COLIN BEECHEY

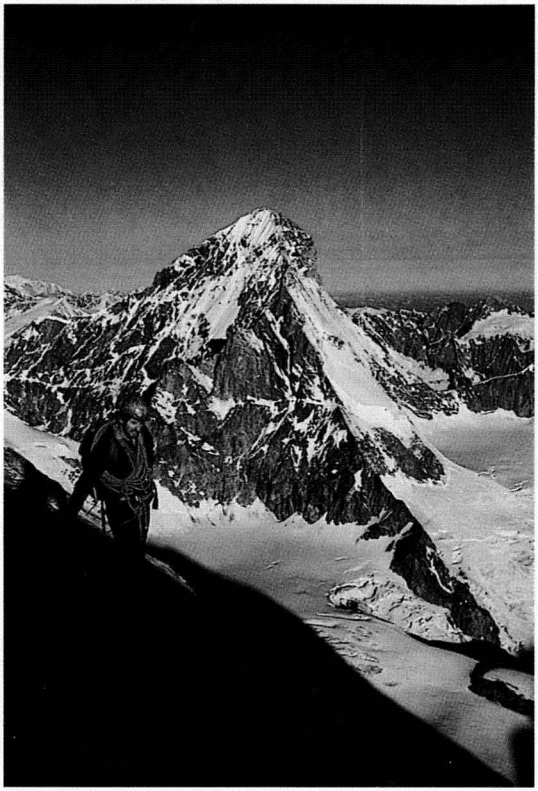
Two Asses on the Dent Blanche

(*Plates 71–74*)

For several hours we had been progressing precariously up the rapidly melting snowy crest of the ENE ridge ('Viereselsgrat') of the Dent Blanche. The ridge had not been climbed that season so no advice had been available at the Mountet Hut, but from the Zinalrothorn the previous day it had looked in excellent condition In reality we found that the upper snow arêtes were so thin that our only hope of progress was to hack off the top to construct a handrail and to straddle it *à cheval* whenever the snow became too soft. The summit looked deceptively close so we pressed on, foolishly thinking that conditions would improve higher up. We soon realised, however, that retreat was unthinkable, there being nothing solid from which to belay or abseil, and our steps had already melted in the warm sun. The trap was sprung and we were both convinced that it could only be a matter of time before a section of the snow arête collapsed, taking us with it to the Grand Cornier glacier far below.

From any viewpoint the Dent Blanche (4356m) is a majestic and beautiful peak, surpassed only by the nearby Weisshorn and Matterhorn. It was first ascended by the South Ridge in 1862, but the classic and much harder Viereselsgrat was not climbed until 1882, by John Stafford Anderson, George Percival Baker and their guides Ulrich Almer and Alois Pollinger. They found the ridge sustained and difficult, taking twelve hours to reach the summit, from where Almer uttered his famous words: '*Wir sind vier Esel*,' thus christening the ridge. A sad footnote to their success was that when they reached the Stockje Hut (subsequently destroyed by an avalanche in 1889), exhausted and hungry, they were welcomed by W E Gabbett and his guides J M Lochmatter and his son – unfortunately all the latter party were killed the following day on the SW face of the Dent Blanche. It was this accident, occurring soon after the deaths of Professor Balfour and his guide on the Aiguille Blanche, and W Penhall and his guides on the Wetterhorn, that prompted Queen Victoria to try to ban the sport of mountaineering. Luckily for us, Gladstone persuaded her otherwise.

The Alpine Club guidebook we were using (1975 edition) grades the Viereselsgrat AD+, like so many classic Alpine ridges, although D might be a more realistic grading even in good conditions. Despite the passage of time, the route has maintained its reputation as being long and serious, and the guidebook warns: 'The Viereselsgrat is a notoriously variable climb. Sometimes the upper snow ridge is so thin, after cornices have fallen off, that it is pierced by holes.' Indeed, in 1930, T Graham Brown, renowned



Left

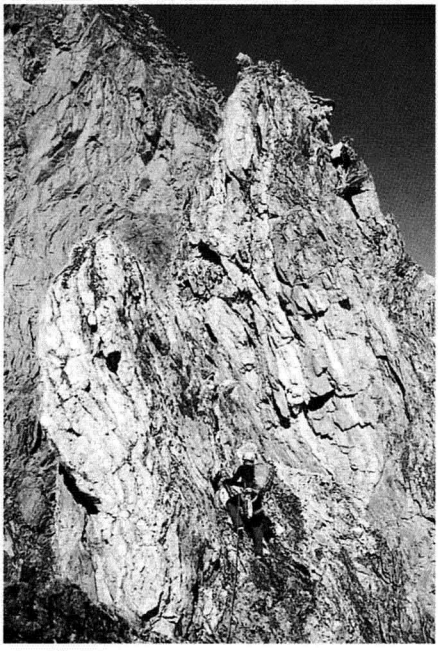
71. The Dent Blanche seen from the Obergabelhorn. The Viereselsgrat starts at the rock spur *lower R*, and continues in the same line to the summit. (*Colin Beechey*) (p201)

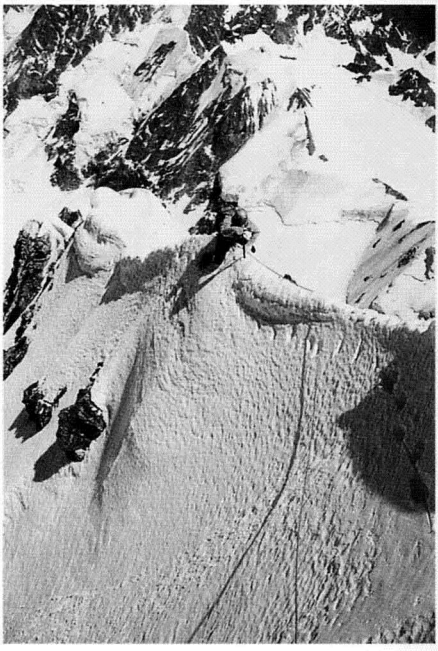
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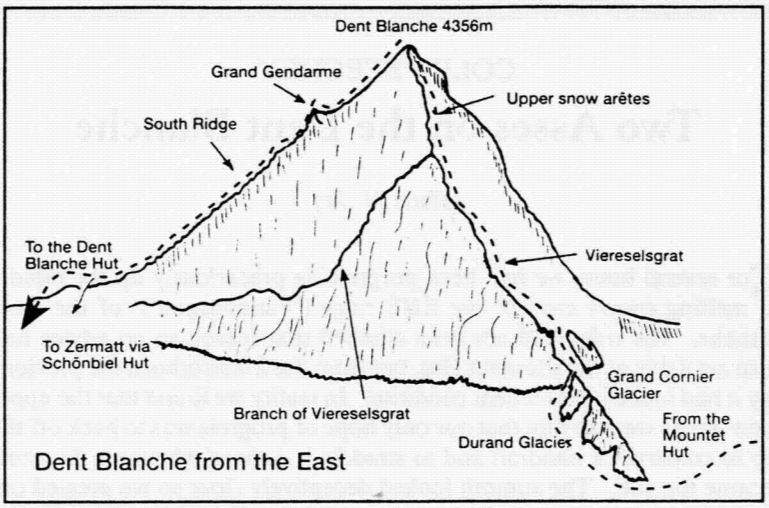
72. Approaching the rock tower on the lower part of the ridge. (*Colin Beechey*) (p201)

Below right

73. On the snow arêtes of the Viereselsgrat, progressing *à cheval* after hacking the top off. (*Colin Beechey*) (p201)







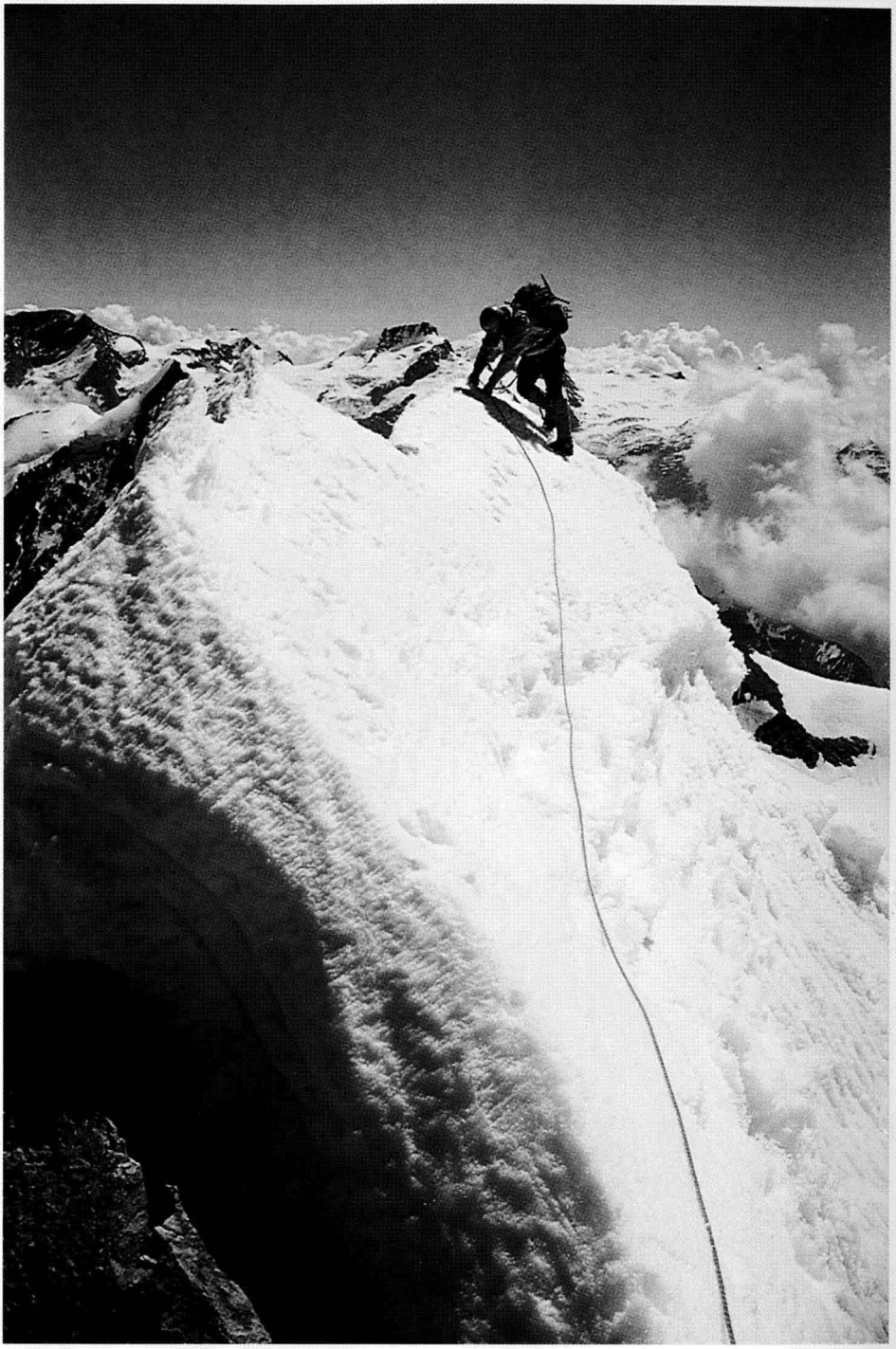
Dent Blanche from the East

for his new routes on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc, made an ascent of the Viereselsgrat in snowy conditions with his guide Alexander Graven and wrote afterwards that it was 'perhaps the most severe climb Graven and I ever made together'.

John Daniels and I had left the Mountet Hut at 3am that morning in perfect weather, looking forward to a long but straightforward day on a mountain new to both of us. No one else followed and we had the mountain to ourselves. Two hours of easy-angled plodding up the Durand glacier took us to a steep ramp of perfect névé from which we gained the exposed ridge crest. Above us the rocky ridge looked endless, the upper snow arêtes being well hidden. After several hundred metres of slightly loose but pleasant climbing, we reached the foot of a huge yellow tower. The route up this was not obvious, but we found a way up the right side at about grade III, to avoid the last 30 metres or so. Above, at a red knoll, we climbed a steep wall to a junction with the other branch of the ridge, usually climbed from the Schönbiel Hut. Here the rock improved rapidly and we climbed a large gendarme by a chimney on its crest.

We were soon congratulating ourselves on our fast progress, but were disconcerted by the sight of the first of the snow arêtes, previously hidden from view. It arched steeply and impressively upwards, untrodden that year and already softening in the morning sun. Hoping that appearances were deceptive I floundered up it, but was shocked to find that there were several hundred metres of similar ground above. We should have turned back at that point but, after all, we had been at this alpine game for over 20 years, climbing many theoretically harder routes, so we foolishly continued.

John stormed past trying to demolish the snow arête above by swinging his axe wildly. This aggressive behaviour at first succeeded but above us



74. Traversing a rapidly melting section of the upper snow arêtes. (*Colin Beechey*) (p201)

the crest was at a much steeper angle, riddled with holes and poised above the terrifying slope of the NE face. The only chance of a belay was the classic but seldom-tried method of leaping down the opposite side to one's falling partner. Reluctantly I went in front and it was at this point that I started to cut off the top of the narrow crest. Using the top as a handrail, my mouth dry with fear, I alternately straddled and climbed along the snow ridge expecting the whole thing to collapse at any moment. We were now totally committed and were forced to continue by the same method for several hours until we reached a complete impasse. The last snow arête before the summit was nearly vertical and about to collapse. Feeling near the end of my mental tether, I tried to avoid it by traversing rightwards across the icy NE face on very loose rock. I then found myself standing on a tiny ledge with no possibility of a solid belay, mesmerised as John led an iced slab towards the summit. He knocked off several rocks and I seriously considered untying the rope in case he fell. After an eternity a dry-throated squeak came from above – he had reached the top and was firmly belayed to the summit cross. I sobbed with joy and soon joined him. It had taken us 12 hours from the hut, but the relief at surviving completely overwhelmed any feelings of elation at reaching the summit. Given less snow, some tracks to follow and a good frost, it would have been straightforward; but the adverse conditions had made it one of the most frightening climbs we had ever done.

All was not over, as we still had to descend the South Ridge – a route new to us both. It started easily enough and we romped down the wide upper section. Soon it became more complex, however, with gendarmes and rock pitches to descend, sometimes by abseil. Even more worrying was the cloud and mist rapidly hiding the route. Eventually we reached the Grand Gendarme which we avoided by a long traverse and a series of abseils down a wide couloir on the west side of the crest. At an icy arête we put on crampons and descended into the mist. We knew that we had to turn westwards along a subsidiary ridge to reach the Dent Blanche Hut. In the poor visibility it was hard to see where to turn off, so we were relieved to find some old footsteps. After what seemed like an eternity I found myself looking down onto the hut roof. An old chain led to the platform outside the hut and it was here that we had our only fall of the day – John slipped off the chain and landed unceremoniously at the feet of the surprised guardian. Despite this display of incompetence the guardian was sufficiently impressed by our ascent to offer us a glass of wine, after telephoning the Mountet Hut to say we had arrived.

In retrospect, we realised that by not retreating in the dangerous conditions we had crossed the thin line between a calculated risk and stupidity. Like the first ascensionists we had also been asses and, like them, had been extremely lucky to complete our climb successfully.

This article is dedicated to my daughter Kim who died in an accident in 1993, aged 13.