

THE S.E. ARÊTE OF THE CIMA DEI PRETI¹

By MARKO DEBELAKOVA

NEXT to the Julian Alps in my affection, but a very good second, are the mountains of the Carnia, which are part of the Cadore Dolomites. The Julian Alps lie to the E., the Carnic Alps to the N., the main range of the Dolomites roughly to N.W. and the Italian plain to the S. One name of this range is probably familiar to every cragsman, the Campanile di Val Montanaia. It rivals the better-known Campanile basso (Guglia di Brenta) in sheerness and is still rated a climb of first-class difficulty.² I made the ascent of it in 1930, with Deržaj, but I must say that I found no outstanding difficulties on the Campanile, only very fascinating and exposed rock-climbing. On the summit, which is certainly not roomy, some wag had affixed two notices, taken from a railway carriage: 'Do not spit on the floor,' and 'It is dangerous to lean out.'

I have enjoyed many fine rock-climbs with Edo Deržaj in the Carnia, including five first ascents. This summer (1934) we realized a very old wish in the first ascent of the S.E. arête of the Cima dei Preti. (2708 m. = 8868 ft.), the highest summit of the said Cadore Alps. The inhabitants of the Carnia are Furlanesi (Friulians), kindly, honest mountain folk who have a hard struggle of it for their daily bread, and are passionately attached to their mountain home. The men go abroad, work as navvies or woodmen; all the house and field work is done by women. If you require a porter in those parts, you engage a Furlanese woman, and she will carry some 65 lbs. all day long and over the roughest ground for 20 lire, or about 7 shillings.

We travelled from Ljubljana *via* Venice and alighted at Longarone.³ An excellent motor road leads through the gorge of the Torrente Vajoni to Claut. Those pioneering days, when Saar and Glanwell travelled with mules to Cimolais, are unfortunately over. Now there is a scheme on hand for carrying a motor road right across the Carnia, which would open up these remote mountains even to the ordinary Rambler.

In fine summer weather our post 'bus clattered up the sharp hairpin bends, rumbled through a tunnel and stopped at the village of Claut clinging like a wasps' nest to the steep mountain side. Then the road twists down to Cimolais so sharply that you cannot help thinking of

¹ The party consisted of Mme. Debelakova, MM. E. Deržaj, Ž. Šumer and S. Černivec. The date of the ascent was June 28-30, 1934.

² The Guglia di Brenta is, from base to summit, at least double the height of the Campanile di Val Montanaia besides being by far the most impressive of the two.—*Editor*.

³ On the Belluno-Cortina-Toblach light railway, some 18 miles S. of Pieve di Cadore.—*Editor*.

your brakes. With a screech of warning the machine tears into the narrow streets of Cimolais and pulls up with a rude jerk at the door of the ancient Albergo 'Rosa.' All inns in the Carnia are called 'Rosa.' I do not know why, but I have never seen any other name.

Cimolais is the southern point of departure for the Cadore Dolomites, Claut and the Duranno group. Next morning we started off for the mountains, heavily laden, and under an unpleasantly broiling sun. We rested at the Bergheron pastures, admired the beautiful mountain world about us and that night camped under the crags of Monte Duranno, 2668 m. The next day was spent on a training climb on M. Duranno, E. face, but we were forced to curtail it by a storm of



Photo, M. Debelakova.]

CIMA DEI PRETI, S.E. ARÊTE FROM CIMOLAIS.

hail and rain coupled with mist. Towards sundown we were back in our camp where everything was afloat. After a night of cold and damp we were glad of the first warm sunbeams at 4 A.M. Soon we were basking in the sun and discussing the approaches to our climb on the morrow.

From behind the Cima dei Frati, our Cima dei Preti peeped attractively. We were indeed in pious company: 'Friars' Peak,' 'Priests' Peak.' I took my camera and three plates with intent to photograph the arête of Cima dei Preti, nearly 3 kilometres in length. And then, in my eagerness, I exposed the same plate twice over. There was nothing to be done later on but to copy the outline of the arête from the spoilt photograph and make the accompanying diagram. Heavily burdened, we descended into the Compol Valley and to the foot of the Preti arête. There is no path and we had to worry through dwarf pine (*Pinus Mughus*) till we struck the torrent at the point where the Floriani

glen, descending from Cima dei Preti, leads into the Compol Valley. Here we selected a good camp site. It was a calm, starlight night. The long Preti arête is the finest in the Carnia, with about 1700 m. of difference in altitude. Its length had made climbers fight shy of it so far, and perhaps its remoteness as well.

We were up at 4 A.M., cached our superfluous baggage and started for the ridge, ascending by easy, grass-grown terraces. Large yellow lilies⁴ shone in the grass; their scent was overpowering and it was like walking through a hothouse. Traversing by a wide grassy terrace we reached a deep gully, almost a ravine, where we struck a hunter's track saving us much time in gaining the foot of the shoulder. Out of the cool shadow we stepped into the burning sunshine and roped, in two parties—as usual.

Before us towered the arête, an unpleasant pile of brittle rock set about with dwarf pine, providing difficult and insecure climbing. We clung on shifting footholds to a steep rock face, and for every sound one, four treacherous holds were encountered, the next patch of dwarf pine scrub being the sole anchorage and stance available. We stewed in the broiling sun with our coats on, for we dared not climb in shirts for fear of stonefall. Later we were forced out on to the left flank, where the climbing was more exposed, but the rock comparatively sound.

Soon we were once more at right angles to the arête and after a rope-length Deržaj had to tackle a specially exposed stretch of friable rock. Secured to a piton, I was minding the rope and so could not take cover. Suddenly with a crash a stone like a sizable brick hit me on the head. The sun grew dark and my footing felt feeble. When I recovered I was aware of the horrified faces of my companions, a bleeding ear and a feeling of compression inside my head. Luckily, the blow had caught me on the top of my skull which is well protected by hair. But I felt quite dazed and remember very little about the next step or two. When it came to my turn to lead, I used but half a rope-length and having come to a patch of shade in a small notch, I crawled into it and cuddled my burning head against the cool rock. Nor were the others sorry of the chance of a little rest in the shade. We doled out a sip of water apiece and thirsted for a quart. The heat was unbearable—a bad omen of a break in the weather. We pushed on smartly for three rope-lengths and then relapsed into a crawl. With delight we hailed a stretch of turf with trees on the right flank. We were there in no time, discarded all unnecessary clothing and gasped like fish on dry land. It was close on noon, and the second shoulder still a long way off. Reluctantly we resumed our jackets and braved the sun again. We scrambled on to the arête and crossed back to the left flank, all overgrown with dwarf pine, despite its incredible steepness in places.

⁴ My friends brought a specimen flower of this lily and a few leaves back to Ljubljana. The wonderful colour had kept perfectly and the shape was clearly recognizable. But at Kew Gardens they were not able to identify it, any more than at the Botanical Institute of Ljubljana University. Dr. Julius Kugy, who knows much about the flora of the Eastern Alps, had not even heard of it.—F. S. C.

Rope-length by rope-length we worried through the scrub, till we reached the lowest point of the second shoulder.

It was 3 P.M. We crossed to the right flank where we found a dripping overhang before the chimney giving access to the shoulder. We eased ourselves of our packs and ropes and rested a little in its shade. I fell asleep at once; my ear was still bleeding freely. The others spread the tent bag to catch the water dripping from the overhang. In half an hour we secured nearly a pint, which we shared between us. Refreshed and rested, we ascended the narrow, dripping chimney whence egress was very difficult; this was followed by shelving shale under an overhang, then another dwarf pine worry, after which we reached the shoulder at 5 P.M.

The ridge now loomed vertically above us. This was the prospect that had worried us during our preliminary observations. We climbed up three rope-lengths at a snail's pace, but the rock continued absolutely exposed. Černivec was off colour because of the heat, so we decided to let ourselves down again to the foot of the shoulder and spend the night there. This meant the sacrifice of 3 hours' stiff climbing, but we had lost much time anyhow in that pitiless heat.

We found a cosy level patch between dwarf pines and discussed the next day's prospects. They might be summed up in one word—water. We had but one flask full and two empty. At 9 P.M., Deržaj and Šumer taking ropes and flasks climbed down all the way back to the wet chimney. They returned about midnight, greatly depressed, having secured barely a quart of water. Thirsty, we lay down to sleep, my throbbing head was as good as a sedative. Out of confused dreams I was roused by Černivec shouting that a thunderstorm was coming. Clear as day, the arête showed up in the glare of the lightning. In hot haste we snatched up our belongings and stumbled to the overhang. Half asleep, we squatted on the shelving ground, hardly aware of what had happened. Presently we found ourselves slipping valleywards, and as this was highly undesirable, we crawled back to our bivouac as soon as the flashes of lightning had grown less frequent. It then began to drizzle. We set out all our pans and crept back into our bag. Once I felt the rain trickling down my sleeve, but I could not be bothered to wake up.

We slept soundly till 7 A.M. The sky was partially overcast, the dwarf pines hung with crystal drops, morning mists drifted along the mountain flanks and there was a sup of water in each of our dishes. In haste we got under way and soon scrambled up the first rope's length, as the pitons had all been left in the rock overnight; two or three of them are still there. This rock face is both very difficult and exposed. Progress was almost direct save for a small deviation to the right by which we reached a ledge leading to the right and ending at an edge. Then up along this edge, very difficult climbing throughout, and so to the upper, pine-fringed edge of the lower vertical step of the arête. Here our two ropes reassembled. We rested and drank a little, but the sun shone only fitfully and we did not suffer as we had

done the day before. Well pleased, we pushed on and traversed a rope-length over easy, almost level ground and so to the foot of the next rise. First a series of chimneys, more like a gully or ravine. Then a wide shelf, gently rising, and then the next rock step. We were now faced by the hardest part of the whole ascent. First an extremely difficult crack in an overhanging edge, whereby one gained about 10 metres, or a bit over, and found oneself on a little knob, confronted by 4 metres of smooth rock face.

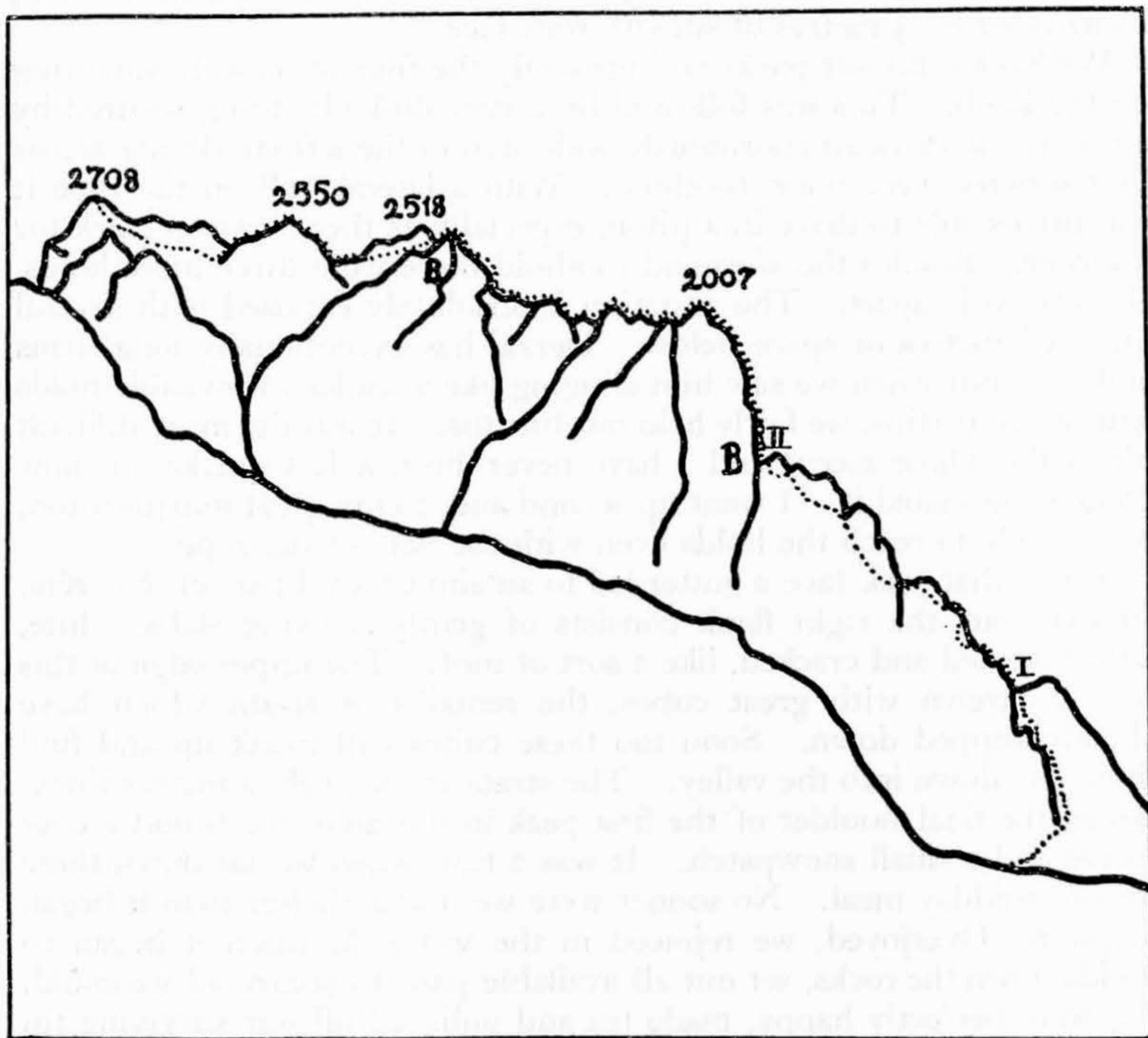
We hauled up our packs and presently the four of us were squatting on the knob. This was followed by a very difficult step; secured by a piton, one takes an enormously wide step to the left straddling across to a solitary, very poor, foothold. With a lateral pull on the rope it was impossible to drive in a piton, especially as there was no crack for it either. Besides the aforesaid foothold there were three more holds, all very wide apart. The situation is absolutely exposed with several hundred metres of space below. Deržaj has exceptionally long arms and legs, but when we saw him clinging like a spider to invisible holds with his fingertips, we fairly held our breaths. It was the most difficult bit of the whole ascent and I have never been able to make out how Deržaj negotiated it. I went up second and, to my great mortification, was unable to reach the holds even with the help of the rope.

Above that rock face a gutter led to an almost level part of the arête. In that part the right flank consists of gently-shelving slabs, white, faintly veined and cracked, like a sort of roof. The upper edge of this roof is strewn with great cubes, the remains of strata which have already slipped down. Soon too these cubes will break up and find their way down into the valley. The strata are scarcely 2 metres thick. Below the final boulder of the first peak in the arête we found a cosy recess and a small snowpatch. It was 2 P.M. when we sat down there for our midday meal. No sooner were we under shelter than it began to pour. Overjoyed, we rejoiced in the wet and, when it began to trickle down the rocks, set out all available pans to secure all we could. We were perfectly happy, made tea and polished off our surviving tin of preserved meat, since we had now enough drink to wash it down with.

As the rain refused to stop, we started in spite of it and, after an hour's easy climb, had attained the point marked 2007 m. in the diagram. There we were received by thunder and lightning, so that we promptly abandoned our ironmongery, scurried down the easy N.E. slope and took refuge under the first convenient rock. When the storm was over Deržaj and Šumer hastened back to the peak, built a small cairn beside the surveyor's big one and retrieved our tackle.

This point had been reached from the N.E. and the ascent from the Cimoliane valley is gradual and easy. In good spirits we scaled the next tooth of the arête, followed by a beautiful stretch of typical ridge-climbing, airy pinnacles and deep notches, but without technical difficulty. The arête now inclined from a northerly to a north-westerly direction up to point 2550 m. In the deepest notch we found a small cairn, obviously the memento of a crossing, probably from the Compol

to the Cimoliane valley. The remainder of the great arête is very easy. The left flank consists of smooth slabs, like the peak's E. face. We kept to the right slope till we came to a precipitous rise. A flank traverse across a steep, slabby wall would have entailed much loss of time, so we kept to the actual crest up to the minor top, 2518 m. The weather was cold and misty. Our descent over slabs to the next notch



Drawn by M. Debelakova.]

CIMA DEI PRETI (S.E. ARÊTE), VIEW FROM MONTE DURANNO.

B, bivouac ; I, first shoulder ; II, second shoulder.

was easy but endangered by stonefall ; below the notch lay a snow-patch, and, on the far side, a cave marked in the diagram.

It was 7 P.M. when we reached the cave. The floor consisted of steeply shelving sand. We built an embankment of stones and then slithered down, sand and all, till we had got the floor level. We were now sheltered from the rain, but the altitude was 2500 m. ; the night was cold and all our things were wet. After a most uncomfortable night we turned out at 5 A.M. As we should now have snow up to the notch, we put on nailed boots and started off on our third day of the climb. By 6 A.M. we had plodded up to the notch. Then, keeping to the snow, we traversed the flank of a 50-metre hump to the next

notch. A monstrous, peaked mountain seemed to rear itself up before us in the mist, point 2550 m., but the ascent proved easy. A lonely cairn remained to tell of our passing, and we descended to the N. This was the peak ascended by Holzmann⁵ in 1874, on his way down from Cima dei Preti. We came to a notch, and by the width of it knew, even in the fog, that we had reached the Colle Compol and were thus from now onwards on known terrain. Up we went over easy snow, just a slow ascent through impenetrable fog. At 8 P.M. we found ourselves beside a large cairn. The slips of paper in the summit bottle bore the legend 'Cima dei Preti.' We knew where we were, and with any luck the arête could certainly have been done with one bivouac.

We descended over easy rock and snow. In pouring rain and blinding mist we reached the head of the Floriani valley. Eight hours is the time allowed for the ascent through that valley, and we took scarcely less over the descent. A hunter's track is supposed to lead through this wilderness. Hopefully, we followed every sheep track, never realizing our mistake till the horrid thing lost itself in impenetrable pine scrub. We were so wet that no further drenching mattered. At last we did strike that hunter's track and reached our stream, where we manfully paddled down, boots and all, knee-deep in water. We retrieved our property from its cache, shouldered our packs and strode off at the double down the Cimoliane valley for Cimolais.

⁵ The ascent was certainly made by Captain W. E. Utterson Kelso with Santo Siorpaes on July 21, 1874 (*A.J.* 7. 157-8, where no mention of Sir Maurice Holzmann occurs).—*Editor*.