Climbs

Julian Cooper *Base of the Eiger*
in progress, oil on canvas, 92 x 112 cms

IAN PARNELL

Annapurna III, SW Ridge

The first time I met Kenton Cool was early one winter evening heading home from a good day in the Northern Corries. Coming towards us through the gathering gloom something was crawling on all fours into the corries. The scrawny animal raised its head to reveal eyes wild like some startled rabbit.

'My name's Kenton,' it announced, 'I know this looks pretty daft, Chief, but I've just got to get into the corrie. If I can crawl now I might be up to climbing next week.' Once we'd hurried out of earshot I turned to my mate: 'What a bleeding fruit loop! Remind me never to go climbing with anyone like that.'

But I did, forging a partnership with Kenton in the Alps, Alaska and the Himalaya. It turned out that when we passed each other in the corries, he had just got out of hospital following a nasty ground fall. Watching him wincing about on all fours, I found it hard to imagine him as a force in the mountains. Now I know better. I trust Kenton completely. If he suggested we go cragging on the moon I'd probably follow.

The 2003 Anglo-American Annapurna III expedition probably wasn't one of the world's best organised trips. With only a week to go we still hadn't obtained a permit for the peak. Kenton, our 'leader', was undergoing his International Guides assessment at the same time as he was meant to be chasing the elusive paperwork. Multi-tasking chaos had been part of every trip I'd been on with Kenton but we'd never been this close before. As D-day neared, whole sections of logistics were left unsolved. Hill food? 'Nepalese Mars bars will do the job' ... 'I can't find the spare stove, Kenny'... 'Bugger it, Kathmandu will be full of 'em.' And so on. I did wonder what our American contingent thought of this logistical panache. Weren't they used to fat corporate budgets, an expedition web site and sat' phones halfway up the peak? I needn't have worried. John Varco was living his own pre-expedition nightmare, frenziedly laying floorboards day and night to scrape together enough cash.

Three months prior to departure I made an inadvertent BASE jump, sans parachute, from the top of Burbage. One moment I was closing an evening's solo circuit by down-climbing a V diff; the next I was in a free fall, arms outstretched in classic birdman position. I had just enough time to think, 'This is only V diff, you can't fall off V diffs can you?' when reality in the shape of two jagged boulders knocked some sense into me. The upshot was a broken upper and lower jaw, a cracked sternum and ribs, plus a mouthful of gravel to replace my teeth.

It's amazing how things work out with a healthy dose of optimism and a good physio. Kenton passed his guides test, John raised the cash, and I joined them, limping into Kathmandu to find the elusive permit had been procured. The walk-in had all the usual highlights – fantastic views of the sacred Machapuchare, dodging Maoist guerrillas at Chomrong and the inevitable porter strike before we turned the final corner into base camp. And there it was: the south-west ridge of Annapurna III, an alpine pin-up to turn the heart of even the most hardened mountaineer. A 1700m snow arête snaked teasingly to the summit, pure, beguiling, but guarded at its foot by a dark shield of rock 600m high. It was a Half Dome topped by the Cassin Ridge, but high up, at around 7000m, a thin band of black rock defended the summit. I sensed those familiar feelings – dry throat, somersaulting stomach – and knew I was falling fast.

In 1994 and 2000, Slovenian teams had climbed the lower rock bastion (at 5.9 A1). The later team had continued through tricky mixed terrain, only to be denied the prize by deteriorating weather. Before our first glimpse of the mountain I hadn't dared imagine cresting those summit snowfields at 7500m. If success had eluded a powerful team of 11 Slovenians, what chance had our motley trio? But now, face to face with the ridge itself, this was less about logic than an affair of the heart.

Four days later, after stumbling loads back and forth across the five-hour scree approach, we were within sight of the lower buttress. There was just one minor problem. Between us and the wall was a 500m chicken run beneath a rim of séracs. We watched as the séracs calved every 30 minutes, spraying car-sized blocks across our access corridor to the wall. John dubbed this monstrosity the Trash Compactor. Six times we snuck beneath it through the shadows of dawn. It's by far the dumbest thing I've done in the mountains. We'd try to run – school races meets Russian roulette – but the sérac debris was like ball-bearings and instead we'd totter on cramponed heels from one ice boulder to the next. Some of these chunks were up to four metres high. We'd use them for shelter, only to find on the return dash they were nowhere to be seen.

At last we reached the wall and could finally go climbing. Or could we? As I wriggled into our only pair of rock shoes (three pairs of socks had to bridge the gap between my size 8 and John's size 11), I slipped and one shoe disappeared down a tiny hole into the snow-covered bergschrund. How would we climb 5.10 rock with one rock shoe and one plastic boot? After a fruitless fishing exercise, John announced there was 'nothing for it' and squeezed through a hacked slot into the darkness. The walls were like two parallel mirrors, polished smooth with no hope of purchase. I've spent years weaving around glaciers and creeping across snow bridges avoiding things like this, but for John this was another of the 'circus tricks' he had rambled on about. Nature and fate had combined to offer him the ultimate off-width challenge: a ten-inch squeeze job, devoid of friction, with a fair chance of permanent burial. Whatever black arts he employed down there,

3. Annapurna III, south-west ridge. First bivvi on the route at 5300m on the initial 600m rock wall. (*Ian Parnell*)

4. John Varco(*left*) and Kenton Cool at the start of the snow crest at 5800m. (*Ian Parnell*)

John saved the climb before it even started. 'Good arm bars,' he remarked, emerging from the depths with the prize boot in hand. 'Solid 5.9.'

Boot firmly back on, I wobbled up the first pitch, a technically moderate ramble through piled shale and death blocks. It was our first introduction to the 'Gogarth in a blender' quality of the rock typifying the buttress. We'd come expecting steep, harsh technical climbing – the Slovenians had used siege tactics and a smattering of aid. Instead we found little harder than technical 5a, but what a 5a! ... 15 metre fall potential onto junk gear, the crux holds loosely moulded out of talcum powder. We actually dug our fingers into the mush for better purchase. Choss followed choss as for two and a half days we picked our way up the buttress. The finish led up an overhanging groove of mud stacked with blocks. Think Mousetrap Wall at just under 6000m. We dubbed it the 'Kitty Litter pitch'. It wasn't pretty, but we were gaining height.

With nothing else safe enough to acclimatise on, our initial foray ended at a snow camp at 6000m. This warm-up immediately blew our alpine-style ideal, but really that had been destroyed several years earlier when the Slovenians fixed ropes from bottom to top of the 600m buttress. Now I've no real desire to tell other mountaineers how they should climb. If people want to siege, they're free to live in the past. But if they're going to string the mountain with their knitting, then for beep's sake, can't they take their garbage home?

We tiptoed round the rotting cords and set up our own belays where we could. Thankfully, the Slovenian's rigging stopped at the top of the buttress. Above, soaring ice slopes stretched for almost a mile to the summit, broken only by the 200m rock band just below the top. This perfect line is set amongst the full sweep of the Annapurna Sanctuary, a backdrop of savage Himalayan beauty. We hung back at our camp, topping up our tans, acclimatising, and watching John turn green with the altitude. Each day Kenton and I would return from exploring to find John hanging head down out of the tent. 'Feelin' sweet guys, hurrghh...just a little hurrgghh red and green one today' gesticulating between retches at the blood and vomit-flecked snow.

It was a relief after three nights at 6000m to drop back down the Slovenian fixed lines and stagger underneath the Trash Compactor back to base camp. Two days later, our feeding frenzy over, we stormed back towards our high point. This time the 600m wall flew past in a single day as we swopped leads. It was great to move so fast over stone but then we hit the snow and were reminded we were in the Himalaya. Our pace slowed to a gasping crawl. The huge snow crest had little technical interest, aside from the ratio of two or three steps up to every one slid downward. Each of those simple steps remorselessly sapped our energy, gave us less oxygen, and led us further from safety. None of us had been above 7000m before and we didn't really know what to expect. We had no real strategy of ascent, no scientifically researched schedule; we just took each day as it came. Sleep, if it came at

all, was in fitful, snatched minutes, interrupted by coughing attacks that took over our bodies and echoed through our brains.

It took us three and a half days to reach the upper rock tier. We'd discussed this thin, shaley band for hours on end, but had been able to make out little of what was in store. There were rumours of M5 from the Slovenians. We had been climbing for five days straight and were at nearly 7000m. That 200m strip of rock could hold any combination of possibilities. What we found far exceeded our expectations. A striking passage led across hinged doors of rock up to six metres high and 10 to 20 millimetres thick. Flaked in rust, each slice threatened to swing open. Protection looked up to the usual standard: a joke cam here, a dull knife-blade battered home with an adze there. The crux was suitably ugly – a grovel along a narrowing ledge across the blankest of the door hinges.

John was up for the lead and set off towards the creaking flakes. After a start of poorly-bonded ice and coal, he bashed a wobbly peg in with the side of his axe. I guessed this wasn't too good, and judging by John's hands-and-knees shuffle across the traverse, it looked like he was taking no chances. At the end of the ramp he paused for an awfully long time, carefully trying different combinations of hands, feet and axes. Like a toddler taking his first steps, he eventually teetered upright on torqued axes and committed to the final hinged door. We saw a spark off his pedalling crampons, and then he was through. Out of sight, occasional volleys of rubble marked his progress until tightening ropes drew Kenton and me across for our turns on the high-altitude beams.

On hands and knees we clawed along the narrow ledge, one leg dangling uselessly toward Kathmandu. Visions of my summer disaster flashed back to me. If I'd managed to fall off solid gritstone then what could happen on this decaying monstrosity? I dug my fingers deeper into the shale and focused on the mud in front, trying to ignore the 2000m drop.

Yet when I composed myself and drew my face up from the dirt, the backdrop was sublime. The drama of the Annapurnas swept around us, with the awesome south face of Annapurna I centre stage. History was written on that face: the great siege path of the British Route was obvious; MacIntyre and Beghin's resting places were there; I could see the line of Lafaille's desperate descent for life, and just to the right, the perfection of the Catalan Route. Looking from our perch high on Annapurna III, we felt eye-to-eye with those inspirational ascents. Freed from the mess of fixed ropes below, I hoped our efforts might stand comparison with those of such great climbers.

A surprise hanging snowfield lent us quick progress toward the top of the wall. But beyond was a frightening vision of mixed climbing. Dark blocks of shale were piled high in loose stacks in a twisting, alpine *goulet*. Among this rough cubism we caught glimpses of flamboyant licks of steepening ice, promising enough to lure on the foolhardy. I took the bait and set off with bravado, wrapping the teetering columns with an occasional

5. John Varco at 6700m on the south-west ridge of Annapurna III, with Annapurna South in the background. (*Ian Parnell*)

sling and bashing my way in deeper. Like all good traps, this one was largely of the victim's own making. Some forgotten logic had told me I would climb better without the leash to my technical axe, while in my other hand I carried a long-handled walking axe, complete with a curved pick. This had proved ideal as a prop on which to gasp for breath as we plodded up 50° snow, but halfway up this final mixed pitch I began to have doubts.

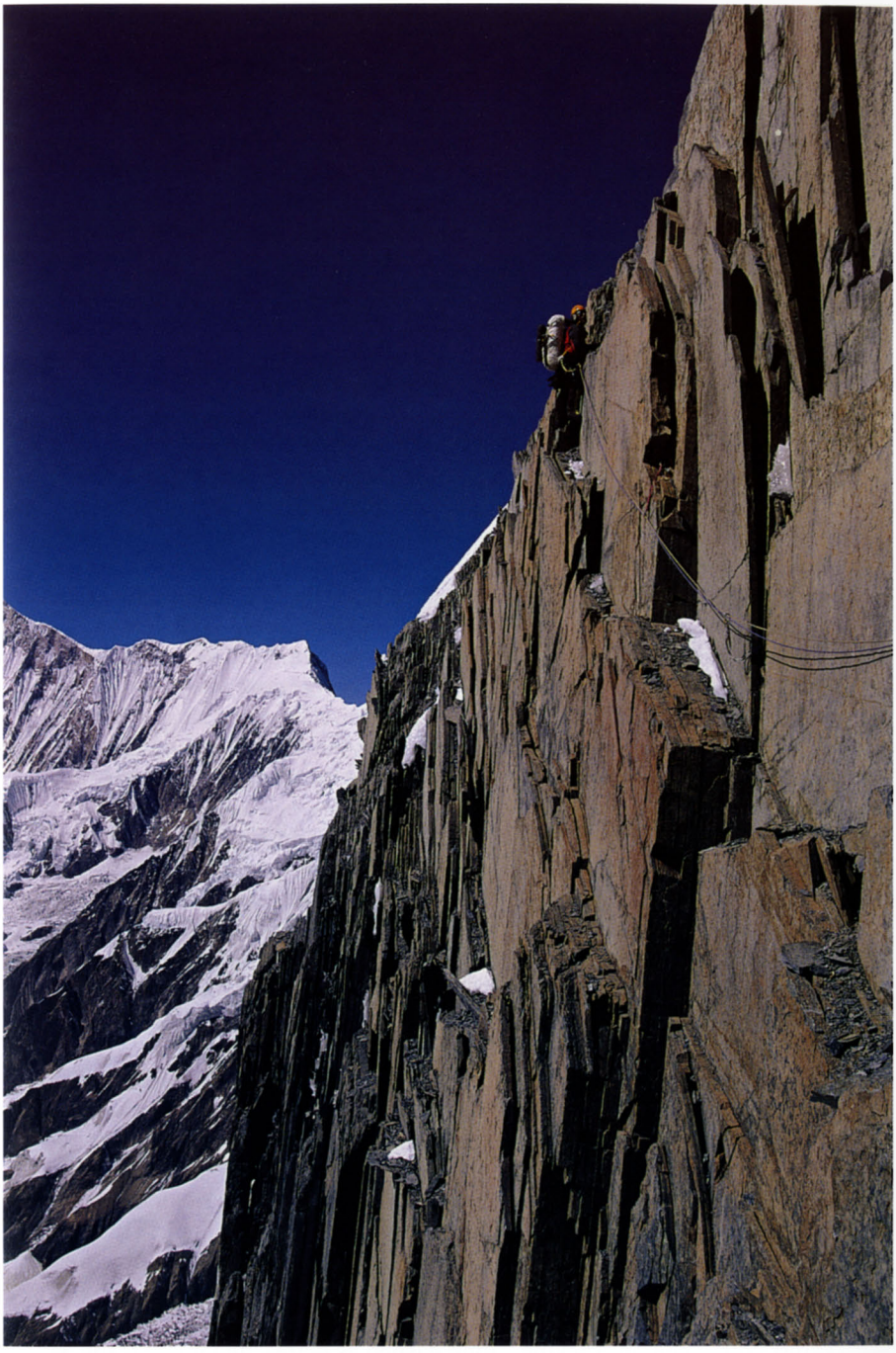
The gentle curls of ice gradually twisted together, rearing up into a 6m pillar that was neatly detached throughout its length. A bulging finish maintained a tentative connection with the main flow. Looking up, I realised I wouldn't have to worry about protection – there was none. At home in a Scottish glen this little drip would have presented a pleasant outing within the grasp of any capable climber, but at 6900m, where the laws of physics break down, I felt I was cowering beneath a frozen Niagara.

My walking axe seemed to be on some sort of timer. As I made each placement, the curved pick gradually unseated itself regardless of which way I leaned my body. I had a count of five in which to release the technical axe and swing. If I failed on my first placement, I was down to a count of only two to make the stick. A sidewall of the black rotten bookends gave decent left footholds, but my right crampon, blunted from 1000m of easy ice, could only make vague attempts at purchase in the narrow strip of ice. After five metres of struggle, I craned my neck over the chopping block of the finishing bulge. The weight of my rucksack pulled at my straining arms. The ticking time bomb of the walking axe went on. Five ... four ... the decent axe broke free. Three ... two ... 'Quick,' I thought, 'swing the fucker. Stick, please. Please!' It bit, just, wobbling like a drunken teenager in high heels.

My grip slowly slipped down the shaft. Why didn't I have a leash? I felt sick. This was too real. I could barely hang on, and still my legs dangled beneath the finishing bulge. I swivelled around to check my landing zone and saw the big, black blocks below, their spiked edges ready. Someone screamed, a horrible guttural cry for help. I felt sorry for the poor sod, then realised it was me. Uncoordinated limbs thrashed for purchase in one of the most pathetic displays of climbing ever performed. Amazingly, it worked, and I floundered onto a belay stance, gasping like a well-hooked fish. Head swimming, lungs emptied by my scream, it took a full 20 minutes before I could communicate properly to John and Kenton that all was well again.

My memories of the climbing that followed are less coherent. By the time I'd finished my battle at the top of the rock band it was night, and we were left scratching around in the dark for somewhere to pitch the tent. Pitch the tent! We must have been joking. The best we managed, after several hours of excavation, was an 18-inch slot, just wide enough to squeeze head to toe.

That night, a bad one, comes back to me as three images. The first is of John, keeled over on his side, mumbling incoherently, face white and drawn while around him the snow slowly turns red as he retches blood. I wasn't sure if he would make the night. The next image comes from two or three



6. John Varco on the top rock band at 6900m with the south face of Annapurna I in the background. (*Ian Parnell*)

in the morning. We'd managed to make the first hours of the night survivable by heating up our water bottles and hugging them close, but now they were turning back to ice and taking our bodies with them. It was the first time in the mountains that I hadn't felt certain of waking up in the morning. Eventually, I roused myself and got the stove going again. I had to visually monitor my numb hands as they passed reheated water bottles into the mouths of my friends' bivvi bags.

The final image is the most sublime – a thin strip of purple slowly turning to orange around the edge of the incomparably beautiful Machapuchare. The new day released us from our terrified claustrophobia. It felt like a rebirth, a second chance. Even John slowed his coughing to give a thumbs-up.

After a mere 150m of ascent we stumbled onto a small saddle beneath the summit slopes. We hadn't talked about it, but we were all looking for a place to recover. Windblown ridges alternated with narrow tears in the skin of the mountain. One, a little wider than the rest, drew us closer. A shallow snow ramp, less than a body-width in size, led into the darkness. Kenton probed first, tensioning down on the nine-mil. Centimetres turned to metres and then to fistfuls of rope as I paid out the line. Eventually a face emerged with a grin pasted ear to ear. 'It's pukka, Chief,' said Kenton.

John and I plunged down out of the gathering wind. I love seeing things in the mountains that few others ever will. This crevasse was nature at its most extraordinary. It opened into a huge cavern, complete with a suspended ice floor and a roof frosted with snowflake chandeliers. Hiding from the wind and the constant spectre of our endless ridge, we named our new home 'Lifesaver Cave'.

Though our strange activity of climbing is often painted in selfish terms, I've always felt it creates moments of the greatest intimacy. Our summit day was perhaps the most emotional I've ever had. Kenton was on fire, carving a summit-bound furrow like a human snowplough. Memories flooded back of our ascent together of the Denali Diamond, when Kenton had turned on the same energy after I had bonked badly four days in. I had announced I couldn't go on and that we would surely die; Kenton had laughed and simply towed me to the top.

He was up to his old tricks here. Stopping briefly, he announced, with a manic grin, 'We're going all the way, Chief.' I felt incredibly proud watching someone I know so well performing at his full potential. John was beginning to lag behind. Considering how much of his lungs he had coughed up the night before, I couldn't believe he was still going. Letting Kenton plough on, I waited for John. After what we'd been through, anything less than all three of us on the summit would have been a failure. I was, however, beginning to think that John had been running on vapours so long he was surely bound to stall.

'Just gotta keep on trucking,' John gasped as he reached me. 'Steady as she goes.' He had his patented snarl on. It was obvious that giving up wasn't in the bloke's vocabulary.

The next five hours were a battered blur of wind and stinging snow. We didn't speak. Instead, we retreated into our own separate worlds, connected only by a piece of five-mil Spectre. I withdrew deep into my multiple fleece and Gore-tex hoods and tried to keep a rhythm going. My hot breath froze on my glasses, and my nose slowly frosted over in the icy jet stream. I thought of all the things I loved at home: friends, family and chocolate cake, all the reasons not just to summit but also to get back down again.

Then I looked up. It couldn't really be, could it? Yes, it had to be. Finally, after all these days, after all this work, after that horrible summer ... It must have been the wind or something but I felt my eyes water as I reached Kenton at the summit, only to find the breeze had got to him as well, his face streaked with tears. John joined us on the top of our little world, 7555m up and surrounded by some of the world's great peaks.

'What's your major malfunction you pair o' faggots,' was his first comment on seeing the colonials coming over all emotional. 'Gotta admit, though, this is more fun than swinging a dead cat.' It seemed we'd been outdone at our national pastime of taking the piss. All my concerns about the outsider not fitting in and we'd ended up with an honorary Brit.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of the south-west ridge of Annapurna III, Nepal, by Kenton Cool, Ian Parnell and John Varco (US) in autumn 2003.