

# THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB JOURNAL 2006





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*Front cover: Forcan Ridge, The Saddle. Photo: Roger Robb.*

*Back cover: Dave MacLeod on the first ascent of Flocktalk (E8 6c), Dalbeg, Lewis. Photo: Dave MacLeod.*



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# THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB JOURNAL

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## UNDER THE WEATHER

By Simon Richardson

*Why is Scotland such a good training ground for much higher mountains? Perhaps because an average winter day in Scotland offers more adventure than a week of storms anywhere else.*

IT WAS past two in the afternoon, blowing hard and snowing heavily. Roger climbed up to the stance and we took stock. We were attempting a new route up the crest of Mitre Ridge, deep in the Cairngorms, and were battling on in a rising storm. It had taken six hours to climb the first three pitches. Scottish winter days are short, and we had fewer than three hours daylight, but the line was just too good to give up. Logical and elegant, a succession of steep corners and unclimbed turf grooves slotted together like a jigsaw puzzle all the way up the spine of the ridge.

I took the rack and continued straight up the crest, grateful that Roger had insisted I take a warthog, as this was the only protection below one particularly awkward bulge. The natural winter way was a steep right-facing inset corner that had accumulated a huge quantity of powder snow. The crack at its back was devoid of turf, so I laybacked up it on torqued ice tools with my crampons skating on the smooth rock. I badly misjudged it near the top, and was on the point of falling when I found a crucial foothold. Panting heavily, I pulled on to the platform above just as the rope came tight. The next pitch was the last difficult one. I struggled up a steep corner, hand traversed on wilting arms to the crest of a tower, and stumbled along the sharp ridge to belay in a col below a second tower in the gloom. By the time Roger arrived it was dark and the urgency of the last few hours dissolved into the icy blackness.

Six hours later, we had finished the route and I trailed head down behind Roger as he kept us on the correct bearing. Conditions on the plateau were extreme with gale force winds and blinding spindrift. Our world was limited to the pools of light from our headtorches and the ever-shifting snow around our feet. We counted our paces to track our progress against the map and shouted out every hundredth step into the screaming wind.

*Niall McNair on In Profundum Lacu (E5 6a), Pink Wall, Pabbay. Photo: Iain Small.*



When we bumped into a prominent boulder we'd passed on the approach the relief was immediate. We stumbled back down the glen, and elated, we collapsed into our tent after 22 hours on the move.

### **The Scottish Winter Experience:**

Our ascent of *The Cardinal* in the remote Garbh Choire on Beinn a' Bhuid is typical of many Scottish winter adventures. The 200m. climb had seven pitches of sustained mixed climbing, but technical difficulty was just one aspect of the experience. The 16km. approach, the short eight-hour winter day, the wild and unpredictable weather and difficult navigation all provided equally important ingredients to the challenge. Overall it was more like doing a major alpine route than climbing on a roadside crag.

At just under 1200m. altitude, Beinn a' Bhuid is one of the highest Cairngorm summits. In summer the Cairngorms are a range of flat-topped grassy hills, but like the rest of the Scottish Highlands they are transformed in winter and take on a seriousness out of proportion to their size. Their summit plateaux collect huge quantities of snow that are swept by the prevailing westerly winds into deep-sided corries that were carved out by glaciers in the last Ice Age. Their granite cliffs are cracked and vegetated and made for on-sight climbing. The cracks take protection readily and frozen turf has the consistency of plastic ice. When conditions are good, ice dribbles down corners and powder snow and hoar transform the dark granite walls and buttresses into white frosted fantasy castles towering up into the sky.

Scotland is a small country and more than half the landscape is mountainous. The mountains range from the rolling schist hills of the Southern Highlands, to the spectacular sandstone summits of the North-West Highlands. The Central Highlands comprise the rugged volcanic peaks around Glen Coe and Ben Nevis, while the Cairngorms lie in the centre of the country and include the largest group of high mountains in Scotland. The Hebrides Islands on the western seaboard are mountainous too, and in a hard winter they can give spectacular climbing overlooking the sea. Most of these areas are accessible from Glasgow and Edinburgh after a two or three-hour drive, and are within weekend range of the English cities. On a good day in peak season during February and March, the popular areas can take on a cosmopolitan air and you are as likely to meet a climber from Slovenia or Spain on the summit plateau of Ben Nevis, as you are someone from Glasgow or Manchester.

Unlike the Alps, there is very little fixed gear on Scottish cliffs and bolts are shunned. Every route you climb is like doing a first ascent. Protection has to be placed on the lead and belays can sometimes take half-an-hour to find. On the harder routes, three-hour leads of 30m. pitches are common, as the leader fights to clear the rock to find gear placements. This ground-up approach maximises the challenge from the cliffs, and



the harder routes are always a race against time and the short winter day. Most ascents are made in weather that you would not consider leaving the valley when in the Alps. The wind blows almost continuously, it is often raining in the glens and snowing on the tops, and despite modern clothing and materials one is nearly always damp. On longer routes a single push is far more effective than a multi-day ascent as the weather is too poor to consider bivouacking. The sub-Arctic climate is unforgiving and it is always better to stay moving rather than stop.

It is the mental dimension that makes Scottish winter climbing so compelling. Solving the frozen puzzle of leading a pitch and finding protection is one aspect, but predicting conditions and selecting an appropriate route is the underlying challenge. Conditions change daily, and historically the most successful Scottish winter climbers have not been the strongest or most technically gifted, but those who have the knack of being in the right place at the right time. While many Scottish climbs are reliably in condition most winters, others take a particular sequence of snowfall, wind, thaw and freeze to form, and many climbers will wait for years for their chosen route to come into condition.

### **A Brief History:**

Scottish winter climbing has a long history. The Victorians pioneered winter ascents of the great 500m. ridges on Ben Nevis before the end of the 19th century using long unwieldy alpenstocks, clinker-shod labourer's boots and short lengths of hemp rope. Even today, *Tower Ridge* (IV,4 1894) and *North-East Buttress* (IV,5 1896) are respected climbs, with the latter sporting a short M4 crux near the top of the route. Step-cutting skills were similarly advanced and Harold Raeburn took ice climbing levels to WI3 levels with his ascent of *Green Gully* (IV,4) on Ben Nevis in 1906. It was another 50 years before ice climbing standards advanced significantly again, when Jimmy Marshall and Robin Smith brought step-cutting to its pinnacle in 1960 with a magnificent series of ascents on Ben Nevis culminating in the first free ascent of *Point Five Gully* and the 400m. *Orion Direct* (V,5). These climbs were the preserve of the elite. Marshall and Smith wore crampons, but step-cutting was still a slow, dangerous and exhausting process where a short single axe was used to cut a ladder of handholds and steps in the ice. Farther east on the powder-covered rock of the Cairngorms, Tom Patey used nailed boots and a single axe to push mixed climbing standards up to M5 levels with *Eagle Ridge* (VI,6 1953) and *Parallel Buttress* (VI,6 1956) on Lochnagar and *Scorpion* (V,6 1952) on the Shelter Stone.

Throughout the 1970s, the 'curved axe revolution' concentrated winter activity on climbing ice – mainly on Ben Nevis. British climbers, well practised on Nevis ice, applied their skills with great effect in the Alps and elsewhere throughout the 1970s. Perhaps the best example is the

*Colton-MacIntyre Route* on the North Face of the Grandes Jorasses (ED3 1976). This very narrow couloir, totally Scottish in character, was undoubtedly the hardest ice climb in the Alps at the time. Another example was the application of Nevis-style thin face climbing to the North Face of the Pelerins (ED2) by Rab Carrington and Al Rouse in February 1975. Towards the end of the decade however, the focus began to slowly turn back towards mixed climbing and during the early 1980s the art of 'torquing' was developed. Mountaineers have jammed axe picks into rock cracks for centuries, but ironically, it was the reversed curve 'banana' picks, developed on the Continent for steep ice climbing, which proved to be perfectly suited to the technique of levering shafts to cam picks in narrow cracks. The vegetated cliffs of the Cairngorms are ideal for this type of climbing, for the deep cracks and rough rock hold the picks well, and there is a liberal supply of turf on all but the very steepest of routes.

During the mid 1980s, the Aberdeen-based team of Colin MacLean and Andy Nisbet forged one of the strongest partnerships in the history of Scottish winter mountaineering. The bulk of their new routes were in the Cairngorms, but their first Grade VIII was away from home territory, 100km. to the west, in Glen Coe. Their winter ascent of the prominent corner line of *Unicorn* (VIII,8) in Stob Coire nan Lochan in January 1985 proved controversial, as the local West Coast climbers doubted whether a hoar-frosted ascent really counted as true winter conditions. The line of *Unicorn* occasionally forms as a thin ribbon of ice, but MacLean and Nisbet were applying Cairngorms techniques and attitudes developed over the previous few winters where the key requirement for a route to be in winter condition is that it should be frozen and have a wintry appearance. These criteria are now accepted as the norm for high standard mixed climbing across Scotland.

Three weeks later, the MacLean-Nisbet team went on to climb their greatest route, *The Needle* (VIII,8) on Shelter Stone Crag. It took two weeks of continuous effort, scoping the best winter line and waiting for a settled spell of weather, before they made a two-day ascent with a bivouac. Twenty years on, the 250m. climb still rates as one of Scotland's most demanding winter routes in terms of length and sustained difficulty, and only last winter saw its first one-day free ascent.

The way was now open for the other great challenges to fall. The following season, Kenny Spence succeeded on his third attempt to climb *Centurion* (VIII,8 1986) on Ben Nevis with Spider MacKenzie, and Nisbet and Sandy Allan linked up an ingenious line on the front face of the Central Gully Wall of Creag an Dubh Loch to give *The Rattrap* (VIII,8 1986). As more people became aware of the new techniques such as hooking edges and torquing, attention in the early 1990s shifted to the easily accessible Northern Corries of Cairn Gorm. Brian Davison, Graeme Ettle and Nisbet were all involved in the action, resulting in a series of short technical



routes including *Big Daddy* (VII,8 1991), *The Vicar* (VII,8 1992) and *Prore* (VII,7 1992). The late 1990s were primarily a time for consolidation, and these climbs introduced dozens of climbers to Grade VII routes. As climbers became fitter and more skilled, many of the big winter routes of the 1980s were repeated, and the one or two points of aid often used on the first ascents were eliminated.

### **State of the Art:**

Until the mid-1980s, many of the harder mixed routes were winter ascents of summer lines, but as confidence has grown there has been an increased emphasis on seeking out winter-only lines. These are typically vegetated, wet and dripping in summer, but they are transformed by winter's grip into inspiring mixed climbing possibilities. *Diedre of Sorrows* (VIII,8 1986) on the Tough-Brown Face of Lochnagar was an early example of a cutting edge winter-only line, and more recently routes such as *Magic Bow Wall* (VIII,8 2001) and *The Godfather* (VIII,8 2002) in the North-West Highlands have expanded this concept to create 300m. routes of alpine proportions that have significant technical difficulty.

Today, two distinct styles are emerging. The first is a continuation of the traditional approach with an emphasis on climbing routes on-sight and ground-up. Attitudes to aid have now hardened, and ascents using rest points or direct aid are considered seriously flawed. As a result perhaps, Scotland can lay claim to the most stylistically pure form of mountaineering in the world. Some routes require multiple attempts over many seasons such as Brian Davison's ascent of *Mort* on Lochnagar (IX,9 2000). This took 18 attempts over 15 years and is widely considered to be the hardest traditional winter route in Scotland. The three-pitch climb involves technical and very strenuous icy mixed climbing with poor protection and serious ground fall potential.

The second style is to pursue technical difficulty by applying modern rock climbing techniques such as pre-inspection to shorter (often single pitch) climbs. Dave MacLeod, one of Scotland's most talented rock climbers, is at the forefront of this development with routes such as *The Cathedral* (X,11 2004) on The Cobbler to his name. MacLeod climbed this 30m. roof problem by placing the gear on the lead, and suggested that the overall difficulty was similar to a pre-protected M12 route. Some climbers are questioning whether *The Cathedral* represents the limit of what is possible using traditional Scottish winter ethics, and for standards to progress, routes need to be pre-protected or practised on a top rope. Although these techniques will drive up technical standards, the difficulty of the bigger traditional routes will always be dominated by the mountaineering challenges of longer approaches, lack of daylight, exposure to weather and a strong determination to preserve the on-sight ethic.

### **The Fowler Influence:**

Mick Fowler, one of Britain's most successful alpinists, has had a prolific Scottish winter career.

"The appeal of Scottish winter climbing is not something readily understood by the average person," he wrote in the 2002 SMC Journal. "I have to admit that I struggled to come to terms with it. Conditions are fickle, early starts wearing and success comes only to those that persevere. Perhaps these are the attractions. Successes that are won too easily are inevitably those that are the least rewarding."

Fowler made his Scottish new route debut in 1979 with the first winter ascent of *The Shield Direct* (VII,7), a soaring line of icy chimneys on the Carn Dearg Buttress of Ben Nevis with Victor Saunders. Fowler went on to climb a superb string of sensational icy mixed routes in the 1980s, mainly in the North-West Highlands. Routes such as *Tholl Gate* (VI,6 1984), *Gully of the Gods* (V,6 1983) and *Great Overhanging Gully* (VI,7 1984) are among the most sought-after winter routes in the country, and climbs such as *Ice Bomb* (VII,7 1988) on Beinn Dearg, *Against All Odds* (VII,7 1988) in Glen Coe and *Storr Gully* (VII,7 2000) on the Isle of Skye are still unrepeated. All these climbs take strong natural lines of daunting steepness, and are predominately ice or icy mixed.

It was natural that Fowler should take his Scottish skills to the Greater Ranges. The first ascent of the technical South-West Buttress of Taulliraju in Peru with Chris Watts in 1982 was his first major success, but the Golden Pillar of Spantik in the Karakoram climbed with Victor Saunders five years later was an eye-opener. Unquestionably, this was one of the finest Himalayan routes of the decade and was very Scottish in character. Intricate route finding, poor protection and tenuous mixed climbing on powder-covered rock all contributed to the difficulty.

Fowler told me recently: "Prior experience of hard climbing in grim conditions helped enormously with this ascent. Scottish winter gave us the confidence to be bold and push on for pitch after pitch knowing that we could find protection in snow-blasted situations."

Spantik led to a series of outstanding first ascents on Taweche, Cerro Kishtwar, Changabang and Siungang. These routes shared several common factors. They were mainly icy mixed climbs, the hard climbing was below 6500m. and they could be climbed relatively fast in an alpine style single push. But most importantly perhaps, they were all intelligently chosen objectives that in many ways could be described as 'super-Scottish' climbs.

### **Scottish Style in the Greater Ranges:**

The current generation of British alpinists has grown up with Mick Fowler's exploits, and his style very much defines the current British approach to climbing the Greater Ranges. There has been a shift of emphasis away from 7000m.+ peaks or attempting technical rock routes



at altitude. The recipe is simple. Combine Grade VII Scottish winter skills with good alpine experience, then go and attempt a mixed climb on a moderate altitude peak. Ian Parnell and Kenton Cool's near-free repeat of the Denali Diamond (2002), Nick Bullock and Al Powell's bold route on Jirishanca (2003) and Rich Cross and Jon Bracey's rapid ascent of the North Face of Kennedy (2004) all point to the success of this approach.

One of the finest British successes of the 1990s was the first ascent of the North Face of Changabang by Andy Cave and Brendan Murphy (1997).

"Undoubtedly, having climbed hard mixed routes in Scotland helped us dispatch sections of the Changabang climb more quickly," recalls Cave. "We'd often made similar technical moves on previous climbs up north, and the ability to climb a long way above protection is also something that you learn in Scotland. New routeing in Scotland also breeds essential route finding skills – a sense of where the line is going to lead. Climbing through bad weather is *de rigueur* in Scotland too, something we did a lot of in India."

It would be simplistic to claim that Scottish winter climbing is the underlying basis for these ascents (proximity to Chamonix, good libraries and sharing of information and an excellent expedition funding system also play their part), but many British climbers passionately cite Scottish winter experience as a key ingredient of their success.

Ian Parnell says: "The weather and conditions even novice Scottish winter climbers take as part and parcel of heading out into the hills really is unusual in world mountaineering. While we miss out on the scale and terrain, everything else about Scottish winter climbing is very close to the big mountain experience. A hard day in Scotland is as tough as any you'll ever spend in the mountains. Even an easy day in Scotland you have to commit, whereas Continental ice cragging you can amble up and decide when you get there whether you can be bothered or not."

The variety of climbing encountered on a Scottish winter route is another key factor, as Malcolm Bass, author of several new routes in Alaska, explains: "In an average Scottish winter season you climb all sorts of white stuff. Water ice, névé, powder, rime, verglas, lovely plastic squeaky ice, wet snow plastered on rock, turf and all sorts of intermediate material. If you waited for routes to be in perfect condition, you'd wait for decades. Winter climbing in Scotland is done, almost by definition, when the routes are 'out of condition' in the traditional Alpine sense. You do your best to make a good choice of venue, walk in, and if it's white you climb something. You climb what you find in the corrie and on the route. I think this gives Scottish winter climbers an advantage in the big hills. When it snows all over your rock pitches you can go on. When the ice pitches melt out you can climb the running rock beneath, and powder-covered slabs come as no great surprise."

But it is not just the technical skills that are important. "It is your will

that is most tested when climbing in Scotland,” Patagonian winter expert Andy Kirkpatrick told me. “Conditions are never assured. The mountains can strip before your eyes as warm winds push north, and even when you find good conditions, climbing can prove impossible with hurricane winds and metres of rime and verglas. Once the top is reached – usually in the dark – there is the descent, testing the navigation skills of even the professional orienteer, especially in a white out with no pistes to follow or cable cars back to the valley. This means we Brits are optimists. We’ll give any climb a go if we have fighting chance.”

### **The Ben Nevis Playground:**

Although there are hundreds of corries and winter cliffs across the Scottish Highlands, the great North-east face of Ben Nevis is the best known, and has had the greatest influence on successive generations of British alpinists. It is reliably in condition from January onwards and has the CIC Hut conveniently situated at its base. Climbing on the Ben is unique. Its cliffs are alpine in stature, and by virtue of their height and position on the west coast, they are exposed to the full force of Atlantic weather systems. The resulting high level of precipitation, and frequent changes in temperature and wind direction, allow ice to build rapidly and produce a winter climbing ground without equal in the country. While the mountain is best known for its Grade V gully climbs such as *Point Five* and *Zero*, it is the thin face routes such as *Galactic Hitchhiker* (VI,5), *Albatross* (VI,5) and *Pointless* (VII,6) that climb the blank slabby walls in between, which have the monster reputations.

Thin face routes rely on a build-up of snow-ice on steep slabs and are normally climbed when the covering is only two or three centimetres thick. Rarely does the pattern of freeze-thaws allow the snow-ice to form thicker than this, and once committed to the route the climbing is a delicate game of mind control while balancing on tip-toe up thinly-iced slabs far above protection. The transitory nature of these climbs adds to their attraction, for it only takes one quick thaw to strip the routes, and they can disappear in a few hours.

Dave Hesleden, one of Britain’s finest all-round climbers, says: “Climbing on the Ben has had a big influence on my climbing. There’s no fixed gear. You have to find protection and set up belays yourself. Routes like *Orion Direct* are big adventures – far more so than doing a Grade V+ icefall in the Alps where you can use screws and Abalakovs. The Ben is the most exacting climbing I’ve ever done. I would never dream of falling off. I’d be prepared to go for it and fall off in the Cairngorms, but never on Nevis.”

Hesleden’s comments reminded me of the time I met French climber Catherine Destivelle in the CIC Hut. Catherine was making a reconnaissance trip with her husband to check out some climbs for a photo



feature in *Paris Match*, but the weather had been poor and they had failed to do a single route. The hut was full and Catherine joined in the general banter with grace and charm, but underneath you could sense that she was disappointed with her week. She visibly brightened when Robin Clothier, the hut guardian and renowned Nevis ice climber, suggested they follow him and Harvey Mullen up *Orion Direct* next morning.

It was a preposterous suggestion. The mountain was very snowy and it was too early in the season for snow-ice to have formed on the upper slabs of the route. Next morning was dark and grey with low cloud and blowing spindrift and most climbers in the hut sensibly chose icefalls or mixed routes low down on the mountain. Robin was undeterred, however, and soon after breakfast the four of them set off for the Orion Face. That evening when I returned to the hut, everyone had got back down safely and were now recounting the day's adventures over steaming mugs of tea. Catherine's eyes danced with delight as she described their climb.

They had followed Robin and Harvey up into the murky gloom of Observatory Gully and when the slope steepened they roped up as two pairs and started climbing. There was no ice, just a 15cm. thick layer of barely consolidated snow covering smooth slabs. There were no runners or belays. Route finding was desperately difficult in the mist, but the marginal conditions meant it was critical they took the easiest possible line. Blindly, they followed Robin and Harvey across the delicate traverse that led right from the Basin and up into the maze of exit gullies above. Every so often they could hear avalanches hissing down *Zero Gully* somewhere to their right. When they got to the summit, Robin pointed instinctively through the swirling snow with his axes and they plunged down through the whiteout towards the Carn Mor Dearg Arete and the descent route.

Catherine said: "It was like nothing I've ever done before. It's a climb I'll never forget."

### **International Perspective:**

For international visitors, the most practical way to experience Scottish winter climbing is to attend one of the International Winter Meets organised by the British Mountaineering Council every other year. The meets are based in Glenmore Lodge, the Scottish Mountaineering Centre in Aviemore at the foot of the Cairngorms. Guests are paired up with local climbers who have the necessary Scottish winter skills to direct their partners to the routes, swing leads and then get them back down the glen.

The meets have attracted many top climbers from around the world. Interestingly, it is the Slovenians such as Janez Jeglic, Andre Stremfelj and Marko Prezelj, who have been most at home in Scottish conditions. Prezelj first climbed in Scotland in March 1999 and notched up eight big routes, almost a lifetime's worth of hard Scottish classics in a mere five

days. The following summer he made a rapid alpine-style repeat of the Golden Pillar of Spantik.

He told me: "There's no doubt that my Scottish experience has improved my approach to mixed climbing. Scottish routes are quite short compared to those in major areas, but the experience is very strong. It's a complex thing, but after experiencing the long approaches in Scotland, clearing snow off routes to place gear, climbing in bad weather and coming back in the fog and wind, I now believe that many things are possible in the mountains. On Spantik I had the technical experience from Scotland so I wasn't scared to make interesting moves without protection close by, and my Himalayan experience meant I wasn't scared about the altitude and size of the mountain. It was really good."

The meets have also given Scottish climbers a greater understanding of what makes Scottish winter climbing unique compared to the rest of the world.

Coast Range guru, Don Serl, told me recently: "You get great training in Scotland for big mountains. You tend to be out in all weather, so bad weather is not unsettling. You know how to dress for it and how to cope with it. Most success in the big mountains depends first and foremost on being able to 'live' in the mountains, in any and all conditions. Here in the Coast Range and the Cascades, the problem is one of consistently bad weather coupled with extremely heavy snowfalls and long approaches. If you get two mountain routes in over a winter, you're doing really well."

When you live in Scotland, the accessibility of the Scottish winter experience is easy to take for granted. Keen climbers will climb routes every weekend. There are probably few other places in the world where you can leave your own bed early in the morning, have a full mountaineering experience, and be back in time for dinner

But Scottish winter is far more than just training for big mountains. Some of the finest Scottish winter climbers rarely climb elsewhere because Scotland gives them all the adventure, challenge and commitment they need. The Scottish winter game can be frustrating and uncomfortable for much of the time, but when it works nothing can compare. As I write this in early January, a warm south-westerly is howling outside, the ice is falling off the crags and the hills are being stripped by a deep thaw. I've failed on every route I have tried in the last month, but I know I'll be back on the crags as soon as it freezes again.

Andy Kirkpatrick understands: "Every season, countless climbers make the pilgrimage to the Highlands, believing that it's better to take a shot and miss than never take the shot at all. Every now and again you'll score, and when you do there's no better place on the planet to climb."

This article first appeared in *The American Alpine Journal* and I have taken the unusual step of including it here in order that the excellent writing can be appreciated by a wider audience and that it can stand as a record of both the antecedents and the current state of Scottish winter climbing. (Ed.)



## MAN-EATER

By John MacKenzie and Ken Crocket

NOW MY old mate, Ken Crocket was really only semi-retired from the winter climbing scene and I thought it was time for him to go for a gentle potter up some local crag that would be encouraging and not too taxing. He had arrived the day before and now February 23, 2005 promised to be a good winter's day with a keen east wind that promised a classic mixture of sun, snow showers and cloud. Just right for a nice Grade III, suitable for not too long a day since we had to be back by 6pm as we were invited to a dinner party.

*The last winter climb I had done was several years ago now, fading as fast as the synovial fluid in my knee joints. So it was in anticipation of a pleasant Grade IV on John Mackenzie's local mountain that I ambled up the A9, waving cheerfully at the Ballinluig speed camera which has caught out so many sleepy club members. The forecast was, for once, wintry, and in deference to my increasingly larger comfort zone I had packed my best winter clothes. There were, naturally, several bottles of comfort too, for his castle, though brimming with hospitality, was usually about 10° cooler than my lowland home. But I had also packed my silk shirt in anticipation of a dinner party.*

*The lower end of Glen Strathfarrar has the famous locked gate that deters the casual driver, but rewards the seeker of the Combination Lock with entry into a magical and remote kingdom. All the birches were snow laden, frosted and heavy; the road deep in powder and the hills quite markedly more snowy on the eastern part of the glen than farther west. This is what we were banking on, that the forecast was sufficiently accurate that our choice of climbing venue on the east faces of Sgurr na Muice and Sgurr na Fearstaig would be snowy but not buried under a metre of useless powder. The mantra of all winter climbers, indeed the Holy Grail, is the word 'Conditions.' Would they be at least sort of okay, the powder hard packed by the recent easterly gales into a climbable medium, even with ice in places, or would it be a white devil of deception, hiding everything and holding nothing save a ptarmigan's weight? Indeed we had the choice of two crags to look at, both very different in appearance and structure but one usually less snowy than the other.*

*I had forgotten one of the few and debatable benefits of a cold bedroom – one does not hang about on waking. The evening meal had been sociable and afterwards, as John fed the sitting room stove with wood, he entertained me with stories of his father, back when it was really, really cold. Breaking the ice on the face bowl in the bedroom for example. In the morning I whipped on my long johns faster than a Highlandman downing a free dram and faced a brave new day.*

*So we drove the long miles to near the top of the glen, past the large herds of stags so tame that we had to stop the car so they could shuffle out of the way, hoping that every car that came was full of fodder. By the time we had reached the burn and the start of the track uphill the snow was a quarter the depth it had been 10 miles back. It was freezing and the ground hard with frost but it had been a dry winter to date and I was not expecting any 1980s style build up of 'perfect conditions' but just something climbable.*

*The track after half-mile or so turns into a stony path that winds its way up quite gently, gaining a farther 300m. in height as it does so. The burn was only partially frozen lower down but now, higher up, quiet and banked with snow and our path grew less distinct with every gain in altitude. The brisk wind promised a raw day that brought in rapidly passing snow squalls and blinks of sunshine that suddenly lit up the hills to a glaring white and equally suddenly hid them within purple brown clouds.*

*We stomped up the track, John in the lead. I was fit through hillwalking, but the weight of a rope and jangly stuff was slowing me slightly. Besides, John was a master at 'allowing' others to break the trail, and today I was content to learn from a master. Or rather, I was content to use lessons hard earned from him in the past. He gave me one or two glances between narrowed eyes as I graciously allowed him to take the lead.*

*At a prominent stone where the track crests a rise before the loch, the sun came out and revealed both faces; that of Sgurr na Muice above us looking pretty white but with rock showing through, and that of Sgurr na Fearstaig a mile or so farther on uphill and totally white, not unexpectedly as it is usually the snowier of the two faces. Now to be completely truthful I was nursing an ambition, shared only with Andy Nisbet and Dave Broadhead, which, though hardly falling into the 'gentle potter up a Grade III' category, I rather wondered if, after 15 years of never finding suitable conditions, might be realised sooner rather than later. It just so happened that at that very moment, as I was standing in the direct line of sight to it, it was lit by a shaft of sunlight that showed it in seemingly better and fuller cover than I had ever seen it before.*

*Some years ago I had done an easy route here with John – one of his routes. It had been enjoyable but I had come away feeling slightly disappointed as there had been nothing stretched. Today looked more promising, and there had been a certain air about my host which, with hindsight, I should have recognised. After all, when a young man myself, I had led several companions up the garden path in search of adventure. I feared I was about to experience what my faithful friends of the past had suffered at my hands. The worm was turning.*

*John led through snow-covered bogs in what seemed to be an illogical route. In fact, he was casting about for the best spot from which to spy out the crag. A two-legged setter. He stopped. Looked up. Looked at me. There was definitely something going down. I hoped it wasn't going to be me.*



Dave Broadhead and I had been up to the foot on several occasions, always thwarted by the overhanging wall that bottomed a steep and uncompromising groove line which led straight up to the summit. Though we had climbed the major line of that part of the face, *The Boar*, some years back, the groove to its left, the object of my ambition, was never possible. Now it looked white and complete, either an illusion of false promises or the gateway to the promised land. Unfortunately, standing 300m. below it and some distance back neither confirmed nor denied my hopes. More to the point there was Ken to consider, my friend and guest, so in as dulcet a tone as I could muster I asked casually whether he had any preferences for choice of route today.

"No," he said. "As long as its new."

Hoping that the inner tiger was still alive within him, I was gratified with the answer. I pointed out that since he had last climbed on the face all the major lines had been done save one.

"Where is it?" He asked pretty quickly, which didn't sound like the answer from a hesitant man at all. So I pointed out the line to him and suggested that it might be a little harder than a Grade III, but this too seemed absolutely fine and since it was a lot closer than Sgurr na Fearstaig and less snowy, it would be the sensible choice for a climb today.

*John could not conceal his body language as he gently probed my mood. I thought quickly before answering. He was easily the most enthusiastic climber I knew. He was also, as I was learning quickly, very modern in his analytical and calculating approach to routes. If he wanted to try something, I would be happy to accompany him. Whether I would lead any of it depended on how horrible it looked. I was in his capable hands. I was also aware that something big and important was driving him today; I could either step aside, or help him along.*

There are two major couloir lines running up to the base of the cliffs plus several minor gullies. To get to the right-hand side of the face we took the right-hand couloir and started up its 200m. height gain of Grade I snow and short icy steps. The powder snow was indeed compacted into a hard slab, well bonded to the hillside and giving easy climbing. Now, I have often noticed that good conditions on the approach mean rather poorer conditions on the face and vice-versa, unless a perfect freeze – thaw – freeze cycle has happened, which was not the case here. Plenty of freeze but no thaw.

The easy access, exposed but straight-forward, led us to the great slab beneath the various grooves. The massive central groove, *The Boar*, had taken several winters to finally form, while the groove to its right, *The Wolf*, formed most winters, albeit briefly. The groove we were now looking at had never formed until now, with the barrier wall sporting a fat free-standing icicle running from the apex of a slab to the base of the groove above.

My eyesight has been slightly myopic for decades – never really a handicap, in fact it has helped on many an adventure, as I often fail to see the gory details of a route in advance, instead picking out the general line. So if it looks elegant and defined from a distance, it's probably worth looking at. Grasp the nettle, get stung later.

Now it's a curious thing that when standing on an already steep slope the steeper ground above you always seems reasonably friendly. This optical illusion plays down just how bloody steep it actually is. If suspended icicles hanging from the undersides of rocks above are hanging out into space then that normally suggests the angle is close on vertical. But all I could see was this great fat free-standing icicle, the 'open sesame' to the promised land. We were drawn to it, two moths to a great big flame.

The slab we were now climbing up can be a pleasant Grade II dance up thin ice, leading under normal conditions to a rock wall. Today, it was thickly covered in not very substantial snow, adequate for purchase – just, so we soloed up and across its top to arrive at the icicle. This at least did not disappoint, no more than 5m. high but really thick and juicy, spanning the barrier wall and ending below a little icefall that ran up to a sizeable overhang just to the right of the groove line I coveted.

The icicle gave a solid belay of two longish slings, after which it was time for tea, that fine British tradition that no battle could start without. Though not exactly expecting a 'doddle,' at least I was buoyed up by the warm liquid into thinking that what lay above looked challenging but fun, just the thing for Ken to get back into the swing of things again.

The axes bit into the ice well, the sudden transition from the relaxed 50° inclination of the slab below to an arm wrenching 90° of the ice making this a blessing. This was quick to climb though and very soon the ice above thinned to a thickish dribble. Just above me was the overhang I had spotted from below and some rather tenuous moves up the diminishing ice led to it. I noticed, rather clearly from this close-up point of view, that the fringe of icicles hanging off its lip were well out into space. Looking down, Ken was huddled up against his icicle and below him the slope fell swiftly and without interruption to the loch a long way below. I felt in need of a little protection at this juncture. The overhang had, curiously in such massive rock, a very thin square flake that took, with some careful manoeuvring, a very thin sling. The rock and sling were evidently well suited to each other. Just being attached to the mountain made a huge difference – better than seeing the ropes hang into space uselessly, as the icicle belay from up here looked a great deal thinner than it did from down below.

*The first pitch looked reasonable; there was ice. The view was great, into the peaceful bowl of the corrie. There would be deer calving here in the summer; skylarks above. Today it was cold. Too cold to lace up my boots properly. My left boot was a bit loose. While not a bad handicap, on*



*what was to come up today it certainly reduced my motor skills slightly. As John huffed and puffed upwards, lumps of ice battered downwards. I had to carefully judge where to stand and when to glance up, though I did end up with a small nick on my face from an ice shard.*

Stepping left from below the overhang led into the groove; initially this was okay, quite thick snow-ice led up to the start of it giving me some hope of success. However, the angle of the groove immediately turned up a notch to just less than vertical and, worse, there was only pretty poor snow masking it. Time to take stock and have a considered think. Firstly, clear away the useless snow and look for hidden cracks and turf. The groove was a perfect 'V' in profile and turned out, surprise, surprise, to be completely crackless and smooth. This was a bit of a blow but not entirely unexpected as schist can sometimes be like that. So, no cracks. How about some nice frozen turf to get the tip of an axe and crampons into? Not much luck there either. Oh dear. I'd have to think a little bit harder. The right wall of the groove however did hold a bit of a promise. Blobs of ice ran down it and they were well frozen blobs as far as blobs go; certainly not ideal but something to go for. So with a right axe and right crampon delicately tapping 'blobs' on the right wall of the groove and the left neatly shearing off the thin slabs of snow in the back of the groove, some kind of upward progress was beginning to materialise.

As I was edging up this Braille trail of ice a wee voice rang up from below: "How's it going, is it about Grade III do you think?"

My answer was, inwardly, a little whimper but outwardly "Probably that sort of thing, bit tricky and delicate in places but quite fun", being careful not to breathe too heavily while talking in case it upset the teetering balance I was holding. By now I was more than 20m. above the thin sling runner and was getting a little anxious. However, the Gods sometimes provide where least expected and I found a thin but deep vertical slot just wide enough to take a No.1 wired nut, in other words rather on the small side but well in. Phew. Soon things took a turn for the steeper. On the left wall of the groove was more ice and even an isolated 'dod' or island of turf. Both were too far away across blank rock to be of any use and so the only option was straight up on totally vertical ground. However, more good things were being revealed. The promise of well frozen turf was above me and though obviously somewhat uphill as they say, did suggest a viable way to reach what looked like an easier angled continuation of the groove just above another overhang.

*I'm not only here to hold the belay rope, I'm here to encourage. John was running into something hard, even I could sense that this was not going to be a pleasant IV, never mind a fun III. "You're looking good," I shouted up, before ducking down again.*

My little nut runner was now well below me and further protection highly desirable. One more teetery move and I struck turf. Initially, this was a bit disappointing as it simply exploded beneath my axe, so cold and

dry that it had no substance. A longer reach sunk my axe into something that would have held the weight of ten men. Better still, despite the steepness I could relax, feeling the sudden departure of the nervous tension that had coiled up within me for the last 25m. There were still no rock cracks around but I did hammer in a 'turf hook', now worth its weight in platinum, and quite capable of holding a short fall. Less tentative now and feeling bolder, some powerful and reachy moves led rapidly to the next overhang which I judged marked the end of the immediate difficulties. A crack appeared and a tied-off peg and good nut runner greatly enhanced life expectancy and even allowed a bit of banter with Ken, now cold and far below and no longer believing that this was going to be a pleasant wander up a Grade III.

Above the overhang the angle fell back, and rather than being a groove was in fact a narrow shelf that ran up along the edge of the much bigger and deeper groove of *The Boar*; definitely not a good place to fall into. The day being what it was, nothing but nothing was going to come easily. The shelf rapidly thinned of any visibly useable turf and instead provided a delicate exercise in looking for the isolated bits of turf hidden beneath a crust of useless snow. Of course, there was no further protection but at least it wasn't too steep. I was hoping to head for an obvious snow bay, still a long way above, but to my great joy found, shortly before the rope ran out, a deep crack that took one good peg belay. There was no stance and standing was tricky as the slabby rock encouraged a slither, crampon points hovering on the point of shooting away from under you and staying put on some unseen rugosity.

*It was my turn, and after a routine bash up the ice all hopeful expectations disappeared and turned into featureless rock, covered in distinctly unfriendly snow. I had stiffened in the cold and a forgotten and unmissed painful hot flush did little to cheer me. Worse, the Dachsteins I had chosen as being the best pair turned on me and a pink thumb began wavering in the wind. Luckily, I had a pair of thin liners, but even so it added to a cold experience. My brain began to turn up the flow of life-enhancing drugs, we were definitely into something interesting. And John was doing a great job in front.*

Ken came up expostulating and taking some time. His thumb had come through his mitt and his hand was rather cold in consequence. He had long ago put aside the 'Grade III' and was now in full battle mode. The wind blew in freezing eddies and spindrift came and went. It was a full on Scottish winter's day with the outcome anything but certain.

With Ken tied back on to the belay peg I headed up to the snow bay up to my right. A thin icefall ran down the right wall of a deep groove that itself seemed to end in another overhang. The icefall had been the scene of Dave Broadhead's bold lead that had ensured success on *The Boar* and I was certain that if the groove to the left was climbable today then we











probably had the climb 'in the bag'. However, as I climbed higher towards the groove, so the snow got, if anything, worse. The groove once reached was plumb vertical and crackless as before with no turf being immediately evident. I retreated to a shelf about 12m. above Ken to see if I could climb the left wall of the groove instead. There was ice, but rotten until about 4m. or so above me. This would have reached uncertain snow covered slabs which may or may not have been climbable. Would I be able to retreat if they were not?

*I was tied on again to an imaginary stance, fighting both the cold and the ropes. They were united in making my belaying as uncomfortable as possible. The ropes kept twisting and jamming, my feet were only just on some hidden nick in the rock, one edge at a time. And above, John had run into a real dilemma. Time to dig in and grit teeth. Oddly enough, I was beginning to enjoy moments. I would raise my face and feel the spindrift. To know a familiar discomfort was to be more fully aware. To be aware was to be alive. And the view continued to calm the mind.*

There were no runners between Ken and me. A fall of more than 20m. on one peg was not, in my estimation, advisable. So I down-climbed the horrid snow and rejoined Ken. Another hour of precious daylight gone. The one remaining option was to somehow traverse left a short distance into the direct continuation of the groove below, the intervening rib looking characteristically blank. Mild farce then followed as I untangled the rope from Ken's sack – my feet shot from under me and I began a graceful slide downhill, soon brought to an abrupt halt by Ken. A more successful re-arranging of the ropes then followed, plus a cup of tea which immediately improved both the weather and our chances of success.

By down-climbing about 5m. I thought I could see a way across the rib to the groove beyond. Some moves not dissimilar to the crux of *Zero Gully* then followed, which I have to say seemed pretty straight-forward compared to what had just been climbed and what indeed might be awaiting higher up. Being established in the groove felt good; on closer acquaintance it was obviously the line of choice. Straight as a die, it led up to yet another overhang, a narrow steep groove above that, and then it went out of sight. Good turf led to some speedy climbing as far as the overhang and I was just starting to feel optimistic. A good peg runner helped even more and then, of course, came the proverbial slap in the face. Some tricky traversing under the overhang led into the narrow groove ahead. It soon steepened into a vertical, smooth and in every damn way a mirror image of the ghastly groove above the snow bay. There were no obvious signs of cracks for protection and I was now a long way above the sole piece of gear. A solitary turf foothold provided a respite to take stock and think. Hope, in the form of a huge 'dod' of turf lay about 3m. above me. Do I go hell for leather up the groove hoping to make it by sheer momentum or do I retreat and see if I can find another solution to this baffling climb? Given a rock

solid piece of gear I might have risked it, but by now the fall potential was huge and unacceptable.

So, once more I down-climbed the wretched groove, not that easy, and surveyed the left bounding wall closely. At a point about 6m. below my high point I could see a good but small island of turf isolated in the middle of the slabby left wall of the groove. It was about a metre-and-a-half away and offered the one slender chance of completing this climb which was rapidly becoming anything but 'fun', let alone a 'Grade III doddle.' How one eats one's words at times like this.

*How often had I been in the lead on some desperate pitch, way above a solid companion stuck on a miserable belay ledge, calculating the chances of survival. The roles were now neatly reversed. More than that, there was no way I could see me leading such climbing. It was not only difficult and serious, it was really technical. I had never experienced such rock; where a corner would normally be cracked, it was not, where a wall might show a weakness, there was none. At one point I found myself bridging up a corner with nothing for the picks and nothing for the points. "I have absolutely nothing here," I shouted up. "Just climb," the Master replied. Recalling past climbs, I breathed in, deliberately kicked the points onto the left wall, and stepped up. It worked, a few crystals grating in protest. Another desperate pitch. Another great lead.*

Grateful for long arms and leaning left with the desperation of salvation at hand I hooked the solid, dependable and blessed piece of turf. Trusting in what I had at hand, a long swing across the groove plus a simultaneous pull up brought the other axe next to the left one. There was still nothing for feet but, and it was a huge but, a ribbon of turf followed the crest of the groove and it was but one more move to reach it and I could stand in balance for the first time since the base of the route. Wasting no time, this was done and better still a big horizontal crack gobbled up a large nut and life looked and felt ever so sweet. A short distance above a small stance and perfect belays compounded the feeling of well being and I brought Ken up. He was now firing on all cylinders and the light of battle was in his eyes; could I detect a hint of the old Ken of *Minus One Gully* and other heroic sorties? I thought I could.

It was good to be united again as both of us were feeling the strain. The wind was still eddying and swirling, bringing gusts of spindrift that hit both from the front and behind, finding, as it always does, the tiniest chinks in clothing and depositing little granules of extra cold snow. However, on the positive side our prospects were improving; if I could get into the wider, squarer groove ahead of me I think we had a good chance. On a darker note it was distinctly late afternoon-ish and our groove appeared to end at an undefined barrier much higher up.

The first few moves were very thin but then much friendlier ground arrived with cornucopias of turf. Inevitably all this sudden speeding up



came to a halt at the next blocking overhang. However, this was not nearly as bad as I had feared, being turfey over its crest and even having some gear. I was very much banking on previous knowledge of this crag which is geologically a bit of an odd-ball. The entire face is a concertina of grooves that are massive and often crackless for the initial pitch or two but then the rock, which is always near perfect, becomes more broken and turfey higher up. Some parts of the face are steeper than others and this right-hand section the steepest of all. Banking on the hope of easier ground above I had a bit of a shock when I had run out the rope to arrive at a most definite *cul-de-sac*. Another perfect belay on the left wall of the now totally enclosed groove allowed a grandstand view into what followed.

Ken came up rapidly and a council of war followed. Above lay a steepening slab, boxed into a perfectly rectangular amphitheatre of vertical rock. Thick ice flowed down the slab and this ended abruptly at the headwall which appeared to overhang. Surely we wouldn't get defeated at this late stage, there must be a way through this headwall. Resisting another cup of tea, I found the ice perfect, plastic in consistency and a sheer pleasure to climb. If only the rest of the climb had been like this it would have been a different story. From the left wall sprung a remarkable yardarm of rock, very similar in appearance to those old fashioned car indicators. Perhaps it was telling me to go right but it certainly was reassuring to drape a sling around its considerable length.

The ice thinned as it approached the headwall, the yardarm now well below. I moved right, as indicated, and found a crack that promised safety. Hammering in a large nut made whatever I was about to do relatively secure. The headwall indeed did overhang, was about 5m. high at most and was capped by turf on the right where it was a little lower. However, overhanging pull-ups well right of my runner seemed less attractive than the higher central portion of the wall which sported a little groove ending in a bulge. This was directly above the nut runner and looked rather intriguing. A deep horizontal crack lay just below the top bulge and if I could reach it then I could probably move left and out onto what was definitely easier ground. Avoiding a very loose block it was no big deal to climb the groove and reach the crack. This perfect feature allowed the entire axe pick into its depths. It was now a slightly strenuous but relatively straightforward manoeuvre to pull up on this and bury an axe into deep turf out left. Hey presto, salvation; we had escaped the jaws of The Man-eater.

*We were not about to be beaten. At this point I felt that the rocks, if not exactly lying back yet, were at least showing signs of having been softened by the weather. By now, we had been hardened by the weather, especially my thumb. I scratched up to bump into the overhang where John had gone left. A large nut marked his saving grace. It was new, and my newly-found position as faithful second would not allow me to readily abandon it. I*

*had to shout several times above the roar of the wind before John gave me some slack and I went back a bit to attack the nut. Unfortunately, he had hammered it in as a sacrifice to the Gods of Survival, and there it will stay until long after we've moved on. I reluctantly, but happily, went back left and pulled over the final bulge.*

This had been another long pitch and Ken took ages to follow. This was not due to idleness on his behalf but to my hammered-in nut placed in the crack below the headwall. Being a good Scot, waste is never an alternative when a good hour's hammering and prising would release the jammed item of gear from its rocky home. Unfortunately for Ken, despite his enthusiasm to remove the nut, my enthusiasm to place it securely outweighed his. The nut would remain firmly wedged in its rocky crack, its yellow tape gradually fading into a bleached white.

We were now nearly at the summit of the hill, the wind had fortunately abated somewhat and Ken set off to climb to the top. Time-wise the sun was now sinking in the west, the full glory of the evening light was upon us and the dinner party (remember the dinner party?) was about to begin. Part one of the day was ending, part two was just beginning. Ken was belayed about 20m. left of the summit cairn, so we walked on over, shook hands and remained pretty subdued. It had been a little too cold, too windy and too hard to fully enjoy. More to the point we still hadn't had lunch and it was gone 6pm. We had started the first pitch before 11am and a degree of fatigue was now evident. I tried to phone home to apologise for being so late, but for the first time, at this location I could get no signal. Ken tried as well, but failed. Suddenly, a more serious aspect was emerging in this day of trials. We were still a good hour from the car and it was at a point 13 miles along a snowy glen with no mobile phone reception. Folks would start to get worried.

*We were up. And out. And down with hunger to boot. I was seriously famished. Only now did I take in the full majesty of the scene. To the west the sun was behind a bank of dull red cloud, lighting up the sky above and the loch beneath. To the east a superb full moon filled the corrie with its ghostly light. As we finally gained the easing under the crags snow crystals winked in the moonlight. We had to push on but I tried to save my knees from the worst.*

A hurried bite to eat, a couple of photos that I hoped would capture both a knackered Ken and the wildness and beauty of the area, and then down. There is a good easy descent down a broad gully a little way south west from the summit, so we took crampons off and stumbled over the slithery boulders towards it. Expecting a quick descent in soft snow we were not amused to find the best and hardest snow of the day. Back on with the crampons again, more time passing by and by almost running we reached the car in 50 minutes. Still no reception. Today was obviously just one of those days when the Gods twist and turn at opposing angles to yours.



Anxious not to crash the car and to avoid the deer, the journey was slower than the incipient panic within would have liked. At a point less than halfway down the glen I met another car hurtling towards us. Both of us stopped just in time. It was Scott Russell, a good friend whom Janet had phoned and here he was looking for us. Oh dear, time to get to a phone. With Scott leading the way back to his house in the glen, I wasted no time phoning. We reckoned on being back home well before 9pm, so we had a little time in hand. Scott's wife Julia put on the kettle, home-made cakes came out and Scott hugged me with relief.

*There were one or two moments hurtling down the glen when I thought how silly it would be to die now, but my trusty leader retained a grip on reality and the road. It was good to find a local out looking for us. We were not late by many an epic standard, but John has a good reputation and his friends were worried. By stages, the evening just got better and better. Tea and cake in the house kept us going, and once on the safer roads I began to probe John regarding the climb's grade. "Definitely too hard to be a IV," I ventured. "Must be a V," I guessed. "Pretty sustained, and serious too," I dropped in. All the time John was agreeing. "That route, I ventured, was a man-eater."*

*"That route was a Grade VI," replied my host. And so the route was pinned down.*

Well fortified and with less troubled consciences we drove home. I even got a hug from Maureen at the gate. So, well hugged and with the roads now black, the journey back was a winding down process. Of course, the irony of it all was that two of the other guests at the dinner were even later, so by the time we reached the party, everyone was extremely well oiled and Ken and I had a bit of catching up to do. One of the more interesting sides of climbing is managing the huge gap of reality between being 'up there' and now down in a dinner party, separated by only a few miles and hours but of a different realm. Two entirely enjoyable situations (give or take) and somehow one enhancing the other, the rare chance to mix and match opposites. It had indeed been a strange day.

*Back at the castle we were met by my concerned hostess. On learning from Janet that in 25 years John had never before been later than his estimated return time, I understood the level of concern. A quick hot shower worked wonders externally, a large glass of wonderful red wine internally, and conversation over a fine dinner in their friends' house worked the usual magic of gently landing us back on firm ground. But all the time, listening to the gently relaxing susurrus of polite conversation, in the background I could still hear the wind on the rocks and the shifting snow in the gully. It made it all the finer, having been there. Having tussled with, and escaped, The Man-eater.*

## HOT ICE

By David Adam

THE writhing gondola swayed between the darkness and the dawn on a cable that stretched forever into the blown mists of the mountain. It slowed with trepidation and then, with a sickening lunge, plunged from the giant pylon into suspended space out across the corrie. Stunned faces bravely tried to ignore instincts to clench, with whitening knuckles, anything that felt solid. Fearful missed heartbeats dissolved into euphoric, fairground whoops of delight as the cable took the vertiginous strain and the veil of cloud ripped apart to reveal the cliffs of the North face. The lichen covered rocks, 300m. down, stood still in their perpetual silence and waited for their next age to come. They had been free of snow and ice for a long time now, some say 50 years. Yet others can still recall climbing there, on the real stuff, during the good old days.

The hot cappuccino took the March chill from his fingers and Mac looked up towards the gondola from the hotel balcony. The tiny capsule moved slowly towards the Tower like a spider on glistening gossamer and then merged again with the morning haze and disappeared. As the gondola wafted its way through the rainbow tinged vapour he could hear the faint, echoing drone of the cryogenic gear working high up on the mountain. Inside, his room was clad in a warming, knotty pine with a grand view towards the arête. Dramatic photographs of climbers on extreme ice routes, with details of the last known winter ascent printed below, pronounced the sanctity of the place. Mac poured over them again and again, absorbing the real moments when ice stuck to rock and snow actually fell. Many of the pioneers had started their ascents from this very location years ago. The stone from the ruined hut was used to fashion the hotel entrance and even although they had arrived by funicular, visitors became aware of a bond with the past as they crossed the threshold. Over the door hung a crossed pair of ancient Piranha axes belonging, it is said, to the greatest hero of the mountain and underneath them, the old hut's plaque.

On the cliff, a viewing gantry with 300 seats was nearly complete for this evening's extravaganza. Speaker systems spat out screechy static, spotlights were positioned and tested. Trickle pipes, alongside the air-blast freezers, had the ice forming up nicely into a row of ten free-hanging icicles, each, being eventually some 20m. long. The tip of each icicle dripped ominously into the void. Sponsors' slogan banners were gently flapping where they dangled from the climb platform, teasing the depths of the empty space between the two opposing buttresses. Live broadcast crews set up satellite dishes. The busy stir was eerily paused for a moment



as another packed gondola clattered into the top station, disgorging a gaggle of giggling corporate guests into the summit bar. The bar was built like an earth-house covered in rock slabs, with its form emerging rather beautifully from the rocky plateau like an eye-lidded crescent moon but, most importantly, it was filling up with thirsty spectators, hungry for thrills.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Mac methodically filed his crampon points and fitted the step-in bindings against the boots. He fiddled about with the cords on the chute, then felt the balance of the axes and adjusted the cams to suit the technical report which stated that this evening's ice would be a poor quality four. The air humidity had affected the formation of the ice early on, making it 'mega-crystalline' and this was bad news for Mac. He, unlike the others, didn't have technicians on hand to design and fettle gear to suit different conditions, his entry was on a 'wild card.' The quietness of his room was blasted by the chopper coming in to land and the intercom telling all competition climbers to proceed to the embarkation point. Mac rushed his gear together and gorged it into a sack that always seemed too small, then crashed through the door leading to the heli-pad. A hand grabbed his sack and pulled it in, chucking it in the tail-stow. Mac teetered across the deck and strapped in.

"You boys got to be mad," shouted the deckhand as he pulled more gear inside. "And you have to be nuts to fly around the hill in this crate," replied Ben, the American ace, who grinned confidently from the deepest corner of the draughty fuselage. He gave everyone a knowing glance and for Mac it was a reassuring one. The chopper rose in a spiral over the burn and then pulling its tail up, headed for the cliff at speed and circled around the summit buttress.

"Gee, look at those diamond-drops," Ben was peering out between the battered joints of the chopper's tin plates at the row of icicles that hung like beast's teeth from the top of the venomous one. "That is something else, wow." Nobody stirred or spoke as the chopper bellied down to the plateau like a burst balloon and the first 10 climbers, relieved to be out of that 'bucket of bolts' spewed out onto the rocks. It buzzed off to pick up the others before darkness fell.

A timeless calm washed over the mountainside with the setting of the sun. Mac let every last ray of light and colour soak into his mind, as if it might be his last, until, when he closed his eyes, the burning disc was still there, changing from ferocious white orange to electric blue. He waited. Ben was behind him trying to share the moment and confided: "You just can't beat a Scottish sunset." Mac opened his eyes in surprise, trying to bring them into focus, still seeing the after glow of the sun razoring across his vision: "Aye, you're right, some things don't change." There was a nice chill to the air up here, but not enough to keep the ice right. The chopper arrived and soon it would be time to start.

At the corrie edge they rock-hopped down onto the buttress crest and grabbed their first close up view of the rigging. The alloy climb platforms were suspended, like a web, from cables anchored on the rocks below their feet to the buttress facing them – 40m. away across the gully. The top platform was the business end of things where the icicle roots were and all the mechanisms for the cryogenic gear. About 20m. below this and level with the ice tips was slung a narrow, retractable platform where the climbers geared up and launched themselves onto the ice. Mac stopped on the walkway leading to the platform and peered into the depths below the ice. There was about 75m. of space between the ice tips and the steep gully scree boulders.

“That might be kind of tight down there,” warned Ben, as the rig creaked and wallowed under the strain, “barely enough drop to rip your chute in”.

Preceded by a huge round of foot stomping and applause from the spectator’s gantry the spotlights were finally switched on, bringing to life a darkening place full of gravity and foreboding. A vivid amphitheatre for a spectacular sport was unveiled. The first-round climbers took up their positions on the lower platform and double checked their gear. The scrutineer slowly examined all backpack cords and tools and waved up to the adjudicator.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the British Hot Ice Competition, 2075. We present 20 international climbers, please welcome them and give them all your support in this, the most dangerous and exhilarating sport in the world and I hope that you have an enjoyable evening,” the compere announced with ‘sponsored’ eloquence.

The climbers had already drawn for position and were stationed below their respective icicles, restlessly clattering their crampons on the platform, like race horses in the stalls. Life or death betting on ‘Hot Ice’ was common and many critics had compared it with the most heinous of blood sports, but the prize money was good, very good and sponsors loved the media exposure. The fastest 10 of the bunch went through to the final. Mac looked up at the 20m. of overhanging ice and then down towards the scree, which was stunningly highlighted by spotlights, trying to fix the distances in his mind. He had climbed Grade 10 indoor ice before and had done a few free-falls before but this was his first time on ‘Hot Ice.’ Here, there were no ropes to stop a fall and no wrist loops on the axes to ease the strain, just you and the ice.

“Climbers, take your positions,” came the command from the starter. Mac looked along to Ben, three places away, for a lead. Ben gingerly pecked his first pick into the ice – it seemed all right – followed by the second and hung back on them. Letting his weight do the work, he screeved his crampon points into the ice as high as possible, not kicking yet in case the icicle tip sheared off. He hung there, backside pushed out

ready to go. Like tree climbing cats all 10 climbers clawed tenuously into the ice, suspended with cavernous space below their feet. The stage was set and each climber was highlighted against the rocky darkness. Wisps of steam rose from their sweating hands. Their last refuge, the platform, was hoisted up. For Mac, seconds turned to hours and blood drained from static arms. Space between his knees was occupied by the see-sawing rocks of the scree seventy-five metres below. Down was just a step away and for some, this is as far as it goes, they ditch out on the wait.

“Wait for it,” shouted the starter and then blasted the air horn. The crowd went wild when Ben lost it and was left hanging on one pick. Crampons daggered into black space, squirming himself up in vain, trying to sink into the target icicle. A long reaching shot with his right pick whacked into the ice as his points finally hit home. Mac had 5m. under his belt and was keeping level with his neighbour, Marie from Chamonix. Higher up things get better, where the ice becomes kickable, the overhang angle reduced and the pace could be quickened. Cranked grips on the axes helped to fight fatigue as fingers ‘dumbed out,’ then, the nip in the air could become a serious factor. Thumping in a pick is easy, getting it out again uses up lots of energy. Mac had found a happy medium by tapping the picks into the ice by just a couple of centimetres, leaning back on them and trusting in positive crampon work. Calves and forearms were in agony now, forced breathing essential to keep muscles from cramping up, the heart missing or adding a beat amidst the manic palpitations. The patriotic crowd, as always supporting the underdog, repeated and repeated, “Come on, Mac.” He was there, grabbing the rail, finished and safe, crumpling up, stress waning, dryness, retching, trying to swallow and nothing there. The ‘easy’ bit was done and he had gained third place in this heat. Mac watched from the viewing gantry, with a certain undefined feeling of pride in himself, as the other group of competitors lined up for their heat.

“Looks like really scary stuff from here, eh?” said Ben.

“Aye, well it is I suppose and the ice is crap too. Then if we ditch out there’s that bloody awful landing,” something that had been worrying Mac for a while.

“Try steering off to the left into the breeze away from the drop zone and pull the chute round into the slope above as you go down, stops you from tumbling too much. Hell, he’s quick.” Ben had just clocked his main rival on the ice, the Norwegian champion. On the climb platform they waited anxiously for the climbing time that would set the pace for the final – this is usually the fastest time of the day minus 10 seconds.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this evening’s target time has been set at an incredible two minutes, fifteen point three seconds and the fall time is two seconds.”



Mac knew that he stood little chance of winning or even finishing. He dreamed through the jet darkness towards the pin-points of light coming from the hotel, to his room and the photographs of the cliffs smothered in snow and ice, real winter climbing in Scotland and just to be back then.

The 10 qualifying climbers made their way down to the icicles, deep breathing all the way, adrenaline surging to the point of sickness and all going through the blind motion of finding and pulling the ultra fast rip. They stepped out onto the platform and once again assumed their positions. The French lass, doing a Joan of Arc, kissed the icicle's tip and crossed herself. Mac clenched and thrust his mum's lucky Ptarmigan foot deeper into his pocket and Ben slurped the last of his Coke. The Norwegian shook himself down constantly and jumped up and down on the spot several times, unbalancing the platform and the others, in a display of utter defiance to the ice and the exposure.

"Climbers take your positions."

To Mac this was the real thing now, as pertinent now as it was way back then: Simply life or death. Get up this icicle before it melted or lose the tools, bale out and rip. The icicles' internal heating elements, that could be seen glowing fiery orange in the roots, were set for two minutes, fifteen point three seconds after which all of the icicles would drop to the screes, like crashing chandeliers regardless of anyone on them or below them. The draw for positions had Mac sandwiched between Ben and the Norwegian. They all mounted the ice and hung.

"Wait for it," screamed the starter and, keeping them on hold until he could see arms and legs begin to shake, he finally blasted the horn. Marie peeled off immediately as her first placements dinner plated. The other climbers wanted to watch for her chute but just had to keep bashing on, ignoring her diminishing screech of, 'Sacre-Bleu.' The crowd went silent as her axes ricocheted like dropped pins onto the rocks below and echoed around the cliffs with a savage loneliness. And then, as if lit by candles, the flickering of blue and red stripy nylon was caught in the spots and the instant cheering told all that her chute had miraculously deployed. Ben was in the lead, climbing beautifully with grace and speed. Long measured stretches out for placements and then crampon run up a metre. Mac was learning by the second and amazingly was keeping pace with the Norwegian who, for once, showed that he was human after all by glancing nervously down at the screes as he struggled to withdraw an overdriven pick. Mac's confidence was brimming and he was actually savouring this like a home-made stew. Ben was now a matter of inches in the lead from Mac, who in a blaze of determined ferocity launched himself higher. Then, in too much haste, crampons scratched out, a pick slipped the ice and time stood still for Mac as he floundered around trying to regain one crampon point on the ice. His arm stretched in

shivering weakness, with the pick chattering in its slot anticipating failure. As a last resort he crimped the icicle between his ankles and let loose a massive lunge with the other axe. Ben was nearly at the top platform and had hooked into the metalwork to scramble up, victorious. Mac had 10 metres of climbing left and half-a-minute to do it in. His rhythm returned and soon he had completed five of those metres when the diamonds began to flaw. First a creaking judder ran down the ice into the tools, the only warning of imminent collapse. Mac's icicle started to move like some animated, mythological statue and shunted dramatically over to the left before parting and falling. He jettisoned the tool grips and kicked himself farther away from the diamond drop. The black void between him and the ice became the birth place of shear fear. It fell with him, sucking him down into the death zone.

"Rip.... Mac.... Rip," an awakening shout of desperation came rocketing down from Ben above. A third of his fall time had passed and he was still in the legendary and dreaded 'faller's dwam'. The cold wind hurtling past at 140km. an hour flipped him up with his arms flapping over his helmet. Spinning, star-spangled lights from above and below confused him along with the relentless chanting of the screaming crowd: "Rip, Rip. Pull the chord."

He grabbed wildly at the parachute release handle and caught a finger in it. The canopy, with a blue and white saltire design, snapped open and thumped sensation back into his numb, free-falling body. The icicle silently plunged down past him like a rocket sent from space and then thundered into the boulders. The crowd went wild as six other climbers baled out into the depths, chutes banging open in a myriad of colours. The massive explosion of ice on rock sent shards across the corrie and peppered the hotel roof several hundred metres below.

Pulling at the chute lines, Mac managed to manoeuvre through the turbulent breeze and moved slightly away from the fall area. Filled with a satisfied excitement and the sudden realisation that he had actually survived, he released the most enormous, ear-splitting, thrill-filled screech of: "Yee-Haa," that resounded, over and over again with the spirit of youth and life across Echo Wall, over the Tower, up Hadrian's Wall and onto the Orion Face. The grin on his face grew as he thought about the old pioneers grumbling about the sanctity of their hill and then turning in their graves. The tumbling ice had created a huge downdraught that headed directly for Mac. It was only then that the scree rocks rushed up at an incredible rate, forcing a desperate, inexperienced bid to control his turn into the hill. Pulling hard on both brake lines the canopy stalled, then collapsed and fell.

An hour later Marie, making her way down, found him.

## THREE HITS AND A MISS

By Phil Gribbon

THE faint moaning filtered round the edge of the crag. It thrust a wedge of tension into the peace of a still summer evening.

We had come out to scramble about on the minor problems of our local outcrop. Nothing serious or demanding, just the delights of moving freely on warm rock, up one line, then down another, and so on. Working confidently through little facile sequences of moves but ignoring other options that required more commitment. Cut out the risk factor, and have fun, man. This was all about personal satisfaction. It was the capture of a sense of freedom, the pleasure and *joie de vivre* of moving in control along a linking series of random rocky blemishes on smooth little walls. However, it was too easy to switch off and dream, in an imagined world of anticipation and enjoyment with an afterglow to store in the memory of a route well done. I was lost in the mythological realms of the Osnabergs. Come down to earth and concentrate on the moment.

Here I was, belayed on the top of a pinnaced block trying to talk my son up a move that would be tricky for the wee lad. His pal on the end of the rope awaited his turn with innocent impatience. Time would have to pass before I could get down and venture round the corner.

I had heard the swish of brushed bushes and the dull thump on the ground. What had my companion done to himself? On a crag which was never more than 25ft. high. Don't dwell on it, but nonetheless, that noisesome sound had been tinged with pain when it came drifting across the face.

The rock was pleasantly warm, the yellow was on the broom, and the sickly scent of the elder flowers wafted over my pinnacle. Tiny insects idly hovered in the slanting sunlight, all here today and gone tomorrow. Close by towards the Howe of Fife were gentle hillocks patterned with neat fields and along the road from Dairsie the quiet cars were slowly strung towards Cupar. All rural idyll with a distant pantheon of well kent hills stretching in blue silhouettes along the horizon. Those upthrust twin volcanic bumps in the Lomonds floating on their upland moorland raft, dipping down and rising into the cramped swelling hummocks of the Ochils, down again to wide strath before up the Chonzie Munro framing the cutout funfare target pair of Stuic a'Chroin and Vorlich at the end of the line. More low ridges and then the Lawers range beyond and the indistinguishable Glen Lyon hills, and then the classical mountain of the fairies, Schiehallion, with its old path scars now healing but with fresh hordes tramping ever upwards. Come now, not more hills, yet afar the Farragon hill, then Ben y Gloe and the merging masses of a glut of Grampians that lurk behind the tower blocks of Dundee.



This is a fine reward to get from a little Fife hillock where a few miles from home the mountains were gathered around to murmur of myriad distant hills. Dream away boy.

We were on the crag of gray metamorphosed mudstone that caps and rings the crest of Craiglug hill. Its old baked rock held a grayish green patina of dry lichen rings and its sharp curving edges and furrowed blocks offered a welter of lines to follow but with no names and no words in guidebooks. The crag was in its development stage and not every possible line had been climbed, neither had its gorse prickles been clipped nor its vital holds been tested. Brown rusty blotches were spattered incongruously on little open walls, a sure sign of former holds that had parted company with the bedrock.

My scrambling companion was being given his introduction to the joys of Craiglug. I kept wondering what had happened to him. It was all much too quiet for comfort. It was time to walk round the corner.

He lay sideways on the slope and pushed up against an evil long-fallen block that was half buried in the grass. A fresh dark scar some 10ft. up marked his point of departure. He was a twisted shrunken gnome beside the acute harsh brown boulder into which he had toppled and spun with his thigh impacting into its immutable bulk. His face betrayed his sense of shock, his skin drained to faint pallidness with drops of moisture filming his forehead, his brave stiff upper lip deadened with an adrenaline rush that held his fear and pain in check. His hand stroked at his thigh, his eyes averted to his plight. Something, he claimed, had snapped within his leg.

This was serious stuff and how the heck was the casualty going to be got off the hill by one adult male and two open-mouthed small boys? My car was parked at the bottom of the sloping field 400 yards across the cow pasture, but for the wounded warrior to reach the field he had to be negotiated down a scuffed path, through a jungle of rank tussocks and over a very compact stone dyke. The car could be brought up to the wall, but would he make it there on one hip-hoppity step and jump leg? We got him upright, I embraced him round his shoulder, he mumbled, groaned and hopped, once, twice and that was all. What was to be the next option in our personalised rescue service? Abandon him to his suffering and go search the ambulance?

However, this was unnecessary, some help was on its way. It was the lang Dougie and two pals from furth the Tay coming up to play on the rocks. More support plus brain power was to solve our quandary: we would manhandle him downhill in a home-made seat stretcher devised from a mat of old carpet normally laid flat on the back floor of my station wagon, hoist and push him over the dyke, plonk him on the floor and take him to the hospital.

Three months later he was discharged from Dundee Royal Infirmary. He had missed out in participating in the first attempt to be made by the

members of a climbing club to climb all the Munros in a period of 24 hours. He had intellectualised his enforced stay in bed to tax his mind with Proust's *Au temps perdus*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and other mentally-demanding tomes. He came out on a pair of crutches with a wasted limb and an attractive limp, and a store of thoughts of deep significance.

That was the hit on someone else, poor fellow, and now years on it was my turn. Gravitational attraction drags loosened items towards lower potential energy states, or given the chance, what is up wants to go down.

It was another peaceful summer's day on the coast of the Solway Firth. The tide had shrunk back across the mired mud at Kipford and the wind found it hard to raise the slightest force, two factors that ruled out a spin in the little sailboat to circumnavigate a minor island.

Forget the granite cliffs at Clifden, he said, and let's look at some bouldery sandstone stacks down by the shore. We parked above the beach and trotted over to the stacks to find that a conventional nuclear family, full of noise and chaos, were picnicking in joyful confusion on the sand beneath the best routed wall. We did not wish to have our public scrambling exhibition performed in front of the seaside paddlers and castle makers. We continued on, our frustration contained by our gentle coastal strolling in search of some alternative piece of climbable rock.

Within a stand of sycamore trees an irregular indentation cut back from the high tide mark and in their shade was a decaying sandstone face split by a weathering vertical groove and all of 15ft. high. It showed a sad lack of holds, its edges were rounded curves in muted orange tones, but it was the sole testpiece on show, and moreover directly above there was a reassuring tree trunk for a top-rope runner. We rigged up the rope by an outflanking wander through ferns and campions and returned to the base.

I tied on and addressed the unresponsive rock. A wiggle, a squiggle, some pushing and then levitation and I was standing on a feeble horizontal ripple with a tight pressure finger grip on another identical feature. A hand brushed the rock above and dust peeled off and trickled down on my head. On the ancient aeolian eroded right wall with undercut scoops and hollows was a hefty column half-propping up the sky. This was fragile territory where everything had to be stroked with the merest touch to assess any help it might provide to get up the groove.

I touched the topless column. I can't recall feeling any sensation when my exploratory fingertips stroked it or whether it just didn't like me when I looked at it. There was little time to react while everything started to go into slow motion in my brain. It was sliding off its base and gently coming at me. This was where my instinctive old-fashioned training began to betray me. I belonged to the school in which one does not consciously part company with the rock but remains as securely attached to the face by as many points of contact as one can muster. The prime rule for ancient



climbers was that the leader must never fall off, and even more improbably jump off. Anyway the average personal reaction time of a quarter of a second was the same time it took for the descending column to crunch onto my left hand as it pinched onto the thin ripple and kept me on the wall. I had been hit and fell off so close to the start of the groove that I reached the ground on the extra extending length of the stretching rope.

I looked at my bloodied floppy index finger held up for inspection. Hadn't I once seen a similar unpleasantness many years ago? Yes, my thoughts went back to an outing up *Ravens Gully* on the Buachaille when a falling stone had hit, and then, more disastrously, chopped the identical finger off my leader. With a lack of foresight we then had precipitately abandoned the route, quickly abseiling down and leaving the lost digit lurking somewhere in the pebbles under an overhanging chockstone. We fled towards Belford Hospital in Fort William, the victim sitting in the passenger's seat with his injured appendage sticking up visibly in the air to help us negotiate our priority onto the Ballachulish ferry. Our doctor was not impressed that we had omitted to bring the errant object with us for reattachment.

This time my finger remained stuck on but there was some urgency to leave for the Crichton Hospital in Dumfries. We wrapped it in a grotty old green sock, walked it passed the relaxing beach parties, took it to the hospital, waited ages while a real emergency was handled, got a jab and drifted double quick into oblivion to wake up for breakfast in a cosy bed.

Later, back at work I was able to amuse my companion of the broken-thigh episode with my tendon-strengthening crane attachment that could be wiggled back and forth like the miniature dipping duck device that pumps up oil from the depths of the earth, but really I don't think he was too amused.

This time a veritable *chute de pierres* threatened a lethal finale for us when the big brutal boulder and its diverging shower of scattering baby missiles headed our way, tumbling down the final abseil pitch. We had enjoyed the 20-plus pitches on excellent rock with a subtle variety of features that traced a serpentine route up to a virgin summit. The return descent down the exposed ridge to the glacier had all the snags expected from abseiling and climbing down, with the ropes conjuring up their frustrating fankles, their jams on anchor blocks and snags on projecting spikes. This was the penultimate rope retrieval and soon we would be coiling up the ropes and wandering down to our bivouac site at the desolate col.

My partner started tugging on the rope but it remained fixed at the unseen abseil point. Another tug, but again nothing happened. A stronger pull and the rope runs and falls free but snags on its downward flight. I sensed that directly above our ledge, but out of sight, was that unstable patch of loose gravel and stones that ended at the lip of the wall.

I spoke too late: "Don't pull until we're out of the way." But as the rope came snaking down, there followed a horrid rattling, grating sound of moving stone, and over the lip came a cascade of deadly rocky detritus. The largest lump, shaped as a headstone with our names on it, and its attendant swarm swept towards us fanning out like those images of speeding asteroids seen from a spacecraft in a sci-fi film. There was nothing we could do but watch its line of flight and wait until the last moment and think that we could dodge the ill-starred consequences of our unthinking folly. With luck this big 'un would not hit us. Sparks of ignited, vapourised rock were flying off the wall. When it was unbearably close I ducked instinctively, wishing to shrink and disappear into another dimension of space and time. Out of mind I never saw it whistle past us a mere metre away while wee pebbles and shreds of gravel slithered off my bone dome.

This was a very scary and hard lesson to put into our experience. We were also out on the proverbial limb, miles from anywhere and the nearest link with the outside world several days of travel away. There were the high glaciers to cross with the surface snow soft in the continuous daylight as the sun circled on its daily round.

What might have been our fate didn't bear thinking about. We just carried on as if nothing had happened, slipped off our slings, packed the ropes, hitched up our sacks, and staggered erratically down to the col.

There was only the glacier to cross to the tents but the little crevasses would be lurking below the surface and waiting to snap at an ankle. The problems never ceased but we had become blase beyond the point of self-preservation. We were riding on the high crest of fulfilment.

You missed us, thank God, and we now live to climb another day.



## IN GOOD HANDS, 1955: A TRIBUTE TO ERIC LANGMUIR

By Ted Maden

IN 1955 the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club held its annual Alpine meet at La Berarde. I was 19-years-old and had completed my first year at Cambridge. Almost the first thing I had done on arriving at the University was to join the Mountaineering Club. Previously, I had been a keen hill walker but had had few opportunities for real climbing. Most of my limited knowledge had been gained vicariously by reading Smythe and Kirkus. With the Club I climbed on meets, made friends and had some cautionary incidents which I heeded but lightly. In the summer a small group of us went to climb in the Pyrenees before continuing to the Alpine meet. For most of our Pyrenean stay we had an excellent time, but on our last day I had a narrow escape when I was persuaded to lead a steep rock pitch that was much too hard for me and the only way out was up.

A few days later we had made our way to La Berarde for the Alpine meet. Smythe's *Mountaineering Holiday* had started in La Berarde, It was exciting to be following in his footsteps to this wild valley, even if our climbs would be different from his. Wildness is one word that characterises the Dauphine. Looseness is another, as we were to discover.

Fifteen of us had assembled for the start of the meet, including three successive Club presidents: Geoff Sutton (1953–4), Eric Langmuir (1954–5, outgoing) and Bob Downes (1955–6, incoming). There was one other experienced alpinist (Ian Hughes), so the rest of us were divided into groups with those four as group leaders. I was with Eric and Geoff Horrocks. Eric was extremely fit by nature, and had only narrowly missed a Half Blue for Cross Country. My diary spells out his five day start-of-meet plan for the three of us.

July 6, to Refuge Pilatte.

July 7, Col du Sele, nearby peak, Refuge  
Sele or Lemer cier.

July 8, Sialouze Arete of the Pic Sans Nom  
(D sup.).

July 9, Traverse of Mont Pelvoux.

July 10, Les Ecrins; if the Sialouze goes well, by the South pillar (TD inf.); if not, then by the Voie Normale.

Some itinerary! The weather was good. The Refuge Pilatte was crowded. On the ascent of the glacier to the Col du Sele Geoff and I had to ask Eric to moderate his pace. He acceded graciously, and we had a pleasant climb to the Col and to Les Bouefs Rouges. This minor rock peak above the Col

afforded a magnificent panorama, especially of the great group of peaks comprising the Ailefroide, Pic Sans Nom and Pelvoux nearby to the east.

The ambiguity of plan regarding the Sele or Lemercier refuges was because Eric knew that one of them had been destroyed by an avalanche. It turned out to be the Sele. In fact the Lemercier was much better placed for the Sialouze Arête. However, getting there entailed a long haul, down the Sele Glacier and a stony valley with a rock band, then a considerable re-ascent to the hut. Geoff opted out of the Sialouze plan for the morrow, but Eric considered that I was up to it. The hut was small but was magnificently situated, perched high above the rocky valley from which we had climbed, with the Pelvoux group rising gauntly behind. There were only three other occupants in the refuge beside ourselves. It was a stark contrast from the Pilatte, and an aura of seriousness did not promote a good night's sleep. Eric and I set off at dawn, diagonally up a glacier, at first beneath another, hanging glacier. Gradually, peaks around us and in the distance were touched by the sun.

The Sialouze Arête is the south ridge of the Pic Sans Nom. It starts with the spectacular Aiguille de Sialouze, where the main technical difficulties were expected, and then continues past gendarmes and for quite a long way to the summit of the mountain. Based on guidebook times, we planned about 2hrs. 30mins. to the foot of the route, 8h on the route, and 3hrs.–4hrs. for descent by the Voie Normale. The weather remained set fair, but if we were to get back to the hut before dark the schedule did not allow much margin for the unexpected.

We reached the col at the foot of the Aiguille de Sialouze on time, and relaxed briefly in the warm sun and kitted up. Eric led off. The climbing was superb, much of it up slabs and shallow cracks, delicate rather than strenuous, with continuous pitches of up to V. We made good progress to where the route temporarily quits the ridge and traverses beneath the summit of the Aiguille on its west flank. Here a relatively easy looking line led above the steep west face, and we started to move together. I was behind, and carried much of the 120ft. rope as coils in one hand. I had the two axes tucked between our small rucksack and my back. Once my foot made a slipping noise and Eric instantly responded to the alert. I assured him that I was OK. That is the last thing I remember, except, possibly, a dim, fleeting impression that something was not OK. Or did I imagine that afterwards?

I woke up gradually. It was not like waking from sleep, but, rather, from the edge of oblivion. Someone, Eric, was calling down to me from a long way above. I was groaning, and starting to ask questions. He answered patiently. I wanted to know the name of a wicked looking rock gash that I could see on the skyline across a glacier. I must have been pointing at it. He answered that it was the Coup de Sabre. There was an ice axe on a patch of snow a long way below me. Gradually, my state of consciousness



improved, and we addressed the central questions. Where was I? How was I? What had happened?

I was on a ledge, on a shaded rock face, about 100ft. below Eric, held by him on the rope. I could move my arms and legs, but my chest hurt, and there was blood around. I had fallen off the traverse with a large mass of rock, about two tons Eric thought, which had immediately fragmented. I had probably been hit on the head by a fragment and concussed at the start of the fall, so I had had no chance to hold onto the rope coils. Eric, unbelayed, had managed to jam himself into a crack and save both of us from falling to the bottom of the face 1000ft. below. Then, holding on with one hand, he had managed to hammer in a piton with the other and so secure us. He asked me to get myself belayed so that he could climb down to me. He did not expect me to belay him but wanted me to be tied to the mountain while he climbed down. I managed to find something to which to belay a few feet up. It was my first action towards our self rescue.

When Eric joined me we took stock of the damage. This was miraculously light. My limbs were functioning. The pain in my chest had suggested a broken rib, but was subsiding, and was probably due just to bruising. I had surface cuts on the hands and face and a partly split lip. I put on ski mitts and a Balaclava. Crucially, I was capable of supervised movement.

Even so, Eric did not try to coax me back up to the ridge. Escape from that section of the ridge would have been difficult. He judged that it would be easier and safer to get me down the west face. The face was broken for several hundred feet. He belayed me down for some rope lengths and we did one abseil. Eric collected the axe from the snow slope, and luckily, found the other axe nearby. The sun had now reached us. This meant that we were warm, but also that time was ticking away. Then the face below steepened to vertical for several hundred feet to the Coup de Sabre Glacier. The cliffs were of very wide extent and there seemed to be no way down. Eric searched with great determination and patience, guiding me back up a bit, across a bit, down a bit, across some more. It was beginning to look as if we really would have to climb back to the ridge. Eric admitted this possibility, adding that he had a bivouac sac. The prospect of a night out struck the beginnings of despair into me. Then, when the sun was starting to sink in the west, we reached the one breach in the defences, where only 100ft. of partly overhanging rock separated us from the glacier.

Eric very briefly considered making a single abseil and abandoning the rope, but a crevasse was visible on the glacier, and he almost immediately rejected forfeiting the rope as too dangerous. Instead, he abseiled 40ft. down a groove that slanted diagonally through the overhang, taking great care not to swing beneath the latter, and reached an extremely awkward ledge where he placed a belay piton. He called me down. I joined him and he pulled the rope through, with great relief. He placed another piton so

that we could stay belayed to the first one while preparing the second abseil. At last, all was ready and we made the abseil to the glacier, which we were then able to descend safely roped.

It was dark when we reached the stony valley that we had descended the previous day. We were above the rock band. In fact, Geoff had found the path down this band while Eric and I had taken a rougher line. Now Eric managed to locate the path that Geoff had found. It was quite steep, with some metal cables, and we stayed roped until we were down. It was our last obstacle, but it was still a long way down the valley to civilisation at Ailefroide. We arrived there after midnight, hammered on a hotel door, were admitted, fed, wine and given a bed. Next morning, Eric took me to the doctor, who declared I was all right but was to rest for four days. Eric then speeded back up to the Lemercier Hut, to the relief of a worried Geoff.

During the split seconds of my fall Eric had reacted with athletic swiftness and precision to avoid disaster. Throughout our difficult self rescue he had acted with great mountaineering skill, calmness, kindness and resolve, qualities that presaged his future distinguished career in outdoor education and mountain leadership. I had been in outstandingly good hands.

**Footnotes:**

On the meet there were other incidents with loose rock, though none as serious as that which befell me and Eric. After the meet Eric, Bob Downes, Geoff Sutton and recent Oxford president Alan Blackshaw enjoyed an outstandingly productive continuation of the season based on the Ecole Nationale de Montagne et de Ski at Chamonix. Their routes together included the SSW Face of the Gugliermine (ED, second British ascent) and the NE Face of the Badile (ED, first British ascent). (Also climbed was the N Face of the Triolet, TD, Blackshaw and Downes, first British ascent.)

The substance of this article was adapted from a more wide ranging article, *Dangerous Learning Curve*, which has been submitted for publication in a planned Centenary volume of Cambridge Mountaineering. Eric read the manuscript of that article with pleasure. Following Eric's untimely death through illness I hope the present article will be of pleasure and interest to many readers of the *SMC Journal*.

## WITH MIDGES IN HIGH PLACES

By Malcolm Slessor

THE responsibility of climbing a hard route with someone much less able and/or experienced than oneself is not of itself unpleasant, or even dangerous, if the climb is well within the leader's ability and there is adequate protection. Nonetheless, there is a very different *ténue*, as the French would say, about the outing. It is not quite as carefree as climbing with a partner of equal skill. Normally, a well-balanced climbing pair take each pitch alternately. They share the decisions, they share the risk. They share the ambition. If one partner cannot find a way, often the other will succeed, not necessarily because he or she is a better climber, but in the same way that one player will read a hand of cards differently from another. But climbing with your inexperienced wife or girl friend completely changes the nature of the game. It not only places an enormous responsibility on you – especially if either of you have family responsibilities – but generates a strain for the leader that must be totally hidden from the other party. Moreover, the chances are that the tyro may be little adept at belaying, unable to hold you were you to peel. Mountaineering is a practical sport. You have to have held a fall to know how to prepare for one. But to shove your dearly beloved companion off a cliff just to demonstrate the technique is not a good way to warm a relationship.

I got to know Jane quite late in my life and hers. She was over 50, and though she was an adventurous quine, high standard rock climbing was not one of the skills she had honed in her youth or been exposed to subsequently. But she was at home among mountains and, to my joy, was very willing try her hand at rock. I tried her out on *Route One* on Carn Dearg, a steep, severe, route of impeccable rock. Because one is cosseted within two walls the sense of exposure is limited, something that can be very intimidating to a beginner. She kept her cool, but climbed jerkily. Several years later, now in her 60s and quite a polished climber, I thought she was ready for a really challenging route. I was determined it should be of the very best, offering exposure, position, views, aesthetic sensations and, of course, good sound rock. I settled on *Shining Cleft* on Sgurr a'Mhadaidh in the Cuillins of Skye. The name alone has allure. I had climbed it before, though not for some time. It is a long route – 270m. – and takes one way out over a sheer bulging vertiginous wall, home to the extreme climb *Thor*. It had been pioneered by three undergraduates of the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club in 1952. They must have been in great form for it is truly a bold line. I consider it to be one of the finest of the early post-war routes in Skye, even today reckoned to be Hard severe. In those days a first ascent was always led from below on the basis of a perceived line on the cliff face. There was no prior rappelling down the face to check for holds and belays. You started at the bottom.



You judged the potential for ascent by examining the rock above you, and worked out a set of moves. On every pitch at the back of your mind was the possibility that maybe it wouldn't go, and then what? A perilous climb down if that was possible, it being a fact that it is much harder to climb down than up. Sometimes retreat was impossible, then the route had to be forced either taking you beyond your ability, and in so doing possibly releasing talents and self-control you never knew you had. And to add to the prestige of that Cambridge first ascent, rock boots had yet to reach the UK. Wrangham's party did the ascent in hill-walking boots!

The Gods dealt Jane and me a peerless, windless, August day for our ascent. It started in our tent on the greensward below the bridge over the Allt Coire na Bruadaram, at the head of Loch Ainort in Skye. As experienced campers we had gone to bed with everything needed for breakfast within the tent, and just as well, for outside the midge-proof gauze door there pulsed a black cloud of ravening beasties. They were doubtless maddened by the succulent scents emerging from our unwashed bodies. These were not mere foot-soldiers here to challenge the human invader, but female impis with their assegais ready drawn charging upon the tent utterly fearless of the might of our flyspray. The death of 10,000 seemed of no account even to the hordes following the first wave. Here was an entire army, brigade upon brigade of perhaps hundreds of thousands of *Culicoides Punctati*, armed and passionate, ready to puncture our skins and draw forth our life blood while inserting a maddening itch.

A few kamikazes had worked their way in, and were incinerated by our Primus stove. We observed the fruitless battering of our door by the restless horde with serene detachment while we prepared breakfast. Then came the call of nature! With socks pulled over my trousers, midge cream on wrists, ears and nose, hat jammed over my ears, I made a high speed exit and ran like a deranged dervish to the edge of the sea. It was low tide. I took refuge among the seaweed in the belief, false as it turned out, that midges do not invade sea water. But just as a sailing boat cannot outrun the wind, no human can out pace the midge. No sooner had I my trousers down than the hellish horde surrounded me. It reminded me of that wonderful line in Tam O'Shanter at Kirk Alloway "As bees bizz out wi' angry fyke." In moments my face was swollen, my backside aflame. Pulling up my breeks I tore back to the sanctuary of the tent, while Jane cremated hundreds of midges by playing the Primus flame around my face, hair and backside. The smell of cremated midges mingled agreeably with singed hair. Dead bodies accumulated on the tent floor in a tousled heap.

We decamped in haste. Everything was hurled into the boot of the car any old how. In moments we were speeding at 50mph, the windows wide open blasting out the little brutes, and soon approached Sligachan Inn. My bowels were in torment. Something had to be done quickly. The Inn seemed closed. Jane drove to the adjacent campsite, to the very door of the loo, where a queue of patient campers scratching their bare legs were awaiting their turn. As a door opened, I ruthlessly (did I have an

alternative?) dashed in, locked it and dropped my pants (and much else) as howls of rage and beating of fists on the door told me what sort of reception awaited me on my exit. Swiftly relieved, I emerged to find a campsite manager purple with rage. I placated him by paying for a night's camping, and, amid boos drove out of the campsite.

Now detoxified, I was ready for the day. We hastened along Glen Drynoch, one of Skye's bleakest glens, towards Talisker, where we embarked upon the equally dreary moor road by Satran with its deadly boring conifer plantations on each side. Then as the road dips towards glen Brittle, the plantation abruptly peters out. Here the Cuillin ridge etches the skyline, as bold and exciting as any mountain range, and one's heart beats that little bit faster. The view is straight into Coire na Creiche, dominated on the right-hand (south) side by the cliffs of Sgurr a'Mhadaidh – hill of the fox. For the most part one can find a way up through these cliffs without serious climbing to gain a notch on the North-west ridge. On the right, however, the cliff is sheer, broken only by the line of *Shining Cleft*. The face was in shadow enhancing its sense of steepness. Against the morning light we could not pick out the exact line of our chosen route.

We parked. The day resonated with the gentle hum of insects going about their business. It was now seriously hot and muggy – ideal midge conditions. We scraped together all the gear we could dig out of the boot and with two 11mm. 45m. ropes headed down the slope to join the track to the coire along the bank of the Allt a'Mhadaidh. This is the most delightful of all the Cuillin burns. The beaten way holds to the north side of a ravine, and passes a succession of waterfalls creating frothy pools of peat brown water reminiscent of home brew. We identified one deep pool for our swim on the way home. The occasional rowan clung to the side of the chasm, garnished with tufts of heather. The vegetation was the familiar couch and cotton grass illuminated by pink asphodel, yellow tormentil and blue-flowered butterwort. Jane was picking bog myrtle leaves, crushing them to release their oil, which is well known to repel midges. I contented myself with the folklore that midges can't stand the heat and shack up till the evening and that we would, anyway, leave the pests behind as we gained the vertical heights.

The rock face of Sgurr a'Mhadaidh faces north west, offering a complex array of cliffs, ledges and basalt dykes 600m. high. Once in the shade we were able to pick out detail on the cliff. A leftward slanting gully detracts from the purity of the face, but offers a way of gaining an entry to the vertical wall, which was not climbed till 1967, the Cuillin's first E2 route by Bolton and Cain. *Shining Cleft* starts to the left of the slanting gully, using as an approach two pitches of steep slabby black-brown gabbhro as rough as a pot scrubber but, as we discovered, offering no placements for protection. I enjoyed the climbing, eventually finding an indifferent belay after 30m., Jane joined me finding it well within her standard. I continued to the point where the route crosses the slanting gully. Deep within it I thankfully found a good belay crack.

At this point the climb becomes not so much hard as serious. A basalt dyke offers a line of weakness that leads out into space. I was now unaccountably nervous. At this degree of exposure I was accustomed to having an experienced companion belaying me. Was I justified in bringing Jane here? Was this within her scope? She evinced no qualms, and as is so often the case when a cautious reappraisal is called for, the momentum of the day's plan brushes aside prudence. I am dripping with nuts, friends and slings. If there is the remotest possibility of a running belay I will take it, every few feet if the opportunity presents itself. I am determined to make this climb safe for her. But as I climb no such opportunities appear. By the time I have led out 35m. I am 100m. above the screes with nothing but space between my feet and feeling distinctly nervous. Eventually, I find a meagre stance and something to hook myself onto. Jane arrives at my side in good form. I supervise her belay with all the attention of an anxious mother strapping her infant into a car seat.

The route is obvious – a gangway, leading out and upwards to the centre of the vertical cliff. It is steep but the rock is sound. But it is also devoid of cracks for running belays. Long lead-outs without protection are not appropriate for one of my age, I am thinking. Soon I am on slabby rocks under an overhang. About 10, 20m. out and I still haven't found a runner. I can only press on. I worry that the exposure will unsettle Jane. It is certainly getting to me. At last I reach a place where I can place a belay. Its not much of a stance, just somewhere to brace the feet. I place two nuts, neither of which look like having much holding power. I comfort myself that so far the climbing has not been that hard. The rock is dry and we wear rock boots with sticky soles. Jane joins me with accomplished elegance.

Swapping positions isn't too easy, but finally she is tied on, and ready to handle the rope as I press on. She asks if I think the belay is good. I pretend it is. The route now leads into an amphitheatre. It is a severe move, but uncomplicated, yet desperately exposed. No opportunities for runners emerge. My gear is useless weight hanging from my waist. In due course I reach a stance, and look for a belay. The position is good, but I have to explore 10ft. above me to find anything into which I may insert a nut and hook on my rope. As an anchor it is about as irrelevant as bottled water. I descend back to the stance. I am worried. This is not my recollection of my previous ascent, then I recall that on that occasion there had been three of us, Bill Wallace and his inexperienced son. Bill had led followed by his son with me as his adviser. At the tail end I hadn't had to worry about looking for protection.

Anyway, this belay is good enough to bring someone up, but quite inadequate to hold a falling leader. I seriously consider calling it a day till I reflect on the nature of the descent. No protection, and, for Jane, a downward traverse which means I cannot really give her real support from the rope. In truth, we are already past the point where retreat is attractive. We cannot rappel down for not only are we at least 130m. above the deck



and have but 45m. of rope, and there is nothing I would trust my life to. I have lost two friends from failed abseils. Better go on. I tell Jane not to hurry. What I really mean is for God's sake don't slip. While I am slowly bringing in the rope I become conscious of midges dancing in front of my eyes. Where one moment there was one, there are soon 10 and within minutes many more. They home in on my face and wrists. I am raw meat laid out to entice the lion. I am cold meat for maggots. My hands are entirely taken up with attending to the rope at the end of which Jane is working her way towards me, so I cannot scratch to rub off the offending beasties. They zoom in and out like dive bombers assaulting a battleship. By the time Jane gets to me I am in desperate straits, torn between care for her welfare and a desperate need to beat off the enemy.

We juggle the belay around, and when satisfied that she at least is reasonably firmly attached I set off. I am now conscious of the fact that even if she were the finest belayer in the world, she could not hold me. Hence, I must not fall. Desperately, I hunt around for runners, now for my sake as much as hers. Nothing. The route steepens, nothing desperately difficult, but needing skill and care. I might as well be climbing solo. I am not happy. I cast my mind back to the last time I climbed this route. I recall there being a really good stance farther up. We are truly committed to the climb. I begin to long for the days when we carried pitons.

I continue to climb. The basalt dyke is smooth, not rough like gabbro. I do not have the guide book with me. Guide books can seriously detract from adventure. I did indeed read up the route before I left home. My memory of that description did not tally with what I now saw around me. Later, when I returned home I checked. Three editions of the guide book faithfully copied the original description in the Sligachan climbs book, which later was published in the SMC journal of 1953. I concluded that the guide book editors had never climbed this route, and subsequent inquiries confirmed this. This is like the Internet. Once bad or false information gets recycled often enough it takes on the aura of authority and truth. Then I recalled the fate of the original pioneers. Two had since died (one by being hit on the head by a falling rock on Pillar in the Lake District). Ted Wrangham, with whom I had expedited to the Pamirs 30-odd years before was very much alive, but with a dim memory of the event. He, too, had been a number three on the rope and so had simply followed his mates. Back to the climb.

Looking up, I sense that the angle eventually relents. Up there should be the ledge. One further rope length brings me to it. A genuine commodious ledge! A resting place with room to manoeuvre. Above me soars vertical rock split by a crack, which provides an ideal location for nuts. Soon I am attached to the first reliable belay since we left slanting gully. A1, first class, bomb-proof! All anxiety vanishes. Momentarily, relieved of the stress of such exposed climbing I can again enjoy our situation. It is a spectacular spot. If it weren't for the midges life would be

perfect. I take in the sunlit sea. Not a breath of wind stirs its surface. The isle of Canna squats like a huge vessel on a pewter ocean. This is perfection.

Jane arrives and we examine the way ahead. The route is now not at all obvious. I wondered what the Cambridge pioneers must have thought when they reached this point. Were I a limpet, I could traverse a holdless slab to some quite hold-worthy rocks about 20m. away. But I am not a limpet, so I turn my gaze elsewhere. Above me, in the crack, is an old peg, and above it, a tattered weathered sling. So someone has been up there, however that doesn't prove it is the route. It might be a false trail. On the other hand we could see no other options. It is clearly necessary to climb the crack to see what prospects it opens up. You never know till you rub faces with the rock. That's climbing for you. That's what makes it so exciting. I cast a critical eye over Jane's belay so assiduously attached that she looks like Houdini's assistant on a bad night.

Comforted by such precautions, I climb the crack rejoicing in the frequent opportunities to place nuts. The climbing, though technically harder, is mentally more relaxing. And 20m above me the crack disappears into a blank overhanging wall. An ancient sling hangs from a pebble jammed in the crack. Signs of pre-nut climbing technology? There is no further way upward. If there is a route it has to be across a sheet of smooth rock, not steep enough to be called a wall, but rather too steep to be termed a slab. 15m across this slab-wall rises a rib of seemingly climbable rock. The obvious procedure is to make a tension traverse. This would involve my bracing my feet against the slab while Jane paid out the rope in accordance with my commands. Secured by my sling placed beside the ancient one, if I slipped, I would come to no great harm. But when it came to Jane's turn, no such tension was possible. I would need to climb really high above her to be able to give her adequate rope support, and if she slipped, she would swing through an arc and crash against the rock rib. What decided me against this manoeuvre was that a slick of water ran over part of slab. No boot could grip on such a surface. It might have been a defensible strategy with another climber of my own experience and ability, but not with someone of Jane's limited experience.

Very unhappily I descend the crack, inordinately grateful for the various runners I had placed. What now? Looking around I see that if I can descend, negotiate some rather bald bits of slab, it may be possible to gain a climbable rib of rock 30m. away. Because I would be descending, Jane could afford me quite a bit of support through tensioning the rope. Grimly aware that this was our only hope, I set off, climbing with the delicacy of a cat on a slate roof, aware that its claws are useless. I found some running belay points, but couldn't put them in since they would hold me back when I started to climb. Finally, I embrace a substantial hold like a drowning man grabbing a life-belt. A huge exhalation of breath reveals the tension that has built up within me.

The sun has come round making the scene less awesome. Now the only

way is up. No matter what I encounter I have no choice but to ignore the deficiencies of the rock above me. Whatever little it offers, I have to accept. In these situations the key is to plan ahead. Just as a sentence has a grammatical order the rock imposes a specific sequence. A false line can spell disaster, for in retreat, moves that are just in balance on the way up are distinctly 'iffy' on descent when it is often impossible to hold one's self in balance. After a few metres I feel confident that the passage will go. I move more fluently. At last, with myself well above Jane with 20m. of rope stretched between us, I find a ledge, a stance and a belay. The issue is no longer in doubt.

I am lathered in sweat, no doubt partly from the intense mental effort of the climb, but also due to the speed with which my anxiety has driven me. Nothing could be more attractive to the midge. One by one they call in their pals to join the feast. So much sweat is streaming off me I am surprised they aren't drowning. My first act is to cool off. I dearly want to strip to my waist but the thought of them devouring my lily-white body stayed my hand. Jane meanwhile is scratching away at her face and wrists, while nobly continuing to belay me in the appropriate manner.

I call her to climb downwards. Gingerly she descends. Down-climbing is not something of which she has experience – few have! I give her a tight rope. I admire the way she keeps her cool. She crosses the smooth slab with commendable delicacy, and soon has her hand on the 'Thank God!' hold. There she pauses. She knows she has to follow my line. I can see she is not relishing it. I am glad of my excellent belay. I pass this news to her. Sensibly, she takes her time. Eventually, she joins me on my large and comfortable platform.

The way ahead is now easy, and in two pitches we are on easy ground and unroping. A light breeze caresses us and is accepted as a just reward for our efforts. The midges, reduced in number, are still circling like sharks round a bleeding swimmer. What was needed was to really cool off. Midges don't attack cold skin. There is no-one in sight. We strip naked. Absolutely stark naked, except for boots. The evening sun sheds its golden rays over our bodies, making them seem bronzed and luscious. It is a handsome sight. If Courbet had been here, he would surely have painted us. We linger over the view, for as the sun dips the Outer Hebrides stand out like a pencil drawing. It has been a good day, a testing day, giving the sort of satisfaction that only comes when overcoming odds rather greater than expected. The final treat will be our swim in the Allt a' Mhadaidh. Donning our clothes we pick our way down the ledges and cliffs of the coire. At our chosen pool we again divest our clothing, and revel in the coolth and cleansing of the peaty bubble bath. As we dress, we glance back. The coire wall is rose-red. The line of *Shining Cleft* is easily picked out. We relive the climb, recalling the best bits, discarding the worst, before picking up our sacks and returning to the banality of everyday living. The wind was up. The midges were in hiding.



## THE WEE TRAIN ROBBERY

By Morton Shaw

"It would never work!"

"Aye it would, I spent a long time today thinking about it on that manky belay waiting for you to make the move. You were forever."

"What do you expect, at my height it wisnae easy, I had two choices and the second choice was you letting the rope go as I hit the deck."

"Aye whatever. Anyway it would work, these guys have been carrying the cash for so long they don't know what they've got and couldnae care less. After Tyndrum they go up to the driver's compartment and share a glass or two."

"Awa and bile yer heid ya stupid loon."

"The Chemist and the Counter slouched in the corner morosely listening to the conversation wondering only if this evening would end like so many with the Shipbuilder and the Engineer being held apart on the long road back to the doss with insults being traded at high volume, only stopping when one or other of them landed in a ditch.

The summer passed into autumn with the usual litany of failure and drink, compounded this year with rumours from the south of a band of schoolkids blitzing the Rock at a standard we could only boast about. It was only a matter of time before they appeared in person and made our lives even more unbearable.

The weather had the October miseries, work was a pain and, in the total absence of what is euphemistically described as a personal relationship, there was little alternative to the usual hitch up the loch, a wet Saturday and the drink again in the bar.

The fifth or sixth pint was on the table with the conversation going round in a circle when the Shipbuilder raised the subject again.

"Look I'm no saying it would be easy but they're just asking for it, it's almost criminal the way they treat that money." This time there was a spark of interest.

"So how are you going to take it from them."

"Stop the train just after Corroul, grab the cash and leg it."

"As easy as that eh?"

"Nae quite, but we can block the line both sides, take out the telephone wires and disappear into the Moor. If we hide out in the CIC for a few days by the time we come off the hill they'll be searching the slums of Glasgow."

The walk back to the doss that night was no more enjoyable than usual but by the time we rolled into our pits all the problems were solved and the only thing left to do was to drift off into a drunken slumber dreaming of spending the Mill's payroll somewhere warm.

Sunday was as useless as Saturday had been and eventually we struggled out of the bunks bad tempered and sore. Even the rats had the good sense to keep quiet. We drifted over to the other side of the road trying to look

upright and made our way home. The year had turned, and for once the snow had come, when the phone rang.

"It's on, we meet next Tuesday in the Coe."

"But..."

"Nae buts, take some holiday, you cannae drop out now. The others are in, you're needed and what's more – you know." The last said slowly.

The hint was taken and on Tuesday night we assembled in the doss. The Shipbuilder laid out his plan.

"They shift the money on the Wednesday train, count and sort it into the paypackets at the works on Thursday. I drive up to the Fort with the Wee One, dump the climbing gear in the CIC and come over the col and down to Staoineag. You pair meet us at Loch Treig where the track from the Blackwater comes in. Keep your packs light with plenty of space. They've been working on the line just past Corrou and there are lots of sleepers to block the track. I wave down the train with a light to stop it before it hits the sleepers, the Chemist piles some more behind the train and you cut the telephone wires. The Wee One gets on board and dumps the cash over. If we get it right and stop them at the bridge, we duck under the bridge, down to the loch and then up the path and over the CMD arete and down to the CIC.

"How do you stop them just laughing at us?"

"The Dhu left their guns under the boards at the Ville, they didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to steal them. We won't have to use them."

"They'll just lift the sleepers and head off to the Fort."

"No way they won't, not after the Wee One uses the gelly he has left over from the hydro he was working on last year."

"And if there's someone in the CIC?"

"We dump the gear in the shelter in Coire Leis and pick it up later."

The next morning the Shipbuilder and the Wee One left in the car that the Shipbuilder said he had bought – "And I'll be wanting the cash back first before the split." – their sacks piled high with our gear. We left a little later, travelling fairly light, cutting straight across to the dam, though straight was not how it would appear on a map if our course had been drawn. Up and down and in and out of bogs with a light wet snowfall adding to the pleasure. The track beside the Blackwater was more in the imagination than real and we eventually stopped for a rest in the bothy beside Loch Chiarain. The Chemist, a dour man at the best of times, slumped in a corner steam gently rising from his wet trousers.

"I don't like this," I said.

"Neither do I but I don't see an alternative. The Shipbuilder would do us good and proper if we pull out. I'd rather face the cops."

"Aye."

Silence reigned again.

It was getting dark as we reached Loch Treig and we sheltered under the bridge leaving a sack on the track to get the others' attention. Half-an-hour later they appeared.

“No problems, there is no one in the hut.”

“Right let’s get on, the train passes at about nine. Don’t forget to wear your Balaclavas.”

In the event it all went smoothly. The train came to a halt at the pile of sleepers, I cut the wires, sleepers were piled behind and while the Shipbuilder held the driver and guards in the cab with his gun the Engineer tossed out the three bags of notes. We scuttled under the bridge and down the track to the loch with the hills still resounding to the noise of the gelignite going off on the track and the shotgun blast that the Shipbuilder had let off to remind the guards not to follow. The night was black, the only light being the glow of the quartz on the track but we didn’t stop until the bridge where the track bent left towards Staoineag. The railway line was well out of sight as we put on the torches and struggled up to the bothy where we stopped just long enough to share out the weight of the cash more evenly and then set off again into the face of a bitter wind with the snow dancing and whirling in the light of the torches.

It was a long struggle from then, up past Luibelt, through the boggy flats at the pass and down to Steall. Another rest in the limited shelter of the ruins, everyone lost in their own thoughts, our breath frosting the edges of our balaclavas. Then we turned and set up the coire in the darkness, down to only two working torches. The snow gradually hardened and steepened until just below the CMD col we started to cut steps. On the other side of the col the snow in Coire Leis was rock hard and our crampons bit as we nervously found our way down under the face and into the coire, rarely able to make out our feet in the flowing spindrift.

The CIC eventually loomed out of the dark and we quickly unhinged the corner window and slid in over the basins to the quiet of the hut. The fire was lit, a brew on and the Shipbuilder set to work on the padlock on the trapdoor to the loft. Once free we removed the cash from the bags and separated it into four piles – nearly £20,000 each – but I for one was too knackered to care. We wrapped each pile up in an identifiable item of clothing and passed it up to the Shipbuilder in the loft. He secured the padlock as best he could and we collapsed into the bunks. A ghostly light coming in the one open shutter in the corner signified the coming of dawn.

The next day was fortunately horrible. Gale force winds and low scurrying cloud kept anyone with any sense off the hill and we rested in the bunks, only occasionally braving the wind to crawl through the snowdrift at the window for water and relief.

“Bloody hell,” the chemist said, as he appeared over the sink, snow cascading from his clothes. “With this money we could build the old farts a toilet and do everyone a favour.”

“They still wouldn’t give you a key though.”

Friday dawned calm and bright and we were away sharp trying to give the impression of being real climbers. The Engineer and the Shipbuilder headed for Tower Ridge while the Chemist and I cramponned round under the Douglas Boulder to the area right of Vanishing Gully. The Chemist



claimed that he had seen possibilities of an easy line or two on one of his rare forays to the Ben. As usual his optimism outweighed our ability and after scratching about at the bottom of two obvious grooves we settled on the right-hand chimney which had the advantage of being shorter in difficulty than the other two, with the difficulties well within retreating distance if, as normal, failure loomed. A pillar of steep snow led to the chimney and the Chemist quickly disappeared. I stood paying out the ropes in short bursts as steps were cut and moves made. It seemed like forever, but eventually, the rope came tight. Despite his steps it was a struggle and I left dirty marks of Rannoch mud as I, in my usual style, kept as close to the ice as possible. We changed places at the belay with only a "I don't think this has been done before," to speed me on my way. Eventually, the angle eased and in the early afternoon we approached the ridge just below the little tower.

The other two's steps were still visible and we made fast time to the Eastern Traverse. As I edged out on the traverse faint cries could be heard and in the distance a figure could be seen descending Observatory Gully. I looked at the Chemist and was met by a shrug of the shoulders.

As I rounded the corner below the chimney the reason for the cries became clear. A rope was tied off to one of the blocks and hung over the edge absolutely taught. My shouts elicited no sensible response, the curve of the ground, distorting the words but there was real anger in the sounds. The Chemist joined me and after rigging up a pulley system we managed to slowly raise the weight on the end of the rope. As the body came closer the noises become more intelligible but consisted mainly of Glasgow patois interspersed with an amazing range of swear words. The Engineer was a mess, blood everywhere and his clothes in tatters. His anger overcame any pain he may have felt and we felt lucky that he had lost his axe.

"He pulled me off then scarpered – I'll kill the bastard."

After a few minutes things calmed down and we edged off leftwards into Tower Gully and down Observatory. By the time we reached the hut we were reconciled to what awaited us. He hadn't even bothered to shut the trapdoor behind him and not a note had he left. We packed up and struggled down the glen with the Engineer complaining so loudly that I for one began to wish that the rope had not been tied off so securely. By the time we met the police as we crossed the golf course it was patently obvious that there was hardly enough competence in the group to climb a hill far less rob a train and so, after we morosely answered a few questions, they gave us a lift to the Belford where the Engineer was patched up with their usual incompetence and sent on his way with a patronising lecture.

And what of the Shipbuilder? It was quiet for a few years then rumours floated around of sightings in the Far East, of a business venture going wrong and a partner who was there one day and gone the next. Once in Bangkok I thought I saw him in a bar but I left my drink – and town. The memories are still there though. And, of course, the 'new' route had been done before by some ignorant students from Glasgow.

## THE SHELTER STONE SAGA

By Julian Lines

June 1989:

THE HARD smooth sheet of crystalline granite gives away none of its secrets – it is blank, unforgiving, and once again tosses me down its cruel rough surface. I let out a yelp and close my eyes until I feel the elastic security of my two ropes tugging at my harness, rendering me safe once again. My first basic instinct is to shoot a glance up the line of ropey tension; I spy the rust-weary downward pointing peg from which I am suspended without fear, for this is the third time that blade of rust has held my 30ft. fall in the last hour.

Sunlight has disappeared from the surrounding plateau, the night stealing in at the same rate as my confidence leaks out; I begin to realise that I have bitten off far more than I could chew, on attempting my first E4 lead. I glance down to my belayer, searching for an expression of reassurance on Mike's face. The blonde haired, cherub-like face that stares back at me shows signs of bemusement and anxiety at my cloth ripping falls. "Are you ok," he asks with a grin.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I reply as I climb hand over hand up the rope to the peg, ready to forge another attempt.

I sigh heavily as I look around, quickly absorbing my predicament among dusk-coated mountains; the vista is authenticated by the sound of tumbling melt water that roars with perpetual echo over bare granite. On the one hand I feel demoralised but on the other I feel free and happy, testing my limited technique on the Shelterstone's unorthodox and flawless granite. Once again I find myself at the 'blank bit' 15ft. above the security of the corroding artefact and my body is channelled yet again into the same compulsory sequence of moves as before. My parched throat gulps with anxiety and tension as I anticipate being propelled down the granite sheet in yet another skin tearing arc...but wait, my hand reaches a hold at the far side of the 'blank bit' and for an instant I am overjoyed, before realising that I am in fact lonely, committed and now on unfamiliar ground. I manage to secure a big nut before shakily scampering along a rattling hollow flake with youthful spirit, hoping there aren't going to be any more difficulties before the belay. In gathering gloom, I release Mike from the torment of his semi-hanging belay, he follows rapidly and we abseil from the *Missing link* into the silhouettes of darkness.

We bivvy on the beach at the head of Loch Avon, under a star-infested sky, it is windless and the midges are a nuisance which makes for a restless night. At some ungodly hour I prop myself on my elbows and gaze at the charcoal-black shapes of the mountains silhouetted against

*Shelter Stone Crag. Photo: Andy Tibbs.*











an inky blue and lacklustre orange sky. The serene surface of the loch is reflected through the night air like an ethereal mirror – a varnished image of nature that no lens could ever fittingly reproduce. Within an hour the sun emerges like a blood apricot and, as its light intensifies, the mirror shatters and the image is lost forever.

The heat of the morning brings on apathy as we sunbathe on the beach's coarse granite husks, cooling down when required by foolhardily diving into the loch's heart-pulsing melt-water. Every now and again I look up at the huge turret of the Shelter Stone Crag, rearing up like a formidable geological sentry at the head of the loch. What steals my attention is the circular sweep of flawless slabs, bang in the centre of the Shelterstone, like the centre-stone of a tiara. Ever since, I have become fascinated by that jewel – an obsession.

Late that afternoon, after the sun's eccentric powers have drifted from the beach, we stir, gather our gear and head for *The Steeple* – a stunning 800ft. line of corners up the right edge of the crag which, at E2, is perhaps the finest mountain climb at its grade in the country – Scottish heritage at its best.

At gone nine o'clock, Mike sets off on the penultimate pitch. From out of the dusk golden shards of sunlight sparkle into the corner, illuminating us in the surrounding darkness.

"Mike, look at that – the sun is out!" I shout in high spirits, as I crane my neck backwards to find Mike absorbed in wide bridging manoeuvres 80ft. above me. He makes effortless work of the chisel-featured corner as I struggle to pay out the disobedient rope in rhythm with his upward movement. Within minutes he is out of sight, the rope snakes out and it is my turn. We both sit on top spellbound – the view down the loch, the peace of the mountains, the company, the fun, the challenge – everything is perfect, a memory that will last my lifetime and one which would stoke the desire for many return visits to my favourite 'spiritual home' – 'The Shelterstone'.

June 1992:

Even the words in the guidebook intimidated me – 'a modern desperate'. I had read the description of *The Run of the Arrow* in the Cairngorms guidebook over and over again, along with Kev Howett's account, detailed in *Extreme rock*, naively thinking that the more I read, the easier the route would become. My University Finals start tomorrow and if only I could revise my Geo chemistry like I do the guidebook, then I would surely attain a first class degree – if only.

I climb out of the confines of the *Thor* diedre onto the slab, losing sight of Matt and all other securities. I look up at the blank sweep of rock above, wondering why I didn't stay in Aberdeen to revise for tomorrow morning's exam. After slotting a number of uninspiring RPs

*Climbing on Skagastolind. Photo: Carl Schaschke.*

*Ben Alder during the 2006 Ski-mountaineering Meet. (See page 442).*

in a sinuous crack, I begin to wobble uncontrollably in fear as if I had just been thrown into a coliseum full of lions. I now know that any attempt is pointless.

Matt and I had returned for a further attempt on *The Run of the Arrow* after my Finals. Matt who we all knew as 'Matt the cat' with his agile build and long unkempt brown hair is one of the most understated rock climbers I have ever known. It was hard to determine how keen a climber Matt was, as he is soft spoken, affable, and at times, apathetic, but he always climbs fluently and with flair.

I offer Matt the lead, and cocoon myself comfortably into my belay alcove. Matt oozes past the lower section and then boldly climbs out to the flake, he doesn't find the crucial large nut for the crux and proceeds to take a few 20ft. whippers off the crux on marginal gear, somewhat casually. On reaching the belay he abseils off, strips the gear and pulls the rope for my attempt. Matt's chalk dusted holds, instill confidence in me as I sketch my way past the tenuous lower section to reach a salvational line of natural carved steps – the climbing is no more than Severe standard for 40ft., albeit with no gear. The steps peter out at a large handhold and with frightening reality, fear envelops me as my dangerous predicament dawns.

Bloody hell – my mind goes into spasms of horror at the thought of Dougie Dinwoodie on his first-ascent attempt, reaching this point, unprepared, with no chalk and a pair EBs. I myself was now reliving that horror – albeit with sticky rubber, chalk and the knowledge that it was climbable. I awkwardly spy a perfect, parallel nut slot that spits out everything that I try to secure in it. Luckily for Dougie, he managed to smash a couple of nuts in with his peg hammer and lower to safety, unscathed. The 'welded' nuts have now gone, and a blank 5c slab needs to be addressed before gear can be placed in a flake that drools downwards like a blood-hound's jowl. Spillage of nerves here would lead to a 120ft. fall. My mental state was still in tatters due to my exams, and my commitment only went as far as emptying the contents of my chalk bag on the one good hold. After half-an-hour I felt it was wise to down climb 40ft. followed by a 30ft. jump onto RPs.

Having climbed down the 40ft., the idea of jumping started to haunt me. I now felt humiliated, vulnerable, scared and stuck. I find a tiny crack in the granite that takes a Rock 1, half in. Once seated, I tug it numerous times to make sure it is firm. I have Matt take up the tension in the rope and I spread-eagle myself on the rock, close my eyes, let go and shout down to Matt to lower me. I was shit scared, I waited for the wire to pop, but it held and I escaped, thoroughly traumatised. When I returned in 1996 to lead *Run of the Arrow* with Sue Harper, I couldn't even find this Rock 1 placement – an illusion forged in desperation perhaps.



**1995-1997:**

Ever since my first visit to the Shelterstone, my eyes always focused on the beautifully curving sickle and its smooth powerful architecture. I could never understand why no one had climbed it. Was it because it curved into *The Missing Link* and had no true finish?

I left Scotland in 1992 after University, but I kept obsessively staring at the crag photo of the Shelterstone in *Extreme Rock*, dreaming of ways to link up the sickle with a blank top pitch above *Thor*. My dreams of an ascent, slowly became an obsession, but not living in Scotland and not having the time, tormented me. In 1993, I hear on the grapevine that Rick 'The Stick' Campbell had climbed the line of the sickle and named it *Realm of the Senses* known as *Realm* for short. Rather than being frustrated at missing out on the first ascent, it was quite the contrary – I was happy, as I now knew it was possible and this urged me to return to Scotland.

In 1994, Rick returned to climb the top pitch independently calling it *L'Elisir d'Amore*. Rick had frightened himself on the ascent, and when he arrived back down at his tent, among boulders in the alpine style meadow, he proposed to Sarah – now his wife – and gave up bold slab climbing. A romantic ending. Along with his swansong, *Aphrodite* – which he attempted 'on-sight' in dramatic nail-biting fashion in 1990, when, run-out above the crux, he found himself in a frightening position with no runners and little rope. He eventually 'escaped' into *Cupids Bow* and completed the clean lead in the morning – Rick had now completed a trilogy of E7 routes on one of Scotland's purest pieces of rock; not to mention the first free ascent of *Thor*, quite possibly Scotland's most coveted E5 mountain route. I was envious.

I returned to Scotland in 1995 to take up residence with my adopted family at 'Muir of Knock.' I wrote, asking Rick for his route descriptions and he happily replied, however I never managed to secure climbing partners for the Shelterstone during the perfect summer of 1995. So in frustration I soloed a sack-full of routes in the Cairngorms, including *Firestone* on Hells Lum Crag. Rick's comment on this, writing in *Climber* magazine, "Gritstone psycho routes reach the Gorms," made me smile, and gave me inspiration for greater things to come.

In 1996, even Rick accompanied me to the Shelterstone, we dabbled with a few variation starts and finishes to existing routes, one of which Rick mockingly named 'Hard Lines' – possibly a jibe at me. One morning on waking up to the noise of the burbling stream, I poke my head out of the tent, glance past the flat meadow grass, up past the beautifully carved boulders, past the infamous Shelter Stone – a large rectangular boulder 12ft. high and 30ft. long, there was a doss underneath it, but sadly it has been rodent infested for years and not used during the summer. My eyes drift forever upwards to the jewel, glistening in the sun and I become

excited about climbing on such immortal stone once again. I make subtle noises to try and stir Rick from his tent, and luckily Rick stirs, he is a morning person too.

At more than 6ft. in height, with a frame like a skeleton, I couldn't understand how Rick had developed into a bold slab climber as he has the physique of a 'sport' climber. Initially, I was slightly unnerved by Rick, due to his legendary ascents on the slabs, but this soon wore off as his quick wit, freshness and perverse sense of humour smothered any hints of arrogance or ego that he may have had.

"Which of the three routes do you want climb today Julian?" Rick asks in well-spoken tongue, like me, Rick had gone to public school.

"Err...I don't know," I replied, knowing damn well deep down that I wanted to climb the amazing sweep of granite architecture of *Realm* and link it with *L'Elisir*. Rick was a little disappointed with my decision, he had hoped I was going to repeat his most coveted route – *Aphrodite*.

With Rick on belay, I set off up the beautifully twisting groove of *Realm*. I feel unfit and a little intimidated at the fact that Rick is obediently holding my ropes. I struggle with the puzzling awkwardness of the groove and I become scared of falling off inches above the belay. Rick makes comment at my pumped and oversized forearms, which breaks the tension and makes me relax a little. After an awkward rest halfway up the groove, it fizzles out and into more intense technicalities. Rick shouts some numbers and, after many body contorting manoeuvres, I peel off the rock onto a brace of RPs.

"Julian your rock boots are in pieces. You can't climb tenuous routes in those." Rick shouts up in incredulity

"These are my favourites, I don't want to bin them," I reply, knowing that Rick's right and my boots are in pieces. On my second attempt, the flyaway groove pushes me into a sequence of levitation moves, before reaching the overlap utterly stunned and shaken by the experience. The overlap lends a meagre rest, chunkier gear and a little time to reflect on the impossibilities to come.

"Pinch the lip of the overlap and traverse left on miniscule footholds," Rick advises, trying to be helpful. However, this doesn't work for me, I am too short to dangle from the lip and secure any footholds at all. "There aren't any footholds." I shout down rather pissed off. Having managed to clip a sturdy down-pointing peg, I try to climb entirely on the slabs crystalline surface, but I fall numerous times, become deluded, tired and eventually lower off.

"Perhaps it is 7a." Rick bursts, with a smile on his face.

"I don't know, perhaps I am being useless," I reply, in a subdued manner.

Later that afternoon, I decide to accompany Rick on an ascent of an 800ft. route – *The Stone Bastion*. Only the top two pitches were of worth,

so Rick and I race up the lower pitches of *The Needle* another of the Shelterstone's timeless classics – a Robin Smith route from 1962. I sit on a ledge, below and right from the 'Crack for thin fingers' and pull the ropes in for Rick to start climbing. In the distance I can hear the familiar deep-bass roar of turbines and chopping rotors as the wasp-coloured Sea-King emerges at the head of the valley and heads plum for us.

"Bloody hell, the chopper's coming straight for us."

The pilot pulls along broadside, below me, and I can see the winch man baring his teeth in a broad smile as he claps his hands in the open doorway. The chopper then turns and disappears back down the glen. When Rick arrives on the stance, I ask: "What's all the clapping about?"

"The helicopter came in close, so I decided to perform the Highland fling on the belay ledge," Rick replies with a grin, somewhat pleased at his performance.

Rick's main climbing partner over the years was Paul 'The Stork' Thorburn, their climbing partnership gelled into a Scottish *tour-de-force*. Their new-routes list was endless, routes of E5 to E7 fell thick and fast, when one failed the other would succeed – symbiosis in harmony. They were commonly dubbed 'Sticky' and 'Storky'. Stork, similar to Rick, is far more than 6ft. tall, and again has a physique such that he could get a stand in part for the skeleton in a human biology class. He has a quiet but intellectual manner and is unusually practical for an academic – a Dr of Chemistry too. Although at 30 years old he still didn't drive a car. I always thought he was called Stork due to his slender shape but later it transpires that the term was coined on a climbing trip years ago, when he used to stand on one foot, stoop down and pull his rock boot onto his other foot, making him look like a stork standing in the shallows. It was my great fortune that Stork was keen to climb the Shelterstone routes too, so we teamed up to link *Realm* and *L'Elisir* before I had to leave the country for the heat, humidity and toils of a bustling shipyard in South-east Asia.

I sit on the belay watching Stork smoothly cruise into the crux section, for a moment I think he has done it, but without warning he slumps onto the rope – even Stork was human after all. I follow on a tight rope, tearing at the uncompromising crystal surface, not wanting to fall, how embarrassing that would be. Eventually, I join Stork on the *Thor* belay – an assortment of pegs, banged into the cliff's granitic hide, it makes me think of a dying bull, laden with matador daggers. I leave Stork dangling on the belay, among the graveyard of rotting iron carcasses. My head is a bag of nerves at the thought of the unknown *L'Elisir* run-out above me. Climbing out of *Thor* is an awkward, swear-spitting, energy-sapping affair before reprieve arrives at the deserted 'peg in the pocket'. At this point, *Thor* drifts easily off rightwards along a line of shelving holds to *The Pin* and easy ground, but not so my destination. The streaks that



follow directly above look appealingly reckless and thoroughly dangerous, but annoyingly, they are seeping with water, which puts an end to our attempts.

The day before my departure for Asia, Stork and I turn our attention to *Aphrodite*. We had come to the arrangement that Stork was to lead the fiercely overhung initial overlap and I was to lead the mega run-out slab, which incorporates the infamous soul searching section on *Run of the Arrow*. I climb quickly on familiar ground and spend little time dwelling on the consequences of a hundred foot fall. I grab at the flake with pulsating heart, I fumble in gear, relax slightly and then proceed to place the large dovetailed nut at the top of the flake. The crucially tenuous crux of *Run of the Arrow* traverses left from here via a move of utmost imbalance or technical mastery. My path was on the right. Discreet edges and a set of topless and bottomless seams suck me upwards via a sustained sequence of moves. I claw bravely at the rock noting there may be a 6c move ahead, my whole body pumped and shaking with the anxiety of the unknown. I look up, and there it is, inches above me, a large hold and slender ledge that marks the end of the crux, I reach up for the hold, the mix of fear and excitement is unbearable at the thought of success, my fingers touch the hold, my body turns to rubber and I rattle 35ft. down the rock and end up bouncing up and down like a puppet on a string! "You useless piece of shit!" I shout at myself, as pissed off with falling as I was surprised to find that the moves were easier than *Run of the Arrow*, although there were more of them. On the second attempt, I make no mistakes and as I attain a standing position on the ledge, I look around to see a sea of unblemished rock. I am absorbed, anxious and frozen to the security of my foothold. In ten minutes I haven't moved but I have to commit soon before all commitment evaporates. The slab above me is covered in positive brick edges, I know it is easy, just a game of mental trauma. After twenty minutes I commit to the glassy curbs, my senses alert to every move I make. I join into the final holds of *Cupids Bow* and the closer I move towards the finishing holds my involuntary shaking becomes intolerable as if I had just popped out of a frozen loch.

### August 1999:

Light filters through the fly sheet of the tent, I cautiously creep out into the beautiful morning scene, the boulders are radiating heat, the grass is luscious green and the alpine flowers are vibrant with colour. I look up to see the Shelterstone glowing pristinely in the morning sun, the slabs look brazen like a Centurion's shield glistening in bronze. I can feel excitement well up in me – this is the day. Now if only I can get Stork out of his sleeping bag – Storky unlike Sticky isn't a morning person.

It had been crap in 1998 for climbing. It was also the year that Stork

had found himself a girlfriend, taken up paddling, took work more seriously and had his bum-tickling locks of hair cut off. So when Stork led the introductory pitch to *Realm* he was faffing.

"Come on," I mumbled, as the Samson and Delilah scenario sprang to mind.

"Stork if you don't hurry up, I will untie the ropes," I called over, laughing at his lack of nerve. On the belay beneath *Realm* I was brimming with confidence, anything less wouldn't be enough for the challenge that lay ahead. This confidence was due to the fact that I had mastered the required sequence of moves while attempting the line a week before with Wilson Moir, my mentor and friend.

The moves along the sickle fitted together with such ergonomic simplicity, I felt I was floating, but once again anxiety makes me take another fall at the end of the hard section, but soon I am back onto normal sized holds. The crux of *Missing Link* passes without thought before latching onto the flake at the base of the *Thor* belay by the skin of my teeth, *Realm* was complete! Stork follows, ties into the belay of decaying iron and lets me get on with the awkward passage of *Thor*. The white streak above the 'peg in the pocket' looks innocuous enough, but it hasn't any holds, attention to detail is called for, dot to dot between clusters of crystals leads to a flat hold, which offers two perfect nuts in opposition. I take a deep breath, pull at the ropes to make sure they are running smoothly, and without hesitation launch up the slab, the flake hold soon disappears, and I have to quickly study the moves required to gain the pocket, I tweak a crystal like a grit pebble and technically shuffle leftwards into the pocket. I am committed now, comfortable in my self-inflicted environment, my adrenaline rushes me through the moves, my feet pop and my wide eyes start to dramatise my inevitable 60ft. fall just as my hands lustfully secure themselves onto a good flat hold, I scramble into the groove and secure some modest gear. I boldly climb up to reach the final impasse. I can't reach the wire placement that Rick had utilised, years previously – at this moment I feel emotionally drained from the physical and mental duress that the route has exacted from me. In desperation I search for hope, and find an RP placement, I bash at the tiny brass cube with my nut key, pleading for it to seat itself as tears begin to roll out of my eyes. I have difficulty staying calm as I launch out with trepidation to grab the final flake, I scuttle up it dangerously, not stopping or looking down until I reach the turfy finishing ledge, my sentence finally over as I slump on the belay, empty of all emotion.

### June 2001:

Since I had repeated all Rick's routes, I was eager to try a new line of my very own on the Shelterstone – a slice of history for myself. My idea was to link up the direct version of *Realm* with a top pitch, following the red streak in its entirety.

I had difficulties with the weather and more so with climbing partners, but as the summer of 2001 arrived, everything was set. I had managed to talk Lawrence Hughes into a trip to the Shelterstone. Lawrence, like Stick and Stork was tall and spindly, yet unlike them he was a young, rampant, red-blooded male, that liked to drive fast, go to all night parties and play music at a billion decibels. I first met Lawrence in the local climbing shop in Aviemore where he was manager. I groomed him with Shelterstone stories and eventually he became keen to accompany me – ‘The Judge’ – to attempt my line.

My legs start to buckle under the sheer mass of two climbing ropes, climbing gear, a tent, a sleeping bag and food for four days, but it all seems worthwhile when I reach my perfect camping spot down the far edge of Loch Avon, a tight pitch with a beach and a boulder on the edge of the loch, which I term my diving board. I loose my baggage before wandering over to the boulders and acclimatise myself to the nuances of the granite once more. Lawrence turns up in the twilight after work. “How’s it going Judge?” Lawrence inquires through the door of the tent in his usual laid-back tone.

“Cool man,” I reply, thankful that he has turned up.

“Got something for you to release your stress,” as he pokes a couple of girly mags through the porch. We both laugh in hysterics.

The morning is peaceful, the crag glints in the sun’s early rays as I dive off my boulder into the cool water of Loch Avon, refreshing myself of all inhibitions. I feel alive and ready.

Once at the foot of the slabs, I foolhardily start climbing directly up the steep wall left of *The Pin*, it is totally devoid of gear, and I find myself in an inescapable position, with no protection and an unknown rounded mantelshelf to complete before the belay. I know I have to commit now, the only other option is to fall 50ft. onto ledges, and smash myself into bits. Lawrence reaches the belay, wide eyed.

“Judge, you mad bastard, that was awesome!” he announces in high praise. I laugh, feeling pleased that my hunch had paid off. We sort the belay and Lawrence pulls out some Mars Bars and cracks open a tin of Red Bull. In a glucose overdose, I climb the *Realm* groove before laying on a frenzied attack on the overlap. The finger holds in the slab above are miniscule, there are no tangible footholds and I am casually spat off, not once but 15 times. Frustration is starting to mount as I try many different sequences, all to little effect. It has to be possible, I did it on a top rope years ago. I tell myself. Reality starts to dawn on me, perhaps it was impossible after all, and I only climbed it on a top rope because the rope was taking half my weight. In defeat, Lawrence climbs *The Pin* – I follow and then have a quick practice, in hope of finding a solution to the overlap, which does materialise.

Lawrence and I were back within the fortnight but, with wet streaks



dribbling down the top pitch, we set our sights on *Thor*, the original and most lucid route of all – a diagonal line of diedres that make for a perfect granite experience and the only route I hadn't climbed on the slabs. It was first climbed on aid with bongs, angles, leepers, blades, rurps and even a sneaky bolt – enough steel to sink a battleship. However, when Mike Rennie and Greg Strange reached the end of their adventurous ordeal, I was still only an embryo clawing at the walls of my mother's womb. Today, most of the rust-ridden relics have disappeared, producing a brilliant modern day extreme – tortuous, awkward, forever interesting but never too bold.

Within two days I return my attention to my new line. Back at the overlap, with leg tucked high and hands scratching at crystals, I commit to a heinous move that leaves me stranded on the upper slab feeling like flotsam, alone on the swell of a ruthless ocean. It takes a moment to comprehend my fragile situation, just as spits of rain tinkle down and evaporate on my forehead. With curses mixing with my fears, I focus on my only hope, the hidden slot 15ft. above me. I sketch my way up the damp 6a slab and fix my 00 friend lifeline, at the same time as the clouds release havoc. I hang from the friend, like a freak-child from an umbilical cord, as miniature waves of water ripple their way down the granite-plane.

“Why?” I shout in desperation, as the thought of another failure starts to sink in. In a mad rage, I repeatedly bang my head on the hard granite slab in front of me, shouting “I hate Scotland,” over and over again. I then watch my blood drip from my head into the torrents of water and disappear into the void below.

### June 2003:

The gods had at last given me a good hand. A fine forecast – the Ace, and Stork, keen to hold my ropes – the King. I was ready to play my hand, and win.

At the overlap, the tension becomes unbearable, the thought of failing floods back through, I have not been on the route for two years, but I have been practicing one-legged squats almost every day in that time, to ensure I have the ability for the next 15 seconds of muscle searing madness. I tear at the blank slab in panic and bewilderment, then wobble my way into the heart of the slab to find my only security in that tiny slot. After regaining a little composure, I tip-toe daintily leftwards into another holdless arena, where faith, hope and keeping cool are my only allies. I relax as I join easier rock, at the crux of *The Missing Link*. My mind then recalls that this section was once my Nemesis, spitting me off three times, those 14 years ago, but today I am glad to have reached the safety of its holds. I spin a web between four rusty relics at the belay and shout down: “Climb when ready,” to the ever-patient Stork.

I want to chill, relax and celebrate after success on such a brilliant pitch, but I am only halfway there. I have a super run-out pitch above me to complete first, a pitch that I had inspected on an abseil rope, five years before, but a pitch, which I had never practiced and because of this I feel intimidated by the unknown. Stork follows smoothly until the overlap, where his long spindly legs and bad knee are of absolutely no use; soon he is up on the belay, tangling himself in my uncouth assortment of ropes. I certainly didn't want to leave the web I had spun myself, but words rolled round my head like a tumble drier – it's now or never.

The actual thought of failing after what I had just climbed below spurred me into action. I left Stork dangling in the web and rushed through the awkward section of *Thor* to reach security at the crescent shaped crack, the crucial ring peg reminds me of a bull's nose, I clip it and feel safe. Knowing that this is the last safe place, I step into the crescent-shaped crack, lean my forehead against the rock, close my eyes and take a few inspirational deep breaths before stepping into a selection of pockets that run out. I begin to stare at the steep blank slab in front of me, thinking what a fool I had been to believe that this line was possible. I have no choice other than to commit, so I spend a few minutes dusting all the crystalline curbs with chalk as I try to read a plausible sequence of moves that will work. I curl my fingers round quartz crystals and edge upwards, shuddering all the while. I reach a Thank-God hidden hold, 30ft. above the ring peg, from which I desperately stretch blindly to push in a cam, for this was all I had for a farther 40ft. The red streak was now the line. I cautiously follow its path into the pocket and then it's right edge to a foothold. I stand here for eternity weighing up my mortality, before gazing down the slab to see nothing but two tiny ropes that look like spaghetti – two moves – two moves, I tell myself. They didn't look hard but they were to be the most precise and important moves of my life. Eventually, I smear and dart up into the termination scoop, where the top of the slabs rear up into the vertical. Yet again, I curse myself for not placing a blade peg in the edge-ridden vertical wall, now I feel ridiculous attached to ropes – I may as well be bloody soloing. I secure an RP and reach some holds before moving left and then up onto another slab. I hadn't noticed the clouds swirl in, until I noticed specks of rain making invisible holes in the backs of my chalked hands. I hadn't a piece of gear below me for 100ft. worthy of holding a dead pheasant, so I switch off and rush at the final 6a slab in the drizzle without care. I heave onto the belay and sit on my throne, regal, my mind lost in a world of chaos and aspirations – the *Icon of Lust* set in stone forever.

## RAMBLES IN THE ALPS

By Cairns Dickson

I HADN'T been to the Alps in October before and was full of anticipation about my visit to Chamonix. Three days is a pretty short alpine season I suppose, but never mind. The distant snowy white domes were bathed in sunshine as our bus sped through the suburbs of Geneva.

By 1pm. we'd checked out the weather, (good but with a fohn wind on the way) bought some food and were leaving the valley heading for the Argentiere hut. It was so picturesque, I could almost imagine the smell of wood smoke but my early enthusiasm was quickly subdued by the steepness of the path leading to the Refuge de Lognan.

Later, teetering about on moraines and ladders, I knew that despite my assiduous planning my pack was too heavy, and it was dark as we trudged wearily across the glacier spending a happy hour, shuffling around in the snow, trying to find a way into the hut.

The comfort of the winter rooms did not disappoint. We slept in and left the hut at 10.30am. A pathetic alpine start even by my own dismal standards. We picked our way through the moraine and staggered on up to the Milieu Glacier.

Too hot, too tired and too late – I knew even at this early stage that the Aiguille d'Argentiere would not be ours today. We sat down and I allowed my eyes to wander around the awesome circle of peaks that lay before us, so big, so cold and so, so scary. Sitting here, wretched, heaving for breath in this thin and unfamiliar air, it was hardly real, I could scarce believe I'd been on these faces – neither could my companion, Magnus.

So, what had changed since my last visit in 1979? Well sure, I had, not just my flabby and arthritic frame but also my frame of mind. No more the joy of youth, the thrill of unmixed play, the unquenchable drive to succeed, but the measured compromise of experience. Discomforts and dangers weighed against the fear of failure and more frighteningly the fear of missing the pub. Had I spent too much time on the couch in vacant or in pensive mood, allowing icy spires to flit across that inward eye instead of under foot?

And what about the climbers – have we changed? Is Chamonix in summer still heaving with Brits on everything from the *Freney Pillar*, the *Eckpfeiler* and the *Dru Couloir* to the Petit Clocher and the Aiguille d'Argentiere? I doubt it and why should it, new climbers – new games, harder, better? And the mountains themselves, what of them? Summer temperatures and thawing permafrost have brought new dangers and completely removed some icefields. The old sport of summer ice climbing is not as appealing so climbers adapt and develop to face the greater challenges of climbing in winter. And what of these Argentiere peaks,



much, much less ice but still the same – immense, austere, brooding in the shadows.

I couldn't climb them now, but what about then? What thoughts still come to mind over the long and twisting decades that separate me from that distant past?

### **August 1979:**

Not a terribly alpine start, even then I'm afraid, left the hut about 9am not that we stayed in the hut, rather too hot I think? Strode with great purpose across the glacier, the face looming ever more menacingly above us. Try not to feel small. The Bergschrund – hmmm! Bad memories from Les Courtes, this one not so bad. Our little hearts flutter as we scuttle rightwards across these enormous crenellations. Desperately steep sides, they were apparently garbage shoots, making one feel uneasy about resting in them. It's not too late I could still go home! Enormous packs (mandatory) and an unending ramp of ice, although not technically difficult, still steep enough to concentrate the mind. We had a long way to go and I suppose it gave us a chance to acclimatise to our new vertiginous world and familiarise ourselves again with our equipment.

We had both spent a busy year doing nothing so we were as rusty as our gear. And what magnificent equipment it was, Joe Brown helmet, Whillans harness, Deadmen, Salewa drive in ice screws (three each!), Moac nuts, Mountain Equipment Snowline duvet, Galibier Terray Fitzroy boots of which I was justly proud, two Terrodactyls – prehistoric ice tools designed to macerate fingers, Chouinard crampons, an ice axe and some slings, all stuffed into a capacious Tiso sack.

The névé on the ramp was superb, hastening our progress. The Salewa drive ins working well, sometimes too well. This was our first day on the face, going fairly smoothly. I look up, Neil's Terrodactyl hammer is flying directly towards me. I'm reminded of another idiot mate whose 'Quick release' crampons were always coming off. Fear for lost tool, fear for myself. Splat, sticks straight in the ice right beside me, I thank the presiding deity. We'd done about 2000ft. of this and felt we had front pointed enough by this time, the steepening rocks of the upper section were assuming gigantic proportions in the failing light. Don't be intimidated! Lovely, a little platform just big enough to sit on, we sat on it and had our tea.

The sun had already dropped behind the Verte, the rock spires of the Chardonnnet glowing fiery red in the evening light. The sense of exposure was very grand as we looked down between our boots to the thread like bergschrund and the ripples of the crevasses on the glacier. I was enjoying the peace of the moment that comes after a good days climbing, everything was fine. The moment passes, weather, route finding, the conditions conspire to rob me of my rest. Something else was just starting to tug at my consciousness, I couldn't place it at first then it dawned, I was freezing.

Promptly rearranging my seating I look over to my companion, he was still there. I regale him with pleasant tales of the *Forbes Arete* and its suicidal descent! He had dosed off. The day had gone well, memories of our first encounter flickered through my mind.

### February 1977:

One last effort that must not fail – he's out. I've made my point, who the hell is he anyway? Dave, my other passenger looked on with disinterested hauteur. Well petrol bills were an issue back then and my Mini 850 used more oil than petrol and it had to be paid for. Neil Harding-Roberts re-entered the car, we continued our journey to Beinn a' Bhuid after our brief altercation in Perth. Well there was no one else. Money, work, resits, he would have to do. We'd survived our first alpine trip and here we are again, happy as can be, 2000ft. done 1000ft. to go. Another late start, very poor.

The climbing was harder now, quite sobering, an awkward pitch leading rightwards beneath a slightly overhanging rock wall led to a nasty little bulge – 100ft. of rope out, nae runners, why am I here? Anyway, that pitch connected us with a series of grooves and chimneys that would take us through the most difficult part of the face. Neil leads on through and up into a steepening groove, disappearing into swirling mist and flurries of spindrift. He was climbing quite well I thought – good choice after all. The next few pitches were similar and needed some care. Sustained steep climbing, well iced up, good belays, favourable conditions, (Scottish 4/5 maybe?). We were starting to feel the altitude a little by now despite our training – a leisurely saunter up the *Gouter Ridge* of Mont Blanc. The mist made our position seem more serious but we had lost the exposure of the ramp. We were so committed by now that there were no decisions to make, just keep climbing.

We were supposed to be on the *Axt Gross* variation, which is to the left of the *Cornuau Davaille* route on the North face of the Droites. I'm pretty sure we were on the Droites but there were so many grooves, chimneys, slabs and couloirs all fitting the guidebook description. The mist was clearing and we were catching some afternoon sunshine which warmed our hearts as well as our bodies. The climbing difficulties had eased a little and we were heading directly for an obvious lentil shaped rock very high up on the face.

I found myself on steepening water ice that was starting to dinner plate. I whapped in my 'terror' hammer and off comes this large scab of ice. I leaned in on it to stop it but it knocked my front points clean off. I was hanging from the wrist loop of my elegant and beautiful 55cm. ash-shafted Chouinard Frost ice axe, the shapely curve of its long pick securely embedded in better ice. Our day could have been spoiled. I recovered hastily and, but for a little more detritus coming his way, Neil seemed unconcerned.

We moved quickly up and round to the left of our lenticular rock, the summit now lay at the end of a long snow cone. Neil opted for a shorter, but quite spectacular, rock pitch to get us directly on to the summit ridge. We pulled on our duvet jackets and settled down for another bivi, the tensions of the day giving way to the delightful and the mundane. Very stupid to have ejected food earlier to reduce weight.

Anxious now about the weather, a much earlier start saw us scramble onto the summit of the East peak of Les Droites (4000m.). We had conquered the useless and set off hastily along the East Ridge towards the Col des Droites. Frustration with our pitiful progress persuaded us to opt for a more direct descent down the East Buttress, abseiling from ice bollards, then on towards the Talefre Glacier inadvertently glissading over a small bergschrund. Our antics had cost us time and it was long dark before we staggered into the Couvercle Hut. The guardian produced some wine, which we absorbed immediately. It was many years later I learned that he had in fact expected us to pay for it.

Magnus, unimpressed with my fitness was now showing signs of impatience and boredom with my story. Fear of this 'Fohn wind' sent us scurrying back to Chamonix and the pleasures of Les Vagabonds.

Our midday departure from the Midi teleferique station was another disgrace, perfect weather and no fohn wind.

We were heading up Mont Blanc du Tacul, but of course, we were too late, I sat down in the snow, my mind wandered back to 1978 and my last visit to this mountain. Neil and I were descending, this serac above us collapsed and...Magnus yawned.

Well maybe another time.



## CHANCE ENCOUNTERS IN NORWAY

By Carl J. Schaschke

WE WERE on our way through the Jotenheimen mountains of central Norway, heading for our 20-year anniversary rendezvous on the Romsdalshorn a bit farther to the north. Lasse was behind the wheel of a camper van he had hired. Complete with its foldaway chairs and indoor toilet, the vehicle was not the most conventional mode of transport for a seasoned Norwegian climber. But then conventional is not exactly Lasse's style. Who else fills in his lottery ticket without paying and then sits in front of the national TV show hoping his numbers don't turn up?

"At the end of the programme you haven't won and you haven't lost any money either," he says. Lasse has been around long enough to have seen and done just about everything there is to do in Norway except make a successful ascent of Norway's highest alpine peak—Store Skagastolstind. I've collected a good number of Norwegian peaks in my time too, but not this one either. The mountain is very much the benchmark for all others, and frustratingly, for us both, had remained a dream.

I first met Lasse, 17 years my senior, in 1985 on the Romsdalshorn. Climbing alone one day that July, I chanced upon the Norwegian, also alone. For Lasse, this particular block-shaped mountain, which stands on the other side of the valley from the Troll Wall, had been a family taboo after a relative was avalanched off the lower slopes and seriously injured some years before. Unbeknown to his wife, the unauthorised sneaky visit — which apparently had not been his first — resulted in a great day together and the start of our 20-year friendship. Over the intervening years, and many Norwegian and Scottish mountains, rock climbs, cross-country ski trips and sails around the Norwegian islands later, it was time to return to the Romsdal. Any excuse for a fun time.

Having crossed the high mountain passes, Lasse parked for the night in front of the Turtegro Hotel — a well-known starting point for aspiring ascensionists of the big peak. With roughy-toughty folk milling around outside the hotel, the camper van gave us remarkable invisibility. It reminded me of Billy Connolly's comic sketch about the Glasgow drunk on a bus whose outrageous behaviour is completely ignored by other passengers; the magic of whisky thereby making him invisible. So camper vans (or 'Toilets on Wheels,' as Lasse so elegantly puts it) it seems, are not what climbers drive about in. Lasse may not be conventional but he is wise in his own country. Think of Scottish weather and then multiply by 10. They say that if it's not raining it has just finished or it is just about to start. Camping in Norway can be very miserable indeed. Camper vans are very comfortable and dry.

The old climbers' hotel accidentally burned down in 2001 and was replaced almost immediately by a modern purpose-built climbing centre. The character of Turtegro is much changed but, because of its location, it remains as popular as ever. The new front porch faces out towards the mountain which confusingly (but more conveniently) is also known as Storen. When we arrived, a couple of climbers were sitting outside with a beer – reward indeed for an ascent. What else can possibly justify parting with one's life savings for a glass of øl?

Staring up towards the peak, they ignored Lasse in the immediate foreground busying himself unfolding his chairs and table outside his 'Toilet on Wheels.' Other washed-out blond-haired climbers began to appear as the evening lengthened. The hurdy-gurdy tales of the day's adventures were lost on me. Lasse leaned back nonchalantly in his chair without a care in the world. Not exactly the picture of the master alpinist.

I had been past the old hotel several times in previous years, but only once ever caught the slightest glimpse of Storen. Worse for Lasse, he had actually been to Storen on three separate occasions with a view to climbing it and had once sat at the bottom for a week waiting for the rain to lift. With no joy, he had gone home, like so many others with great expectations, frustrated and disappointed.

Although we had intended only passing by Turtegro, the weather forecast claimed to be reasonable so the deal was done. By 5.30 the next morning we were packed and off up the verdant valley following the milky melt water towards the glacier. We weren't alone. Two teams had beaten us and were already some way ahead. It could have been a trip up to the Ben from the golf course. The pace between the teams quickened, culminating in an outright race to the foot of the mountain. One team eventually veered off up a different route, and we overtook the other that turned out to be a Norwegian Guide and his paying clients. Lasse is no newcomer to powering his way to the bottom of routes in Glencoe and the Guide eventually conceded defeat, passing comment to Lasse as we cut our way past: "Your mate might have the youth but you'll have the experience."

At the strangely striped turquoise glacier, we steered a course away from the crevasses and passed over the years of glacial flow underfoot to the bergschrund. Beyond, signs of vegetation ended and the sterile arctic world above began, relieved by the delicate pink and white flowers of the perennial mountain buttercup *Ranunculus glacialis*. In spite of the forecast, the upper reaches of Storen remained lost in cloud. All we could be certain of was being on the right mountain. The snow-clad lower flanks were beginning to get uncomfortably steep the higher we ascended. The thought of a slip was a bit worrying. I kicked over-sized bucket steps through the crusty snow until we reached the start of the solid rock band, a blessed relief that couldn't have come soon enough. The rock above was reminiscent of Coir' a Ghrunnda. From below, the rocks had appeared small but now, up close, the blocks and cracks belonged in the Land of the Giants. I felt very small.

*Cairns Dickson climbing on the Droites North Face in August 1979. Photo: Neil Harding-Roberts.*











By good fortune the mist was lifting, slowly unveiling Storen's upper walls. That was a help for our navigation. The guidebook, on the other hand, was not. The Norwegian text didn't make sense and we could make neither head nor tail of the illustrations. The walls appeared massive. Slingsby had impressively made the first ascent of Storen, solo, well over a century before but it wasn't from this side. We cut a diagonal line across the lower face until we could go no farther. This was definitely wrong. So now upwards. Even though we couldn't find any sign of a route, there was evidence that we had not been the first to reach this particular point. Karabiners hung ominously from pegs. We found ourselves on a belay that appeared to have been used as an unscheduled escape route. Stinking evidence of rapid bowel movements suggested it had been an epic.

From nowhere, the Guide magically reappeared some way overhead, minus one of his clients who, apparently intimidated by the sheer enormity of Storen, had opted for the relative safety of the glacier below. Lasse and I had traversed too low and been unwittingly overtaken. While the Guide busied himself on 'The Corner' securing his remaining clients, we climbed up to join them. Now on route, we collectively traversed 'The Gallery,' an open ledge high over the Slingsbyreen glacier 2000ft. below. We were in danger of tripping over the Guide and tying ourselves in knots with his clients. I recognised that even by my usual low standards of climbing etiquette, carving past on this occasion was going to be poor form. The Guide could see this, too. In no uncertain terms he made it clear that they were taking the left-hand *Andrews Renne* (AD-) and that our options were either directly above up a deep crack known as *Heftyes Renne* (AD+) or to follow another groove farther to the right. However, dripping melt water from the bottom of this as well as its disappearance from view narrowed the choice down to *Heftyes Renne*.

Launching off the belay proved a bit of a challenge. Before disappearing upwards, the Guide briefly filled us in on the historical details of the first ascent. In time-honoured tradition, Heftye himself had apparently stood on the shoulders of his companion to gain access into the crack. Forget the rock ballet, this was down to pure unadulterated brute force and ignorance. It was a desperate scuffle into the crack and a fumble to clip into a peg embedded some way overhead. Squirming farther into the crack, the pack on my back restricted mobility in a way not dissimilar to the upper section of *Sassenach*. God, how I wish I'd left it behind at the bottom as the Guide had done. Smart guy.

Popping out of the crack above to belay, I was now in a position too high to see down below or to communicate with Lasse. I tugged on the rope a couple of times. I could feel movement as my friend sorted himself out below, then suddenly I was drawing in the rope, he was on his way up. He had watched the inelegant thrutching and reckoned that he would have to perform the move spontaneously or face the prospect of perhaps never getting off the belay (or so he claimed.)

*Jason Currie climbing on Coire Ghranda Upper Cliff. Guy Robertson.*

Some more rope lengths led to the summit – a clean sweep of granite of humongous proportions. There we rejoined the Guide and his clients. By chance, the third team appeared from Mohs Scar over the other side of the mountain. From my pack, I offered Lasse a dram of Scotland's finest to celebrate but he barely condensed the vapours in his nostrils.

"We have only done half the job, Carl," he wisely reminded me. Straddling the summit block, the views over the Jotenheimen were magnificent. Our heads were clear.

With the thought of that shitty belay down below fresh in my mind, the escape was something I wasn't particularly relishing. Like a roll-on, roll-off ferry, the team that arrived last left first followed by the Guide and his team, and then us. I was beginning to appreciate the fact that the Guide knew the mountain like the back of his hand and that keeping behind him might have its advantages.

About 100m. or so below the summit he nipped off around an innocuous looking corner. Lasse and I tagged along behind to find him with a jumble of multi-coloured slings hung around a block. We would never have found this abseil point in a million years. Threading the rope through one of the *in-situ* steel karabiners, we all descended. I was chuffed that I'd brought a 60m. rope. It was plumb vertical downwards. We used all of it. More abseils followed until we were back at the edge of the snowline. Making our way to the top of the bucket steps I'd kicked earlier, we descended down to the glacier. Then, safely away from the reaches of Storen, we quaffed the whisky. Looking back up I still couldn't fit the guidebook's topo to the rock that lay in front of us. Our heads were no longer clear.

A few days later, Lasse and I were on the top of the Romsdalthorn, this time having carved our way past a Swedish team on the North Face. It was yet another great outing in the hills with Lasse. For 2005, the Romsdalthorn was always going to be the reality but Store Skagastolstind? Well, that was the dream come true.



## THE LAUGHTER OF THE BIRDS

By P. J. Biggar

MAC raised himself and looked out of the window but the hillsides were obscured by low cloud and it was starting to drizzle. He remembered casting for sea trout in the river and lying out in the early morning sun on the green sward. Harvey was snoring peacefully. He was a couple of days into his holiday and starting to look less haggard. At breakfast time it was raining properly. Mac rigged up a can under the downspout and they had no need to go to the river for water.

Camasunary was full of shoreline creatures, French, Dutch, German – Mac particularly liked the Spanish waiters with their guitars and flutes. He cooked a large breakfast and sat in a rickety chair with his feet on an old orange box watching the weather. Away out on the grey sea a bright line was forming under the clouds. In mysterious gaps torn by the jagged rocks the Island of Rum took shape. Harvey moved purposefully from one pile of gear to another. “We should be able to go out about two,” Mac said.

They forded the river in warm sunlight. Mac had chosen his old green boots and almost at once he felt the left heel start to rub. The tide was out and the beach by Loch na Cuilce was a gleaming field of bladder-wrack, by going over it they could avoid the awkward slabs on the hillside. Mac forged ahead and slipped, his feet shot into the air and his head narrowly missed a large rock. “That was close,” said Harvey and turned up the hill.

At the highest trickle on Garbh Bheinn they filled their water bottles. Mac recalled doing that with Mike back in 1988. Big climbing days left a bookmark in the year. Now the reflection in the pool had grey hair. The hill had changed too – it was getting steeper. Then Harvey, who was already ahead, made one of his blunders. The way seemed so obvious to Mac, avoid the slippery slab by the easy crack on the right. Why make things difficult?

“Och Harvey,” he yelled in amused frustration, “They will be calling you Mr Harvey of the Slabs!”

Harvey said nothing for the next few minutes while he extricated himself. He always did, at least he always had. Mac remembered a *cul-de-sac* on Tower Ridge and gleaming ice-sheets in Coir’a’Ghrunnda. He never seemed to learn, but indignation was vain. Every companion had some niggling defect, the trick was to live with it.

Silently, they surveyed the great sea-serpent uncoiling towards Sligachan. Harvey got ahead again. Mac could feel his heel rubbing. He manoeuvred up the huge rough blocks of Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn. Light evening cloud was drifting around sharp teeth which came and

vanished like ghosts. Mac wondered if he should have brought his sticks, but the ground was too difficult. His hands were starting to feel the sharpness of the gabbro.

Harvey stood by the cairn, he looked slightly chilled. He spent a lot of time nowadays waiting for Mac. The night's rain had left pools. They siphoned enough water to cook their dinner.

"Mike's trick," said Mac, "Works a treat."

He leant back comfortably against the slab while the little stove hissed under the pan. Pink vapour clung about Sgurr Alasdair high above them and swirled across their vision of Rum far out to sea. From where he lay among the rocks, Mac looked up towards the rocks of the Thearlaich-Dubh Gap. His attention was caught by two little figures. As the mists cleared for a moment he could see them quite clearly but there was something odd about them, although he couldn't quite say what, and yet they were moving well. Mac thought he heard them shout with delight as they vanished upwards. The mists moved over the peaks again obscuring everything.

He turned to Harvey: "Did you see those guys up there?" "No Mac, when?"

"Just now."

Harvey started violently as their quiet conversation was shattered by a hideous burst of mocking laughter.

"Lord, Mac it sounds like fiends in the air!"

But Mac, recovered from his own shock, knew the answer.

"Birds Harve, birds. They nest high up on Rum. Always make that bloody racket when they come back to their burrows, so I'm told. Manx Sheerwaters."

He laughed: "No wonder the Vikings called that hill Trollval eh! I didn't know they nested here as well. We're privileged to hear that. Talking of Rum," he continued, "D'you remember that wee plastic bottle I had in the Alps? I think I've got it here somewhere."

Working in the construction industry, Harvey never had trouble sleeping. Now, despite sharp stones and the biting of the midges, Mac heard his breathing turn into the familiar snore. He smiled to himself in the dark.

"Now Mac," he quoted the familiar words, "If I should start to snore, you be sure to give me a good nudge."

To which he always replied: "You know I like to hear you snoring, makes me feel comfortable."

How long had they been climbing together?

Mac himself was far from sleep. The chill of the night was creeping down and the thought of the Gap made him apprehensive. Late on a June evening more than 30 years ago he had learned to abseil there. Youth! Adventure! It had all passed in a blur of effort and they had been up and away to King's Chimney, the Pinnacle and a few hours sleep on Beinn Dearg. Mac wriggled farther down into his plastic bag.

And 15 years ago it had started to rain as Mike was leading. Two English climbers had arrived just as he was setting off. A top rope had been requested. Mac remembered the relief when he got his boot into the crack, pressed up and gained a decent hold above. Jim had come up well but Linda had had a slippery struggle as the rain got worse. They had all ended up in a dripping cave on Sgurr Sgumain.

Mike reckoned Jim and Linda weren't married – "... much too fond of each other."

They'd cooked Pitta bread and sardines with a blowlamp and heated water in an old enamel mug. Mac remembered the revelation of the morning as black peaks rose through an ocean of cloud, but that was then.

Like polished pewter the north wall of the real Gap rose before their eyes, its rocks cold and damp under their fingers.

"Don't feel you have to," Mac shouted.

"I don't think I can come back!" shouted Harvey, teetering on the crux. Mac gazed at the yellow lichen on the jagged boulders and held the rope. At long last it came tight. Mac lurched forward. He hadn't remembered it being this hard! Every move took every scrap of energy. With gasps and grunts he hauled himself over the final lip.

Harvey grinned: "I couldn't have gone back and told Proudfoot we'd failed there." (Proudfoot was the club super-hero, he'd done everything.)

"I couldn't have led that Harve," said Mac. He looked at his friend with added respect, he was fast outstripping him.

In ecstasies they climbed Thearlaich and Alasdair and then delighted in the spiral staircase leading to Collie's Ledge. While they sauntered across, the day started to turn towards heat. On the brown slabs of An Stac the heat really struck them. Harvey got well ahead. Mac's boot was chaffing his heel into soreness.

He needed rest. "I have a plan," he said.

Mac sat by the cairn while Harvey climbed the Pinnacle alone. Mac photographed him abseiling. They took water and food and went on. The day grew hotter. The charcoal of the Bannachdich ridge slow-cooked them.

Mac knew that Harvey must have been waiting for half-an-hour when he got to the summit. He slumped heavily beside the cairn. His legs were tired, his hands were raw, his left heel was badly rubbed. He had reached a decision. Harvey knew him better than to argue and they divided the food and water. Mac watched him out of sight before turning away and beginning to retrace his steps along the dusty flanking paths.

Mac was alone on vast, loose, stony slopes and the winding mirage of the river never seemed to come closer. Everything seemed to be in motion as he descended. He noticed that Time itself was going faster, for whenever he looked at his watch it was an hour and a half later. He dislodged a huge boulder which smashed into bits with a whiff of cordite. Farther down, he fell and cut his hand. The effort of getting plasters from his pack was too



great and bright drops of blood spattered on the rocks and stained his dirty trousers.

Down in the valley, the heat became intense and scree gave way to delusive sheep tracks amongst bog-myrtle scrub. Time accelerated even more, but at last Mac lay in meadows among clear springs, greedily drinking the cold water. At length he came to a blue river pool flowing over white rocks. He took off all his sweat soaked clothes and edged into the water. He lay for a long time as the current washed him gently round and round while his swollen toes traced patterns on the jagged peaks. He hoped Harvey had made it. He was sure he would have, he really deserved to. He needed a younger fitter partner. Maybe Proudfoot was the man? But he was in the Alps as usual.

Mac remembered finishing the Ridge himself. Screw top bottles of pale ale at Sligachan and the Election result crackling over the radio in the tent at Glen Brittle – Heath for Wilson – then, years later, the smell of flowers as he and Mike came down from Gillean.

On the slabs near the stepping stones Mac had to stop to lie down. The path along the coast, which they had hardly noticed yesterday, went on and on forever. Just as he came in sight of the white walls of Camasunary a smir of rain brought out the midges, but try as he might Mac found he could not hurry. As he approached the building he could hear music, even the sound of castanets.

Harvey lay in his bag in the little back room. Mac stirred him gently. “Did you make it?” but he hadn’t. After all their efforts, the heat had sucked him dry and he had quit the ridge at Bidein.

“I’ll bet you didn’t drink enough,” said Mac covering the guilt he felt.

“Maybe not,” said Harvey ruefully. “To tell the truth Mac, I was a bit worried about finding my way back here in the dark.”

Mac shook his head and busied himself with the stove. The laughter of the birds had foretold something after all. He opened the wine.

As food and drink revived him, Harvey began to talk. “You know you thought you saw some guys ahead of us at the Gap?” Mac nodded. “Well, just as I got near the end I think I saw them.”

“What were they like?”

“There was a little guy who seemed to be in the front most of the time, then the other bloke was taller. Funny old gear they had, Mac – breeches and old rucksacks and that. I tried to catch them up. I must’ve been pretty tired by that time, but know what? I couldn’t get anywhere near them. I couldn’t get a right look at them either – even though it was clear and sunny. They kept vanishing among the rocks. I reckon they must have finished the Ridge some time ago.”

Mac nodded thoughtfully as he poured more wine.

“I think you’re right,” he said. In his mind’s eye he could see them climbing past the Gendarme and whooping their way over the moor as the rain started to fall. Down the corridor the Spanish waiters played a slow and rhythmical refrain.

## FINAL DESTINATION

By Guy Robertson

THE two of them sit there, all hot air and comfy. Like a brace of stubborn pupae, they try to ignore the inevitable metamorphosis that will eventually extricate them from the car. Straight off the back of a long working week, and four hours of warm stasis is about to crumple under the staggering load of two overnight winter packs. Their task is substantial – two hours to camp, at least – and the lateness of the hour induces sleepy second-thoughts into their lazy minds. But there's no escaping it.

Four burning legs power down big-booted on four tiny pedals, the first steepening of the track melting slowly into darkness behind them. Sweaty uphill first-gear grunts and twitchy front wheels, torch beams dancing under monstrous loads. They slither out-of-control through icy puddle glitches, rectified only by more effort and downward momentum. And then, in a jolt, the unthinkable arrests them, their jaws dropped slack like a pair of wooden puppets. A mighty Gulf Stream fist has driven unchallenged across the great stand of pines through which they toil. And now, up ahead, great wooden bastions lay slain and slaughtered across their way, all twisted and crumpled, 5m. deep in all directions. And more, the moss of damp on dead bark has cunningly frozen to sheath each calloused carcass in a slippery veneer. At once their wheels are rendered useless – crampons may well be required.

A few tentative probes at the main massif are convincingly rejected. Each stepped branch may be a ladder, but each hulk of trunk is an icy snake-back, creeping up, across, then down and sideways, this way and that, always onwards and somewhere, but never forward. The stumbling, prickled pair soon wearily retreat to diverge and meander through unknown, but at least, less precipitous outliers. Their rapid, wheel-assisted approach is presently transformed into a complex and demanding approach of energy-sapping proportions.

Once through; moonlight, stillness, and the hot slow steam of frosted breath. No more dead trees to wrestle. A clear path ahead and at last two clear minds. The West Buttress stands guard like a million miles away or more, its 1000ft. of cracked rock and turf and ice made small by the trick of Midwinter's dim. And so they crunch on, a second start, through a fresh frozen carpet of snow, towards an uncertain destination, finally.

Tented and togged up, cocooned in feathers and fibres and fabrics, the two of them soon lie silent in wait of dreams. Legs still throb from the endless march. The tent skin flaps briskly in a gathering breeze, and one of the two ponders the undeniable advantages of not being born a ptarmigan. A few words of quiet optimism are exchanged passively, before the slight touch of snowflakes tickles falling minds off to sleep.

Nokia bleeps, the repetitive strain. A quiet, but sufficiently, insidious and narking irritant that ensures that both parties are infected with a blurred awareness. First things first – coffee *in-situ* or straight up and at it? A turgid bladder makes one decision, while the other is forced shortly after, through a combination of guilt, and paranoia that time is warping against them. For the Clock – as ever – ticks loudly in the silence.

Back to the future again, and the dull memories of sleep evaporate in the sudden heat of an uphill stomp. With monotonous whiteness once more they engage, as a biting easterly swells up and tears away any chance of conversation. Two little flecks of silent torch light edge forward on the map, each hosting its own little hooded world of hopes, fears and dreams. Step, step, step, crunch! Stop, leg out, breathe, step, step, step, crunch! Stop, leg out, step, step, crunch! Partners in purgatory, taking it in turns, but it won't last forever.

The angle relents and they scuttle now, relieved and wind-assisted over ice-scoured flats towards the col. And there they sit, crouched in the drifting lee of the ancient dyke, gorging snappy, crunching, chewy bars and salt-sugar drinks. A strong grainy wind whips the air with a sharp bite and few words are spoken. And then, right there, straight above, a window is opened, the thick morning clouds are cleaved into blue, and two hearts start to pound. Some more and then more and then more is revealed, unfolding in great sweeps from sky down to loch. Cold and unmentioned apprehension is replaced with sharp excitement in the tight snap of a krab. To their right, and across, their Buttress emerges slowly, glistening and festooned with great icy shards. A dragon in waiting. Decisions are made and minds are prepared and weapons are drawn. They move off together, spitting hope into the wind, two hot-faced jangling fools with spikes and cranked-up boots. The clock ticks louder still.

Side-stepping carefully out and down and left, one of the pair now scans the wall – a great icy canvas, devoid of art. His eye traces keenly up, through familiar territories, to a previous impasse where it all ran out. The undisputed blankness that black schist often presents. Dwelling briefly on that point of return, of sure and sudden failure, he shrinks back quickly from memories of defeat. Tracing left now, across and away back down, he finds a subtle snow cone flirting with sheer rock; a weakness, a quick decision, and a flicker of his fire.

The ropes are unleashed at the base of the line, and the signs are good. A cooperative fault quite bristles with vegetation, slanting left to a bulge, from where a line of tenuous icy tears weeps back across right. And so on into a groove, it would seem, and the start of a battle unknown. A quick knuckle-numbing punch up the fault yields blood to the bones, then a sinker belay, and the second man soon flights up behind to kick out his place.

Into the fray now, teetering out on the tears, to where a searching grope



right for the groove is rewarded with a pick in a crack. Both feet swing in tandem to settle on creases, and the unknown groove is now shedding some light. Nuts tumble from the rack like coins from a slot machine. A thin seam yields a high torque on the left wall, for a high step up with the right foot, then the same again, rocking over, to both picks in good turf. A scrabble, a puff and a manteling heave, and the turf sits solidly under his crampons.

Above is a corner – smooth, black and steep. There's no hint there of turfy goodness, and there's no faint slot for a pick to keep. So he swings back out left, blindly, popping up onto the crest, to where an eyrie and dragging ropes force out a second stance. Good cracks, good belay, and some good progress for sure. Safe? – Enough, at least, to stave off the ridicule of the bulging wall barring access above. This is steadfastly ignored, as coils of rope are rushed in, and the shivering second is yanked from his bubble to hack and claw his stiffened limbs up the groove to the stance.

Their words of uncertainty are brief and in agreement; they are only mild in hope. Our second now leads through, from defence to attack, struggling with the sudden shock of the transformation. Soon he's 10ft. or so up, axes dangling hopelessly from his wrists, spread-eagled, underclung it seems on verglas, and looking quite the limpet. With nothing stopping him below, their stance becomes a target, a human bullseye. The belayer concentrates intensely, hounding every twitchy move, surely wishing he was leading and out of the firing line. But the limpet sticks, and slithers haltingly upward, nothing breaking the shared apprehension but the frightened, lurching gasps of his frozen breath. Until a pick is thrown suddenly, repeatedly, and with conviction overhead. C'mon! C'mon! C'mon ya bastard! The pick finds a slot.

Several great gasping puffs, and an all-or-nothing heave confines their 'impassable wall' to the history books – for now at any rate. Watch me here! Not hard, but bugger all gear! No worries, it'll save some time, and it's running out for sure. A quick snack. Stomping feet and bouncing shoulders, as the rope feeds quickly out and the second's eyes gaze out into the murk, questioning the depth of the grey, and the lateness of the hour. Then the ropes go slack. Aye, slack, take some in then. What? But that's no... WHAAHOOOOAAAAAYYAAAA! The Banshee howl booms heavily round the bowels of the Coire, both the ropes are struck tight, and there's metal clashing metal. Delayed impact....WHHHHHHHUUUMP! Jeezus man, you OK?! Oh man, oh man, I don't know, I think so, give me a minute. Any blood? When does falling become flying?

The clock's tick now echoes tangibly, such is the hour, and the white murk is turning brown towards the sunset. At this, the third stance, their prospect is undoubtedly the grimmest yet. Any weakness above is reliably short-lived, and not a line to take seems logical in any way. The grooves all fade to walls, all the walls are capped by bulges, and there's no glinting crack to catch the eye. But with battered pride set aside with such stalwart

valour below, who would they be to shy away now? Take a look at least man, take a look. So he looks, and he looks, and he looks again. Each time he probes tentatively higher, each time he is more committed, and each time the intensity of his awareness of that commitment grows, until he knows; there's no going back. A move up on more frozen moss than turf, with no bite for crampons, arms locked at the elbows and feet smearing an uncertain balance on the smooth blank shist. Protection still eludes him, and his need becomes acute. The leader must not fall. Fate hangs like a guillotine, sharp and taught around him, as his moves become more frequent, more sure, but less cognitive. It's climbing by instinct. The belayer stares silent at the clean sweep of the rope, momentarily punctuated by a solitary peg, tied off and tokenistic.

The first bulge is beaten trending left under the worst of it, the second succumbs to a more head on approach, cranking hard towards the sanctuary of what appears to be a decent crack at last, praying for mercy. And brief mercy there is, in the form of a nut, but the crack turns blind and forces wild swings out right, crampons all smearing again until a tiny spike accepts a sling. Then right again, and down. Down? He realizes now that there is no line, only the desperate and chaotic clamberings of a man who seeks escape. And there, at last, it appears, out of nowhere – a slim groove laced with ice. Once more the cracks all disappear but it doesn't seem to matter; there's a way out up ahead, and the trimmings of ice and turf have returned sure grip to both feet. Head down, into high gear, engage the exit ramps, and they're out of there.

Staring out into the giddy, amorphous expanse of a winter's dusk up high, he feels the clammy cool of relief on frosted cheeks. The *Final Destination*. It's over, and he knows it, but he's spent of any passion. Sleep whispers in his ears as he slowly heaves the ropes. Real Life is a galaxy away – driving cars, tapping keyboards, drinking beer, sitting on sofas, watching telly. For a while up there it's just hot blood and wind and grey space and frozen ropes, until the faint jangle of the second becomes louder from below. And then the two are united, slapping backs and shaking hands, sorting the compass, the map and the who-goes-first as the slow grind down dawns wearily upon them.

The two of them sit there, all damp but comfy. Like two fat cats by the fire they embrace the car's warmth and settle in for their journey. Straight off the back of a 16-hour epic, four hours of food, music and warm stasis beckons them homeward. Their task is substantial – three hours to bed, at least – but the rich zest of their experience fires crazy ambitions and new dreams across their lazy minds. They'll be back for more, there's no escaping it.

**This article relates to the first ascent of the unclimbed wall left of *Ice Bomb* in Coire Grandha on Beinn Dearg, near Ullapool. The route was climbed in January 2005, and was named *Final Destination* (VIII,7).**