One Man's Fourthousanders

PETER FLEMING

(*Plates* 41–47)

No one in my family had ever shown more than scant interest in hills and mountains, and none could see any sense in climbing them. During my schooldays, as I never took an interest in sport and hated football and cricket, I was written off on school reports as an unmotivated weakling when it came to competitive games. But a new world opened up for me suddenly and dramatically when, at the age of 14, I discovered the Lakeland hills almost on my doorstep, and so it all began.

Twelve months after I had left school the headmaster proudly announced at morning assembly that an Old Boy had made headlines in the local paper, upholding the school's high standards of initiative and achievement, and setting a fine example which he hoped everyone would remember and strive to maintain. This Old Boy had entered the first mountain trial in the Lake District as the youngest competitor and had come third over the finishing line, ahead of seasoned marathon and mountain runners. At last I had found a challenge, and it seemed that I had a natural affinity towards mountains.

Four years later, in 1956 – after an intensive apprenticeship, summer and winter, on Lakeland and Scottish hills – I made my first venture to the Alps. Four of us from our local rambling club – Doug, Colin, Bill and I – drove out in a Ford Popular to Randa in Switzerland, where we took the rack railway to Zermatt. My neck ached with gazing at those awesome mountains. For our first season we did fairly well. Doug and I climbed the *Matterhorn* by the Hörnli Ridge. (There was no cable car to Schwarzsee in those days.) The ascent presented us with no problems, but we were over-cautious and late coming down. Having done the steepest and most improbable-looking mountain in the district, we turned our attention to the highest – the *Dom*. All four of us succeeded on this, but the Festi glacier unnerved us somewhat. For most of us it was the first time on a high snow-covered glacier.

This short introductory taste of alpine mountaineering left me in no doubt that I would return. I could not resist the adventure and the physical challenge that these mountains offered. However, my profession as a marine engineer dictated otherwise, and for a number of years my leave did not coincide with the summer season. Most of my time was spent in the Far East where I had to be content just to look at jungle-clad volcanoes in Indonesia or the unforgettable shape of Mount Fuji, its snow-capped cone rising high and aloof through layers of cloud. A truly beautiful sight, but, alas, I never had a chance to climb it.

It was 1960 before I again visited Zermatt, this time travelling out by rail. The return fare was £21.10 from London, which was good value even then. The only 4000er climbed on this short holiday was the *Zinalrothorn* by the S ridge in

perfect weather. We also traversed the Wellenkuppe, which involved descending its N ridge to the Triftjoch. This was a mistake. The ridge was extremely loose and shattered and, as we were a fairly large party, it took ages. On reaching Zermatt late that evening, we learned that it was the first descent of the N ridge for three years. By the summer of 1962 I had abandoned my career on the high seas, and I took a long break before looking for alternative employment. A lot of time was spent in Scotland and the Lakes before I returned to Zermatt once again. This time I went with a girl-friend, Vi Tyson. We stayed at the Hotel Bahnhof which was owned by a retired chief guide, Bernard Biner, and his sister Paula, who were very well known and respected at that time by most of the British alpinists who frequented Zermatt, for their friendly and helpful attitude and inexpensive accommodation. We had great plans for our stay, and luck proved to be with us. The main objective was to make sure Vi got to the summit of the Matterhorn as it was an ambition she had dreamed of achieving for a long time. We were both at the peak of fitness, and on our arrival in Zermatt the weather and conditions on the mountains were ideal. We set out for the Hörnli hut next day, but before we reached it a storm swept in, putting down six inches of snow at the hut. To dampen our spirits further, when I enquired as to the whereabouts of the guardian we learned that he had just died and was to be carried down to Zermatt the next day. He was Matthew Kronig, a powerfully-built ex-guide, reputed to have climbed the Matterhorn over 100 times. We retired to our beds in the Belvedere next door, feeling rather depressed, and thinking that we had wasted our time in coming up to the hut.

I looked out at 3.30am and, if one ignored the fresh snow, it was a perfect morning. The essential ingredients were there – the '3 Cs': clear, cold and calm. Very few other people were stirring. I said, 'Right Vi, this is it. Let's get going' – and it went well; we were high on the ridge before the sun rose with a welcome warmth. We stopped at the Solvay Refuge for breakfast and soon the snow was melting. We were the first to arrive on the summit at 10am on a beautiful day. Vi could hardly believe that she was there, barely 36 hours after arriving in Zermatt. Her first Alpine peak! Good lass, I knew she would do it. The ascent had actually taken only four hours 45 minutes, despite the snowfall.

After this there was no stopping us. We traversed the Wellenkuppe and *Obergabelhorn*, descending by the Arbengrat accompanied by another friend, David Winstanley. A very good route full of contrasts. We followed this with the *Weisshorn* via the E ridge, and then two days later we went to the Mischabel hut, climbing the 1800m in well under three hours. Next morning we set out in unsettled weather to traverse the *Lenzspitze* and *Nadelhorn*. As we reached the point of no return – the col between the two peaks – we were caught in a storm which was very alarming. It was snowing heavily, the air was charged with electricity and our ironware was alive and buzzing. Visibility was very poor and there was no way of getting off the exposed rocky ridge without going over one of the 4000m summits. We had to sit it out, leaving our axes, pegs and karabiners some distance away until after about an hour or so it blew over, leaving everything in a treacherous and icy state. We continued over the Nadelhorn and descended the S face very cautiously, reaching the Hohberg glacier safely. Unknown to Dave and myself, Vi had silently been suffering in

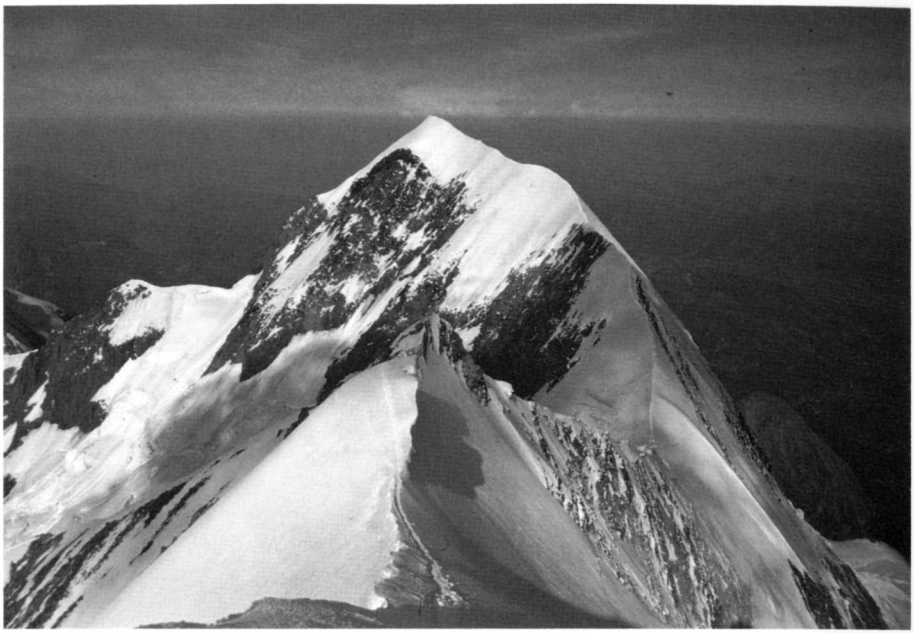
the storm. Her fingers had been frost-bitten and later they turned black at the ends, but fortunately there was no permanent damage. We arrived at the Dom hut with great relief, and later back in Zermatt Herr Biner informed us that our conquests were the only successful ones on any major peaks in the whole of the valley that day.

While Vi took time off to recover, David and I walked to the Rossier hut from Zermatt in one day – not a hut walk to be recommended unless you are in training for the Olympics! Next day we climbed the *Dent Blanche* via the S ridge and descended to the Schönbiel hut to stay the night.

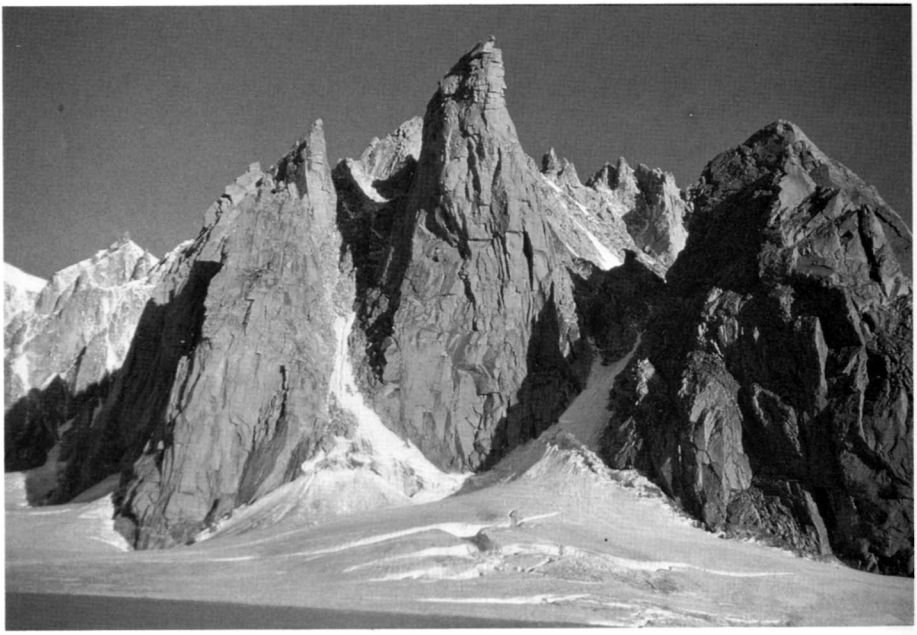
To round off this holiday we planned to traverse the 'Big M' (our affectionate label for the Matterhorn), this time via the Italian Ridge and down the Hörnli. We arranged that Vi, if she felt fit enough, should meet us at the Italian hut which she could reach, via the Furggjoch and the Col du Lion, in the company of a climber we had met in the Bahnhof who also wished to make the traverse of the 'Big M'. Meanwhile, Dave and I were to try to reach the same hut from the Swiss side by a route, not in our guidebook, which had been recommended to us by Bernard Biner. This involved descending from the Schönbiel hut, crossing the Zmutt glacier and climbing into the large snow-basin below the W face of the Matterhorn. The right-hand side of the basin was bounded by what appeared to be a very steep snow-ridge running up the face to an area of seracs just beneath the Col Tournanche. Viewing this from the Schönbiel, we wondered if Bernard had overestimated our capabilities. As we got closer to the ridge the angle eased off, and all went well. We reached the col, and the traverse round the Tête du Lion across the steep névé was quickly made. We were mindful of Edward Whymper's fall just here and wondered how he had escaped with his life. When we reached the hut – which in 1962 was no more than a creaky and grotty shack – we were glad to find that Vi and her companion were already there. That night the atmosphere of the overcrowded and smoky hut was intolerable, and I finished up sleeping outside under the stars to escape the thick fug and general inconsiderateness of some of the occupants. At first light we set off, making good progress. The scenery was magnificent and the weather perfect. The climbing was exposed but not too difficult. We reached the summit cross at 7.30am, the first there again. Two miles below our feet Zermatt lay still in the shadow of the great peaks. Full of exhilaration and the joy of being alive, we remained on the summit for over an hour, soaking up the splendour of our elevated position and greeting the climbers arriving from the Swiss side. This holiday was a great success, and Vi went home in seventh heaven, having achieved her ambition twice over and done much more besides.

Dave and I returned to Zermatt in 1964. We got off to a slow start because of unsettled weather. On the first fine day we once again made the long climb to the Rothorn hut and next day we traversed the Zinalrothorn from the Triftjoch via the Trifthorn and Rothorngrat. A long, sporty rock-route. We descended via the normal SE ridge, and were back at the hut exactly 12 hours after starting out.

We had planned to climb the Täschhorn via the Mischabelgrat, but on reaching the Weingarten glacier we had to turn back when Dave felt ill. The day



41. *Aiguille de Bionnassay (4052m).* (p 119)



42. *The Pinnacles of Mont Blanc du Tacul (4248m).* (p 119)

was not wasted, however, as I made a solo travese of the *Alphubel* via the Rotgrat and Alphubeljoch, descending to the Täsch hut for midday.

Our next objective was Monte Rosa via the Grenz glacier. In the early morning light we spotted a body encased in the ice, and reported this to the authorities on our return. We had now been joined by Jim Bury and Roy Whittaker, and it was a group of four that traversed the *Dufourspitze* and *Zumsteinspitze*, staying the second night in the uniquely situated Margherita hut on the summit of the *Signalkuppe*. Next day we traversed the *Liskamm* and descended by the Zwillings glacier, which provided difficult route-finding through the badly crevassed sections. The weather for the last week had been very good but now storms were forecast, which thwarted our plans to climb the Zmutt arête of the Matterhorn, and we returned instead to the Täsch hut and traversed the Leiterspitzen, a superb little rock-peak which involved climbing some exposed gendarmes. It is possible to do this from Zermatt in a day, but a very early start is recommended. Jim, Roy and I stayed on at the Täsch hut for another attempt at the Täschhorn next day. This time we reached the N branch of the Weingarten glacier before turning back again because of the deteriorating weather and poor visibility.

My companions left Zermatt next day and I took the opportunity to solo the *Rimpfischhorn*, taking three hours to do it from Fluhalp. Two days later I thumbed a lift in a contractor's 'cement bucket' from the Schwarzsee to the Gandegg hut while they were building a new extension to the cable-car system. I continued on up to Testa Grigia. On the following day, in beautiful weather, I soloed the *Breithorn*, the Kleine Matterhorn and the whole of the Frontier Ridge to the base of the Matterhorn, traversing the Theodulhorn and Furgghorn and descending via the Furggjoch back to the Schwarzsee. Thus ended the 1964 season with eight 4000m peaks (seven new ones) and four smaller ones.

Having now spent four seasons in the Valais, and satisfied that I had served a reasonable alpine apprenticeship, I decided to have a change of scenery in 1965. So I travelled out to Chamonix, again by rail and then by bus to Courmayeur, to meet Jim and Roy who had come out earlier by Land-Rover. Our first climb was the Aiguille de Triolet by the normal Italian Route. Two days later I was introduced to the 'delights' of the Torino hut, the first of many visits in the years to come. We made the classic traverse of the Rochefort arête as far as the *Aiguille de Rochefort*. On the way back Jim and I climbed the *Dent du Géant*, which we had to ourselves. Even in 1965 this surprised us. We later discovered the reason in the shape of a notice in the Torino warning climbers to keep off the Tooth because of the state of the fixed ropes; we had mainly avoided these anyway. We had in fact seen the notice before leaving, but none of us understood Italian. The weather was not too kind to us this season, but before it completely broke down we ascended *Mont Blanc* via the normal French Route from the Tête Rousse and the Aiguille du Goûter.

That brought to an end my first season in the Mont Blanc region. For the next two seasons I was unable to persuade any of my climbing friends that the Alps were the place to go, so I decided to go alone, hoping to meet someone out there looking for a companion. It seemed reasonable to assume that if I went

back to Zermatt and stayed at the Bahnhof this plan might work. Sadly, Bernard Biner had died the previous year, but his sister Paula was running things as smoothly as ever.

I was introduced to Dr Hal Taylor from Aberdeen, and we made plans to traverse the Adlerhorn and *Strahlhorn*, starting at Fluhalp. All went well until we reached the summit of the Strahlhorn, where thick clouds swirled in very quickly and, before we had descended very far down the NW ridge, it began to snow heavily. Soon we were in classic whiteout conditions, off route and surrounded by crevasses and ice-walls. What good a compass here? The situation was dangerous and we just had to stay put. After an hour with no sign of improvement we were becoming very cold, so we embarked on excavating a snow-hole. The exercise and shelter it provided helped to restore circulation, but we were soaked by the falling snow and it was doubtful whether in our wet state we could survive the night in our snow-hole at 3900m without bivi gear. Another hour passed and it began to brighten; soon we could make out shapes and detail on the surrounding slopes, and before long we were able to resume our way down to the Adlerpass and make the long trudge down the glacier to the Britannia hut. We spent the next day drying out and recovering. On our return journey we traversed the *Allalinhorn* via the NE ridge and down by the Alphubeljoch to Täschalp.

A few days later we arrived at the Monte Rosa hut, our sights set on *Castor* and *Pollux*. We ascended Castor via the badly crevassed Zwillings glacier, but we were too late to carry on over Pollux and returned by the same route.

Next day we attempted Pollux via its N ridge and got to within 350m of the summit before deteriorating weather forced us to retreat down the Schwärze glacier, which required care in the steep ice-fall. We got our own back later in the week when we climbed Pollux and returned in one day from Zermatt by using the cable-car and snow-cat facilities to reach the Theodulpass first thing in the morning. We then made the long traverse around the S side of the Breithorn to the Schwarztor and climbed to the summit from there. It is much easier, of course, to approach Castor and Pollux from the Quintino Sella hut on the Italian side. Dr Taylor then returned to Scotland. I stayed on and went to the Schönbiel hut, where I knew a British party was planning to traverse the Pointe de Zinal and Mont Durand. I soloed the route behind them with their permission, knowing that they would assist with a top-rope if required. The views of the Dent Blanche were magnificent and the route was well worthwhile, with some sporting pitches on the arêtes.

The Matterhorn again and a tragedy

Towards the end of my holiday in 1966, another lone climber arrived at the Bahnhof looking for a companion. He was introduced to me by Paula; his name was Dave Baldock. 'How do you fancy the Zmutt Ridge of the Matterhorn?' he asked. This suited me fine; I felt on top form, the mountain was in good condition, and it was a route I had long wished to do. We set off next day for the Hörnli hut and bivvied outside. We were too keyed-up to sleep much, and long

before dawn we started climbing the steep ice in the dark to gain the Matterhorn glacier plateau by first light. A quick traverse beneath the towering N face on our left brought us to the steep approach to the lower section of the Zmutt Ridge. We chose to continue our traverse at a low level rather than to climb directly up to the ridge, and this proved to be quicker and easier. On reaching the rocky section, we unroped and soloed as far as the overhanging Zmutt Nose. From here I remembered instructions given by Bernard Biner some years previously: 'traverse across the W face for two rope-lengths, then climb an exposed couloir for two more rope-lengths. You will find a ledge rising to the left, which will bring you back to the crest of the ridge immediately above the big overhang. The rest is straightforward.' We enjoyed every minute of the climb and on 12 August 1966 I found myself on the summit of the 'Big M' for the fourth time.

We started the descent by the Hörnli Ridge and were soon caught up in the throng of guided and unguided parties on the ordinary route. Hold-ups were frequent. On reaching the Obere Moseley Platte, we joined a queue behind two Germans. Because of the delay they became impatient and decided to bypass the queue by descending an icy chimney to the right. The first man was almost down when he slipped; his second, unbelayed and unprepared, was pulled off the ledge and went head-first down the chimney. They were beyond our help and we watched, frozen in horror, knowing that they stood no chance if they failed to arrest their fall in the first few seconds. They never got that chance, and I will never forget the sight of them disappearing in great bounds down the E face of the Matterhorn, the snow staining red along their path. They fell 750m and their bodies were recovered the following Sunday by the Zermatt guides. This tragic accident marked the end of my 1966 season.

I was back the following year, but it turned out to be rather unproductive in terms of peaks ascended. My third attempt on the *Täschhorn* via the Kin Face failed, and I finished up with sunstroke. On recovering, I set out again with Robin Collomb to have another go via the Mischabelgrat, using the newly-erected bivouac hut situated on the Mischabeljoch. We shared this with a group of Polish climbers. Next morning, after an enjoyable climb up the long ridge, we reached the summit where the Poles carried on to traverse over the Dom.

Robin and I returned to the Mischabeljoch and decided to traverse over the summit of the Alphubel rather than descend the Weingarten glacier which, we considered, would be rather treacherous. We reached the Täsch hut via the Alphubeljoch, to end the only worthwhile expedition of this holiday.

Marriage in 1968 curtailed my alpine activities until 1970, when the first visit to the Bernese Oberland was made with Tony Gough and Susan Carline. We did it in style, hiring our own chalet in Meiringen. The first route was a traverse of the Wetterhorn from the Gleckstein hut and down to Rosenlaui via the Dossen hut.

We then made the expensive decision to go up to the Jungfraujoch by rail, to climb the *Mönch* and *Jungfrau* by the ordinary routes. All this went according to plan and in very good weather, the Mönch taking 1½ hours and the Jungfrau 2½ hours. We then set our sights on something more ambitious and decided to traverse the Eiger via the Mittellegi Ridge. Leaving the Jungfrau



43. Return from Mont Maudit (4465m). (p 119)

Railway at Eismeer Station, we stepped out of the tunnel on to the glacier and were committed. The rickety wooden Mittellegi hut stood precariously in its vulnerable position on a level section of the ridge overlooking Alpiglen, as it had done, withstanding the batterings of many storms, for at least 50 years.

Next morning, off at first light, we were soon grappling with the steep exposed buttresses high on the ridge. To our dismay, we found the fixed ropes encased in thick ice and of little use. This slowed us considerably. We were impressed by the exposure and narrowness of the ridge, and caution had to be the order of the day. Susan did very well, considering that this was her first alpine season. Three on the rope was not a good number for this route, and it was 2pm when we reached the summit. We were, however, well ahead of the parties which had left the hut shortly after us.

All that remained for us was to descend the W face to Eigergletscher Station, but this was more easily said than done. I was not familiar with the route and a layer of cloud had moved in below us, obscuring our line of vision. We seemed to spend ages route-finding in the gloom and were expecting to have to spend a night out on the face, when at the last minute we found our way down the steep slabs via a chimney on to relatively easier ground below, reaching the station at 7pm. The parties behind us were forced to bivi out for the night.

1971 and 1972 were not good years, because of unsettled weather. With Tony Gough I visited Courmayeur and climbed Mont Blanc once again via the Italian Route from the Gonella hut, which was closed because of the poor conditions. We returned down the Aiguilles Grises Ridge and had the entire route to ourselves, except for the section between the Dôme du Goûter and the summit of Mont Blanc.

Following this we climbed the *Grandes Jorasses* via the SW flank to Pointe Walker, and came down the Rocher de Whymper back to the Jorasses hut. We were surprised at the number of parties descending, having climbed the Walker Spur; we counted at least 13. The weather rapidly deteriorated and prevented any further mountaineering for us that season.

1972 was even worse. We were based at Lauterbrunnen with a party of Fell and Rock Climbing Club members, consisting of Pat Fearnehaugh, John Wilkinson and Tony Howard. At the first sign of good weather we made the long flog up to the Silberhorn hut. Our plan was to climb the N face of the Silberhorn, followed by a traverse over the Jungfrau, and to catch the train down in time for the Swiss National Day celebrations on 1 August. We made a rather late start next morning, watching a fiery sunrise light up the clouds around the Eiger. Pat led the first rope, cutting a line of steps straight up the face. We pitched it out 45m at a time, belaying on ice-screws. This seemed to go on for ages, until suddenly we were on the summit of the Silberhorn. By this time the weather was threatening, with clouds gathering around the Jungfrau, and a change of plan was called for. The problem was that there is no easy route off the Silberhorn, and it was decided to reverse the Guggi Route down to Kleine Scheidegg. This sounded an exciting prospect – it is described in the guidebook as 'expressly the best known ice-route in the Bernese Alps'. We abseiled down the Silberlücke into the snow-bay below, then went north to the summit of the Kleine Silberhorn, and descended the steep ice-crest down to the upper snow-

plateau of the Giessen glacier below the NE ridge of the Jungfrau. It started to snow here, and daylight was fast diminishing. On reaching the Schneehorn we spotted a rock outcrop some 60m below the cornice. It was the first rock we had seen for some time, and it lay on our descent line, marking the end of that day's activities. A forced bivi ensued. It was a cold and uncomfortable one, made worse by the fact that the Jungfraujoch Hotel was only half a kilometre away to the east, and we could clearly hear the festivities and fireworks and imagine the people tucking into their fondue. Next morning, after nursing stiff and cold limbs back into working order, we carried on down through the tricky ice-fall of the Kühlauenen glacier to the easier terrain of the Guggi glacier and so returned to civilization and our wives.

I decided to try a fly-drive package in 1975 and flew to Geneva with Ray Parkinson on his first trip to the Alps. We collected a new Simca at the airport and away we went, through Chamonix, over the Col de la Forclaz, along the Rhône and up to Les Haudères where we met Peter Howard. We spent a few days in this area and climbed Mont Collon, then moved on to Courmayeur where the weather made us decide that the big peaks were better left alone, and so we only climbed the Tour Ronde and Petit Mont Blanc. From there we motored to Grindelwald, where conditions were much better. Ray had decided that the high peaks were not for him, so I decided to go up to the Strahlegg hut and solo the *Schreckhorn*. At the crowded hut I met Mike and Sally Westmacott with a Canadian friend, and they very kindly invited me to join them. They planned to traverse the Schreckhorn, climbing the SW ridge and going down the SE ridge. According to our English guidebook, the SE ridge was the normal route up and the easiest of the ridges, but we were to find that this was incorrect. The approach in the dark lay up steep snow and rock. Daylight saw us on the plateau of the Schreckfirn, with a full view of our objective. The rock on the SW ridge was extremely good and sound, which made the climb most enjoyable. On reaching the summit we noticed the other parties returning the same way and thought that this was rather odd. We set off along the airy SE ridge. Soon it steepened and became more difficult, and before we reached the Schrecksattel the climbing became more exposed and serious, with vertical pitches and icy chimneys overlooking the sheer Elliottwand. We then realized that the guidebook was wrong. We reached the saddle with some relief, but we still had to descend 350m of steep ribs and couloirs and cross a large bergschrund to regain the Schreckfirn. However, all went well despite the occasional stonefall. I was most grateful in retrospect to Mike and Sally for their company.

Ray and I left Grindelwald to finish our holiday at Saas Almagell. I reasoned that I could solo the *Lagginhorn* and Fletschhorn, so I went up to the Weissmiess hut and traversed them both the next day in cloudy conditions – a boost to my ego. The next day, in better weather, I traversed the *Weissmiess* and was impressed by the superb scenery on the way up, and by the easy way down on the other side. A mountain with two completely different faces.

(*Editor's Note.* It is reported that enlargement of the summit cairn has converted the Fletschhorn (3996m) into another 4000er.)

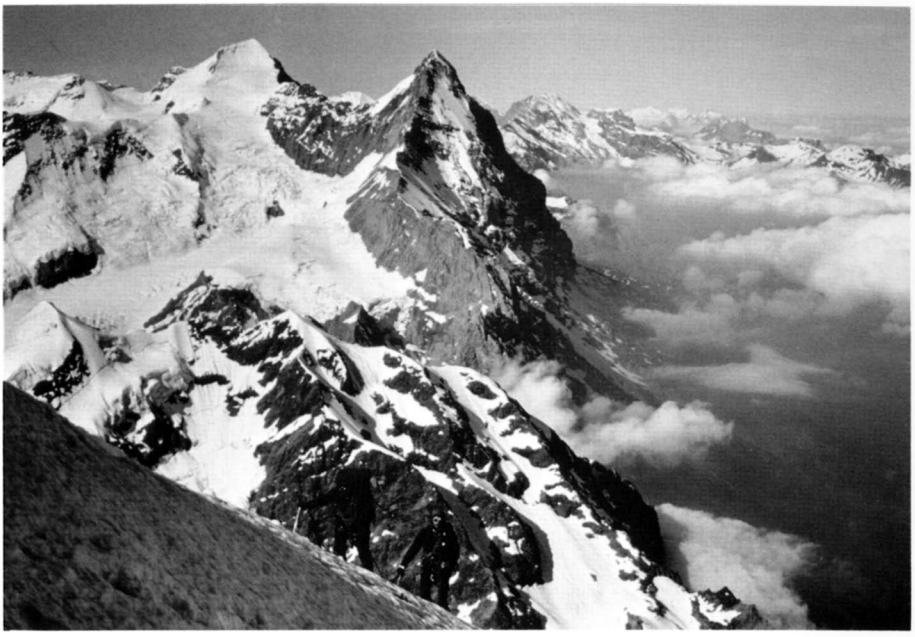
The decision is made to go for them all

By now I had reached the stage where I had climbed a comfortable majority of the major alpine summits and when asked, as I often was, which of the big peaks in the Alps I had climbed, I found it easier to name those which I had not climbed. In 1976, therefore, I made the decision to do them all. Some of the remaining peaks were the more remote and difficult ones. The idea of climbing all the 4000ers was exciting and not unreasonable. In addition, I could find no evidence at that time to suggest that any living British mountaineer had climbed them all. I was aware that Eustace Thomas had completed them in 1928 with guides, and that Frank Smythe was a strong contender. I acquired a copy of Robin Collomb's book 'Mountains of the Alps', published in 1971, which provides tables of all summits over 3500m. It listed a total of 52 separate mountains over 4000m, which seemed to agree with maps I had studied. This left me with 23 more to do.

With renewed interest and an ambitious goal to achieve, July 1976 found my wife, Margaret, and myself on the way to Courmayeur by a fly-drive package again. We travelled out with Mike Kenley and Margaret Mitchell, and on arrival at the Aiguille Noire camp-site in Val Veni we met Peter Blezard and Anne Danson. Our first excursion into the hills was thwarted by bad weather, when we were repulsed from the Aiguille de Trélatête. The next day, despite the continuing unsettled weather, we went up to the Torino hut hoping to traverse the Rochefort Arête as far as the Dôme de Rochefort. We reached the summit of the Aiguille once again and decided to go no further because of the poor conditions.

When the weather improved the three males in the party embarked on a three-day high-level traverse which was very successful and enjoyable. It involved the long march up the Miage glacier from Lac de Combal to the Col de Miage, where we spent the night in the Refuge Durier. Next day we continued over the sharp crest of the *Aiguille de Bionnassay* and the Dôme du Goûter; the second night was spent in the crowded Goûter hut. On both evenings we saw splendid sunsets. On the third day we traversed Mont Blanc (my third ascent), *Mont Maudit* and *Mont Blanc du Tacul* in super weather. At the Aiguille du Midi we caught the cable-car system back to Italy, across the Vallée Blanche, and so to our camp in Val Veni.

Peter and Anne left for home next day; the rest of us drove over the Great St Bernard Pass to Sembrancher. From here Mike and I traversed the *Grand Combin* from the Valsorey hut. Dawn broke as we reached the Col du Meitin. The W ridge went well despite icy conditions. We crossed the summit of the Combin de Valsorey and reached the highest point, the Grafeneire, in a bitterly cold wind on a beautiful clear day. We returned to the hut via the Corbassière glacier, passing under the dangerous ice-cliffs on the N face. The two Margarets met us in Bourg St Pierre, from where we drove back to Italy and set up camp in Val Savaranche. There was time for one more climb before returning our car to Geneva and flying home, and it was to be the *Gran Paradiso*, the highest mountain entirely in Italy. This, and the fact that it is a very easy 4000m peak, makes it a popular mountain with the Italians. The day we climbed it was no



44. *Mönch (4099m) and Eiger (3970m).* (p 119)



45. *Les and Barbara Swindin on the summit of the Aiguille Verte (4122m).* (p 119)

exception. The views were superb, with cottonwool clouds filling the valleys and the whole Mont Blanc range clear as a bell in brilliant sunshine. This ended another successful season – with seven 4000m peaks ascended, five of them new ones.

It was a good start towards the achievement of my recently adopted ambition, but distractions occurred in 1978 and 1979 when I was trekking and climbing in the Himalaya.

In the meantime, I had met Leslie and Barbara Swindin at an Alpine Club meet in the Lakes, and we realized that we had a lot in common as far as alpine mountaineering was concerned. Les had done almost as many 4000ers as I and quickly agreed that to do them all would be a worthwhile feat.

The next time we met was in Grindelwald on a very wet day, late in July 1980. The Lauteraarhorn was our first objective, but the weather dictated otherwise and we turned back at the Strahleggpass. Two days later we traversed the Mittelhorn from the Gleckstein hut. As we arrived at the summit, two jet aircraft of the Swiss Air Force flew close by and dipped their wings in salute. The weather remained unsettled, and our attempt at the Nollen route on the Mönch was cut short at the Guggi hut by a storm that night. What a superb little place the new Guggi hut is.

A week had gone by, and we had not topped a single peak on our list. We moved to Chamonix and went to the Couvercle, intent on climbing the *Aiguille Verte*. At 1am next morning we set out and ascended the steep Whymper Couloir in the dark, reaching the summit ridge at sunrise. There was a splendid view from the summit, looking right up the Mer de Glace to Mont Blanc. We also had a good look at the nearby Les Droites, which neither Les nor I had yet climbed. After a careful descent of the couloir, we reached the safety of the Glacier de Talèfre and the Couvercle hut before 10am. The only other route we did was the N face of the Tour Ronde, in order to study the Aiguille Blanche and the Peuterey Arête of Mont Blanc from the summit. We planned to do this great ridge at some future date, since the Aiguille Blanche qualifies as a 4000m peak.

I was unable to visit the Alps in 1981, for this was the year when Margaret and I had planned a holiday in the Far East. Normality was resumed in 1982, when we drove out to Brig in the Rhône Valley to meet Les and Barbara. We had unsettled weather again in which to go up to the Oberaletsch hut. Our training climb next day took us up the Gross Fusshorn by its SW ridge. It was becoming obvious that age was beginning to tell; we had never bothered about training climbs before, we had always made a beeline for the big peaks. From the summit of the Fusshorn we had a good view of our objective for the next day – the *Aletschhorn*.

The following morning dawned, but only just. We were high on the steep SW arête of the Aletschhorn with more cloud than blue sky above, but all went well and the summit cross was reached just after 10am. No other peaks were visible. As we began our descent a shaft of sunlight beamed down on us and actually followed us all the way down the ridge to the glacier. We were lucky and suspected that our mountain was one of the few major ones climbed that day.

Next day we moved camp to Randa in the Zermatt valley and met

Andrew Hodges, who joined forces with Les, Barbara and myself for an ascent of the *Dent d'Hérens*. The route from the Schönbiel hut is long and difficult to follow in the dark, but Andrew's previous knowledge of the terrain was a great help. The climb up the WNW face through the ice-cliffs and serac barriers was spectacular, as were the views from the sharp summit crest to the Matterhorn and the Dent Blanche.

Two days later Andrew and I set out for the Monte Rosa hut, leaving Les to rest a leg he had hurt returning down the moraine on the way back from the Dent d'Hérens. Our objective was the *Nordend*, but we took enough provisions for three days in case conditions were good enough to traverse the other main tops of Monte Rosa and spend a night at the Margherita hut on the Signalkuppe. After following the usual treadmill route towards the Dufourspitze, we branched off to reach the Silbersattel where an icy wind encouraged us to move quickly along the arête to the summit of the Nordend. We then attempted a direct ascent of the Dufourspitze from the Silbersattel, but the strong wind and steep ice, combined with our heavy sacks and lack of a second ice-tool each, forced us to retreat. When we reached the Gorner glacier it was obvious that a big storm was brewing and we had barely reached the path to Riffelalp when it broke. The crashes of thunder were deafening as they echoed around the Liskamm and Breithorn. Flashes of lightning seared and hissed through the gloom, and the rain poured down. The gods were very angry! We considered ourselves lucky to have retreated, but this feeling was short-lived when a bolt of lightning struck the crags on the Gornergrat high above our heads, and suddenly we saw a volley of rocks about the size of armchairs hurtling straight towards us. They struck the ground above us and bounced over our heads, finishing up on the glacier 300m below. We scuttled back to the safety of Zermatt with our tails between our legs.

A storm on the Peuterey

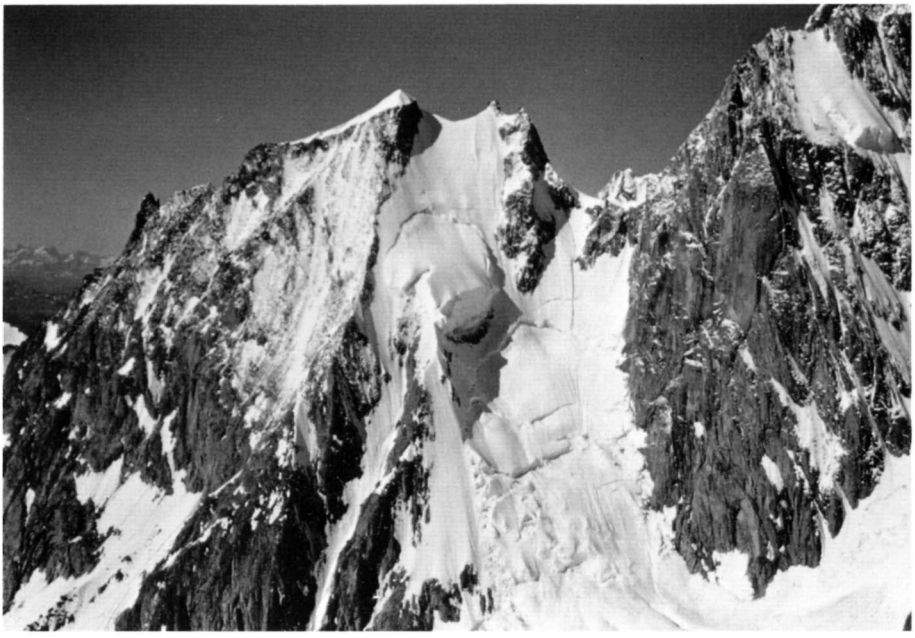
After a rest-day we drove to Chamonix, where the Weather Bureau assured us that the next four days would be settled and fine. So Les and I decided to go for the *Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey*, which is regarded as being the most serious and difficult of all the 4000m peaks. From there we planned to traverse over the summit of Mont Blanc. We set off through the Mont Blanc tunnel to Val Veni and climbed to the Monzino hut for the night. Next morning we went over the Col de l'Innominata and sought a route across the notorious Frêney glacier. This behind us, we avoided the stone-swept couloir, descending from the Brèche Nord des Dames Anglaises and climbing the higher and safer ledge-system to the left below Pointe Gugliermina known as the Schneider Ledge and Couloir. The route was enjoyable on reasonable rock, with no great difficulties. After a short but futile attempt to find the Dames Anglaises bivouac, we reached the base of the SE ridge of the Aiguille Blanche, high above the Brèche, and after crossing several exposed and loose ribs and couloirs on the Brenva side, we climbed directly up towards the summit ridge taking great care on the very loose steep rock. We reached the crest in a gap above the Pointe Gugliermina and followed the rocky arête to the snowy SE summit of the Aiguille Blanche. The

time was about 5pm. We were aware of cloud swirling around and this puzzled us, in view of the good forecast. We prepared a bivouac site on a rock-ledge with snow on one side and absolutely nothing on the other, except for a 1200m drop to the Brenva glacier. By the time we had prepared and eaten a hot meal conditions looked decidedly worse, with thunder in the distance. At 8pm it began to snow and we got into our Zarski bivi sack for the night. The snow fell more heavily and the storm drew nearer. Lightning played around us. Soon we were caught right in the centre of the storm amongst blinding sheet lightning and deafening explosions of thunder. The snow fell so thick and fast that we had to keep sweeping it off the bivi sack to enable us to breathe. The continuous sheet lightning was so intense that it was possible to read a book. Ever hopeful, we thought, 'Oh, it's probably just a local storm. It will pass over in an hour. After all they told us in Chamonix. . . .'

The storm raged unabated all night. We had plenty of time to ponder on our dangerous situation since sleep was impossible. Witnessing nature in a very angry mood from our lofty perch, we felt very much at the mercy of the elements. We could not believe our bad luck. Here we were on the summit of what Frank Smythe described as the most difficult of all alpine peaks at 4000m in the middle of a storm. How could the weather forecast be so wrong?

At first light, about six, the storm began to disperse. We were unscathed. Two hours later we emerged from our snowy cocoon to survey the scene. Visibility was poor. We estimated that 15cm of snow had come down. To carry on over Mont Blanc was out of the question and we were faced with reversing our ascent route – neither of us was looking forward to this. After a leisurely breakfast and with a brightening sky, we started down. A lot of time and effort went into uncovering and selecting safe abseil points for our 90m of rope. It was impossible to know what was safe and what was not under all the powder-snow. We abseiled hundreds of metres down the steep ribs and couloirs on the Brenva flank. Occasionally large blocks were accidentally dislodged and went crashing down a thousand metres to the glacier. The most nerve-racking section was the traverse to regain the Brèche des Dames Anglaises, where one or two slips had to be checked. By now the weather was rapidly improving, and the views of the Aiguille Noire and the sharp needles of the Dames Anglaises were spectacular; but the Frêney glacier was still a long way below. We set off down the Schneider Couloir with water cascading all around from the melting snow. It was decided to bivouac on a safe ledge some 150m above the glacier; it was a beautiful night with bright, shining stars. In the bitter cold all our wet gear froze solid. Next morning we soon reached the Frêney glacier and found that it had greatly changed in only three days. The crevasses were now too wide to jump, so we abseiled into them from snow-bosses cut in the ice and climbed out the other side. After crossing the Col de l'Innominata with its gallery of memorial plaques commemorating the tragic Bonatti epic on the Central Pillar, we soon were in sight of the Monzino hut, green grass and a well-earned rest.

In retrospect, after our safe return, our three-day epic on the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey and the night spent on its summit in the eye of an electric storm was a worthwhile and interesting experience, but not one I should care to repeat.



46. *Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey (4107m).* (p 119)



47. *Finsteraarhorn (4273m), seen from the NW.* (p 119)

In August 1983, Margaret and I motored to Chamonix to rendezvous with Les and Barbara. Because of a recent operation Barbara did not take part in this season's activities. Les and I climbed the Dômes de Miage from the Trélatête Hotel as our training route, followed by the Aiguille de la Bérangère from the Conscrits hut the next day.

The only two 4000ers in the Mont Blanc massif which neither of us had climbed were the *Droites* and the Dôme de Rochefort and so, two days later, we set out from the Couvercle for the S face of the Droites. The route was mixed, on steep ground and, like the Whymper Couloir on the Verte, it should be avoided when the sun gets up. We arrived on the rocky summit after an enjoyable climb. We took care on the descent to avoid the stonefall which raked the couloirs at seemingly regular intervals. Once on the Glacier de Talèfre, we soon regained the Couvercle hut and then went back to Chamonix.

A breakdown in the weather prevented us from attempting the Dôme de Rochefort, so we moved to the Oberland hoping for better conditions. We planned a three-day traverse taking in the *Lauteraarhorn* and Schreckhorn, which Les had not done. Starting from the Grimselpass we walked to the Lauteraarhorn hut, and in the morning faced the long march up the Finsteraar and Strahlegg glaciers, most of this being done in the dark. The ascent to the summit of the Lauteraarhorn was rather loose and tedious, until we reached the terminal arête which was on better rock. On the descent we planned to traverse the link route across the S face to the SW ridge and down to the new Schreckhorn hut; but we failed to find the correct line across the face, wasting time, and so we reversed the S couloir and crossed the Strahleggpass to the hut. It had been a long day and we could not face the ascent of the Schreckhorn next morning, so we descended to Grindelwald.

I had never been too happy about my ascent of the Jungfrau by cheating and using the railway to the Jungfraujoch and, as Les wanted to climb it, we decided to start from the lowest point. We set out from Lauterbrunnen for the long ascent to the Rottal hut; we had the place to ourselves and were surprised by the trusting nature of the absent guardian, who had left out wine and beer on a self-service basis. In the morning we climbed the Inner Rottal ridge to the summit of the Jungfrau in unsettled cloudy weather and descended for the night to the Obermönchjoch hut. We intended to climb the Gross Fiescherhorn next day, but a blizzard set in overnight, forcing us to retreat to Grindelwald.

With time for one more climb, we returned to the Schreckhorn hut and repeated the ascent of the Schreckhorn that I had made previously with the Westmacotts, except that we returned down the SW arête.

1984 was a frustrating year. It started out with a heatwave in the Dauphiné, where we met once again with Les and Barbara in La Bérarde. Our first mountain was Les Bans from the Refuge Pilatte. This went well, in spite of a cloudy start on the glacier, and it was my introduction to the rock of this region, relatively sound compared with the Central Alps. We then went to the Temple Ecrins hut and ascended Pic Coolidge for a view of the *Barre des Ecrins*, which we traversed in perfect weather the next day. Our route lay up the S face of the Ecrins from the Col des Avalanches, but we strayed a little too far to the right and missed the fixed cables. Soon we were on very steep and sensationally

exposed rock, high above the col, but the rock was so good, with deep incuts, that we carried on, taking small overhangs in our stride. It was not long before we regained the correct route. Higher up we crossed two or three snowy couloirs and rock-ribs to reach the sharp summit arête. The view was remarkable: Mont Blanc was as clear as a bell 110km away. Our descent lay down the normal N face route to the Col des Ecrins, followed by the Bonne Pierre glacier, and so back to La Bérarde. It had been a most enjoyable traverse of the highest peak in the Dauphiné, and a day to remember.

Next day we drove to Courmayeur in beautiful weather, but by the time we reached our camp-site in Val Veni rain was pouring down. During the next five days, we made two abortive attempts on the Dôme de Rochefort from the Torino hut – each time the weather turned us back. On the only fine day, Les and Barbara climbed the Grandes Jorasses, while Margaret and I traversed the low hills on the south side of Val Veni, which give splendid views of the Mont Blanc massif.

I had not yet climbed two 4000ers on the NW end of the Lenzspitze/Nadelhorn ridge; the *Dürrenhorn* and *Hohberghorn*. We therefore moved on to Randa and ascended the endless zigzags to the Dom hut. Next day, in still unsettled weather, we crossed the Festijoch and descended the Hohberg glacier to gain a steep ice-filled couloir descending from the ridge. It was ice of the worst kind – rock-hard and impregnated with stone. After a long ascending traverse to the left we gained the col between our two peaks. We soloed the Dürrenhorn and then traversed over the Hohberghorn, regaining the glacier by descending the steep flanks of the Stecknadelhornjoch in snowy conditions, 22 years to the day since I had last come down that way.

Les was keen to have another go at the Dôme de Rochefort. It was his last 4000er: he had overtaken me since 1977 because of my trips to the Far East, and because he and Barbara had climbed some on their winter ski-touring holidays. So off we went back to Chamonix, and once again we made the expensive journey to the Torino hut, this time via the Midi and Vallée Blanche cable-car system. The weather was poor and the following morning it was no better, but we started out just the same, hoping that our cheek would pay off as it had done occasionally in the past. After two hours with no sign of a break in the cloud, we gave up on the Dôme de Rochefort for the third time in two weeks and headed for home. Les would have to wait for another year.

The following season, for a change, everything went according to plan. For obvious reasons we started off in Val Veni and our training route this time was the Aiguille de Trélatête via Petit Mont Blanc from the Giovane Montagna bivouac. The ugly structure on the summit of the Trélatête built in the interests of science was the only blot on an otherwise excellent day.

Our next stop was – yes, you'll have guessed – the Torino hut. The traverse of the Rochefort ridge went smoothly this time, on over the Aiguille, and then Les Swindin, on 27 July 1985, stood on the summit of the *Dôme de Rochefort* – his last 4000m peak. Congratulations were exchanged and a celebration dinner was enjoyed later in Switzerland. It was a great relief to have done it at last. We could not have faced another night at the Torino hut, and we badly needed a change of scenery.

We split up for a few days, arranging to meet again in St Moritz, and Margaret and I drove up Val Sesia to Alagna. There were still two summits on Monte Rosa outstanding on my agenda, and this was the most convenient starting-place for the ascent. Next day we went to the Gnifetti hut, and the following morning I left Margaret there while I set off to solo the *Parrotspitze* and *Piramide Vincent*. It was a fine day, but a very strong and bitter wind was roaring across the high tops; on reaching the Lisjoch, I had to put on all my spare clothing. About this time a helicopter passed by and I found out later that it was about to recover a lone climber who had been blown off the summit of the Piramide Vincent. I continued on towards the Parrotspitze and could hear the wind blasting over the terminal crest. Unfortunately the highest point was at the far end, and I had to decide whether to risk going on or not. In view of the fact that the wind speed was constant, I decided that I would proceed on all fours. If the wind had been gusting, I would have turned back. I reached the highest point, clinging to anything and everything. The noise of the wind on the nearby Signalkuppe sounded like an express train. I learned later that the wind speed recorded at the Margherita hut that morning was 130km/h. I made a hasty retreat via the Balmenhorn and Piramide Vincent, back to the Gnifetti and one relieved wife.

The next day we joined Les and Barbara in St Moritz and were surprised to find that they had not done any routes because of wet weather. They were equally surprised at my success on Monte Rosa.

We were in the Engadine to traverse the only 4000er in the area, *Piz Bernina*, so we went up to the Tschierva hut at what turned out to be the start of four days of fine weather. The Biancograt was in good condition, but busy. We were ahead of most parties on this popular classic route, so we avoided the worst of the queuing at the difficult rock-step high on the ridge, and we gained the summit in good time. We descended the SE ridge, passed under Bellavista and went down to the Morteratsch glacier via the Fortezza ridge. It was another outstanding day on a superb mountain, and a route I can recommend.

Two days later we were watching the sunrise lighting up Piz Bernina as we crunched our way across the glacier from the Berghaus Diavolezza on our way to Piz Palü. We were keen to climb the North Pillar of the East Peak. It looked to be the best way up the mountain from the northern side and there was nothing difficult on it, despite its appearance. The lower section was on rock, while the upper half provided splendid ice and snow scenery all around. From the summit we descended to the Diavolezza via the ordinary route. Piz Palü, while not a 4000er, had a certain attraction for me. It was the alpine peak which had first stirred my imagination as a schoolboy in an old black-and-white film 'The White Hell of Piz Palü'! An archaic film by today's standards, but the drama of alpine mountaineering came through to me, little knowing then that I would one day climb that mountain along with 100 other peaks throughout the Alps. So this had been another day to hold as special.

We returned to our camp-site at St Moritz, and overnight the weather changed dramatically. We awoke to a winter wonderland of snow – except that it was August. St Moritz was under 10cm of snow and this spelt the end of our activities in 1985.

1986 was an unusual year. It was my 18th season and I had never seen so little snow in the Alps; there was rock showing where it had never been seen before. The weather was never completely settled and cloud was present on most days, but it never interfered with our plans. We met once again in Val d'Anniviers, high above the Rhône, in the village of Vissoie. Our training climb was the N face of the Pointes de Mourti, which is in full view of the Moiry hut where we stayed. A good route, but I broke a front-point off a crampon on it: not a good start to the season.

We then went on to complete the long, easy traverse of the Pigne de la Lé, Pointe de Bricola and Dent des Rosses. This done, we returned to Vissoie. The final 4000er I had to climb in the Pennine Alps was the *Bishorn*, which to my mind is merely the terminal spur of the N ridge of the Weisshorn. It looks quite insignificant when seen from Täschalp or the Dom, but it featured in Collomb's tables of Alpine Peaks, so it had to be done.

We drove round to the Turtmanntal and up to the Turtmann hut, a smart and well-appointed little hut of which the guardian must be proud. It also boasts a view of an unusual rock-peak called the Barrhorn, which is the double of Half Dome in Yosemite. (Climbers please note!) Next morning our route was a long one, up the Turtmann glacier to the Bisjoch and then to climb the NE ridge to the summit of the Bishorn. We had the ascent to ourselves, and it is probably the best route up this mountain. The view of the N ridge of the Weisshorn, with its huge gendarme rearing up, is very spectacular. After pausing for photographs, we descended the normal route to the Tracuit hut and on down to Zinal.

Our next project was carefully worked out and was entirely dependent on good weather lasting for at least six days. My final three peaks all lay in the Oberland, so we planned to traverse them from the remote huts in the area.

We left Fiesch in the Rhône valley and reached the Aletsch glacier at Märjelensee. The trudge up the glacier seemed endless; on the way we passed a fine perched glacier table. At last we were climbing the iron ladders to the Concordia hut, which was busy with guided parties on glacier tours. Barbara was not feeling well, and only Les and I set out next day for the *Gross Grünhorn*. We ascended the badly crevassed lower part of the Ewigschneefeld to gain the western flanks of our peak. A complicated route was ascended through an ice-fall which gave access to the lowest point of the N ridge descending from the summit. The steep ridge was followed to the highest point on good rock at about Grade III. There were distant views of the Zermatt giants, and much closer was a full view of the W face of the Finsteraarhorn. We descended the Grünhorn via its SW arête and the Grünegghorn to gain the Grünegg glacier and so arrive back at Concordia.

By the next morning Barbara had improved, and the three of us set off up the remainder of the Aletsch glacier towards the Jungfraujoch, where construction work on the new hotel complex was very evident. We made our way across to the Obermönchjoch hut for the night, and were rather dismayed when a snowstorm swept in and deposited a fair amount of fresh snow. However, the next morning we were off before first light to traverse the *Gross Fiescherhorn*. We reached the crest of the NW ridge at 3605m just in time to see a fiery sunrise

behind the Schreckhorn and Lauteraarhorn. The fresh snow was not causing any problems. The last section to the summit was up steep ice overlooking the exposed Fiescherwand. On our arrival we expected to see the other parties which had set out that morning to make the ascent via the Fieschersattel, but we guessed that they had found problems with deep powder snow on the lower approach slopes. Our descent took us east towards 'Ochs' and then south-east down the badly crevassed ice-fall of the upper Fiescherhorn glacier. A couple of hours later we entered the Finsteraarhorn hut and at last I was within striking distance of my final objective, the mountain of the same name. We were all praying that the weather would hold; we did not want a repeat of the Dôme de Rochefort saga.

We had intended to traverse the *Finsteraarhorn* but, in view of the fresh snowfall and unsettled weather, we decided to follow the ordinary route. It was just as well for me that we made this decision, for in the morning I awoke with a chest cold which affected my breathing. The odds were mounting against a successful outcome. We went off up the steep SW slopes, up the tedious, inclined snow-fields. I was pleased to reach the Hugisattel; my wheezy lungs had done well to get me that far. The rock-climbing on the NW ridge required less effort and was more enjoyable. The higher we got, the cloudier it became. By the time we reached the summit the view had gone, but what did that matter? My ambition had been achieved – 30 years almost to the day since the first 4000er, the Matterhorn. My feelings were mixed: elation, relief and, perhaps, some sadness. It was the end of an era for me. However, I did not have time to dwell on my thoughts. The weather was rapidly deteriorating, a wind had risen and it had begun to snow. We hurried off down the ridge and soon caught up a group of four German climbers whom we had met on the summit. They were equipped with unnecessary hardware and were slow. By now it was snowing heavily and, not wanting to be caught so high on the ridge in a storm, we bypassed them down chimneys and ledges to the left. After one more night at the Finsteraarhorn hut, we faced the long march out to civilization once again, over the Grünhornlücke and down the Aletsch glacier, where I could not help but notice that the top had fallen off the glacier table – symbolic in some way? I had returned, having climbed all the big alpine peaks. Perhaps it had doffed its cap in salute!