could see the first bouncing point. Guido was on a pile of jammed blocks 40 ft. back into the chimney, and Charles and I both joined him before the next move.

He climbed now on the left wall; up and out over narrow ledges onto a large jammed block, out again on the edge of the chimney. Then, bridging again, he went straight up, silhouetted against the bright sky, up and up until the rope was nearly out. Here he got onto the right wall, and on small holds climbed back above us and up out of sight onto the next pile of jammed blocks. I followed and, as before, it was easier than it looked. When it was time to return to the back of the chimney I had a slight advantage over the other two. Not having been 'sawn off' quite so short. I was able to continue bridging, so that the smallness of the holds was of less consequence.

There was still a lot more of the chimney, but it was easier and less exposed. And then there was the last great step, a steep, open buttress, always difficult, never too difficult, open climbing, beautiful rock, pure joy.

We were up! There across Val Brenta was the Campanile Basso, a needle, far below among the higher cliffs. 'A stunt climb. But we'd better climb it some day for all that—by the easiest route.' And then, far off over the Val Rendena, the gleaming glaciers of the Presanella. There is a small hut on top of the Crozzon for those who arrive too late to get down, and there must be a few who are glad to use it.

We got out our water-bottles and offered our guide a drink. He refused it, I thought rather disdainfully, and as we drank he rummaged in his sack and produced a can of beer. 'The miserable old so-and-so', I thought, 'no wonder he wouldn't drink our water.' He opened the can with a piton and handed it over to us. It was a lesson in charity.

The easiest way off the Crozzon is to traverse the ridge onwards and over the Cima Tosa, the highest peak in the range. The rock, in contrast to that of our ascent, was loose and shaley. We crossed a series of towers and pinnacles, remarkably steep for such loose rock and yet never really difficult. Whenever we reached an apparently impossible face there would be a ledge along which we could walk; and vertical descents would have an easy set of steps descending just round the

corner. But it was an hour and a half before we were on the snows of the Cima Tosa.

In true guide fashion we were more or less hustled over the top; so we didn't really appreciate the view as we would have liked to do. The descent, except for one chimney pitch, was on easy ground and we went unroped.

The Perdotti hut, like the Brentei, was officially closed, but the guardian was still there supervising repairs and said we could stay. We drank some wine, said good-bye to our excellent guide, ordered some more wine and were preparing to settle down, when we changed our plans. There were two reasons for this. Firstly the workmen were making an awful row. Then, and this may or may not have been unconnected with the first reason, we suspected that we were staggering on the brink of a wine shortage. So we picked up our sacks and set off once more, back over the Bocca di Brenta and down to the Brentei hut. There we fed and made merry and met the rest of the party. And next day we had an off day and went walking, and enjoyed it so much that on the day after that we went walking again.

Charles and I took the old track down the Val Brenta, now almost disused, down in the bed of the valley, over the high pastures, down through the Passo dell' Orso and into the forest. As we looked back, streamers of mist were winding round the peaks. Autumn was over, and soon they would be clothed in winter.