

FOUR FOOLS FOR FRENDO

The Frendo Spur, North Face of the Aiguille du Midi, 3,000',
D. sup., 60-70⁰ ice and pitches of IV and V

GUY SUMMERS, TROG WILLIAMS, TREV AND ROB THORNDYKE

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Small storms had been forecast each day since we had completed our last route, and the waiting grew wearisome. The usual cure for boredom in Chamonix is to get drunk but suffering from a weak stomach and an even weaker pocket, it was inevitable that we should go back on the mountains.

No one actually decided that we should do the FRENDO, it just sort of happened. The arrival of Trog in our midst was like a few small stones precipitating an avalanche. Trev and I had done two rock peaks both involving pitches of V sup, so we had agreed on a middle-grade, mixed climb. The Frendo is graded D sup., no encouraged by a variety of reports, and a vote of confidence from Dave Brown who had run up it in pursuit of the firey Tut Braithwaite we decided to go. The weather was uncertain but we resolved to take the risk.

That afternoon found the party, Trevor and myself, Trog and Guy Summers, heading up the gentle glacier from the Plan des Aiguilles. We crossed the bergschrund easily and stepped onto the rocks that form the bottom of the spur. The angle here was very easy and the standard perhaps moderate to difficult. I found myself in a groove alongside Trog whilst the others, ahead of us moved steadily on. Trog moved up, moved down, quaked and cried, "a rope, a rope, top rope!" As we were now some fifteen feet off the ground, I considered this appeal carefully and then dismissed the idea - I adopted my school teachers face and said something sarcastic in the way that schoolteachers do when they don't really know how to deal with the situation --- "Top Rope!" was the reply. The man was adamant, he would not move without a rope! Now, it so happened that I hadn't got a rope and that the others were well out of sight, so I gave him a slight shrug, turned my back, and climbed on with as much theatrical ease and nonchalance as I could muster, muttering audibly and unkindly, doubts about him ever having done the Bonatti and Gervasutti pillars if he couldn't solo diff. rock with such a miserable little sac. After all, we had 3,000 feet of real difficulties ahead of us, and we couldn't afford any passengers! Forty feet higher, on a broad ledge, I waited for some minutes and presently he appeared from below, shook like a snake sloughing its old skin, and, like Saul on the road to Damascus a new man was created before me. Behind those sellotaped frames of his spectacles a new light appeared deep in those blood-shot, alcoholic eyes, and, had it been visible beneath his straggling beard, his jaw was set with a new kind of determination ----.

After 300 feet the climbing steepened, so we cast about and soon found an admirable bivouac site, sheltered, level and comfortable. Guy and Trevor started organising whilst Trog elected to find snow to make the brew water. A little while later he was seen soloing down rocks far more difficult than those which had petrified him near the start, but now facing outwards with a lighted gas stove held in one hand and a billy of nearly boiling water clamped firmly on top with the other hand. With flaring

nostrils and stiffened upper lip he held that brew in a grip of iron until he reached our ledge and spilled never a drop.

Thank God for British resilience, and tea.

After a perfect bivouac we away by 0500 hours next morning. The lower 1,000 feet of the route is mostly easy climbing on loose rubble with one steep pitch that we roped up for. In a couple of hours and in good time we arrived at a place where the spur narrowed and levelled out into a snow col. Ahead lay the snow arete rising beautifully to the final rock rognon, the summit with its teleferique station, and the blue sky of the heavens. The summit looked very close. We ate some chocolate and strapped on our crampons.

I ought to point out here that I had never worn crampons before. No-one in our party seemed, however, unduly worried about my lack of skill in this field. "The most difficult thing to learn about crampon technique is how to put them on", had said Trog. "Nothing to it", said Trevor. "You just worry about getting us up the rock pitches and leave the white stuff to us!" enthused Guy. One crampon had the letter R stamped on and the other had an L, so I knew which foot to put them on. I had practised strapping them up, so I made no mistake. Very smart they were too, with their shiny metal points and bright yellow traces drawn tightly over the well greased leather of my "Le Trappeurs" - surely someone will take a photograph of me today!

So smart they were that I even elected to lead the first pitch of snow. (The steepness and consequent foreshortening of the snow had fooled me in my innocence into calculating only four pitches to the final rognon, the last pitch was said to be "very steep" and even without the incentive of my new gear I had calculated that Trevor should get that one). Proudly I set off up the beautiful aesthetic curved line of the arete. It curved away and up in a gentle arc, first to the right, and then back left to a slight angle near the top where it reared suddenly and convulsively in a steep twist so that it hid the glinting, malevolent ice from our knowledge. As gentle as a swan's neck had been my first impression, but as I gained height the thing reared and acquired a far more sinister feeling, I was mounting the gentle coils of a cobra, with its head raised to strike.

"Hardly need crampons anyway", the pundits had said back in the valley. "The Frendo's a classic, in t' middle o' season like this, th'll be steps as big as them up Bradford town 'all, and up th' ice too". Like Nelson, I adjusted my glasses, "I see no steps", I muttered, "Its because the bloody cable-cars been broken, no-one's been up here for ages". Hardy's words hung in the air like the rope we paid out behind me.

For perhaps a week the listering afternoon sun had melted the edge of every step so that it had collapsed and run down to the next, filled, brimmed over and run on again. There were to be no steps, endlessly ahead the snow glimmered just as it had frozen, like the overlapping tiles of a steepened house roof. After 150' there was a slight depression, the remains of a stance. I turned and looked about at the magnificence of the situation, far below Trog and Guy were preparing to follow Trevor, and I began to notice how small an impression my progress had made on the vast white length of the cobra. "Still a couple more pitches ...".

Seven pitches later, each full run outs of 150', I sagged as much as my situation would allow, over my ice axe. The white heat sapped the body of strength, breath came shallow and rasping. We had reached a nerve point on the cobra's neck. It had opened its slack, wide mouth and showed us its' fangs of malignant ice. Trevor stood alongside

and we stared silently at the bare ice that glinted and micked us above. "I can't lead that", I said. "And I'm not going to" was the reply. We waited, and presently Guy arrived and though his face retained its West Country optimism, he ventured no further. Everything now relied on Trog. As he approached we discussed the problem in a serious mood. In my mind I recalled Trog's performance on the easy rocks and then began to think about retreat. He could never lead us up that! The exposure was breathtaking, a single slip would take us all 2,000'. I thought of the bodies from the Drus Couloir we had helped to identify last week. It was only then that I noticed the clouds. Storm clouds, insidiously and silently moving up the valley from the west. The descent would be bad enough, but a descent in a storm ----.

"Where's the problem?" levelled Trog as he scraped his way up to us. "Better-give me the ice-screws if you want to get up before that storm breaks. Better give me that North Wall hammer, it's no use to you stood there like that". So he had seen the storm and knew what his job was.

He scrambled round and past us and began his peculiar scratchy way up towards the distant rock and the comparative safety of good belays beyond the leering ice. It took him a long time, but he did it. It was the most inelegant, nerve searing climbing I have ever seen, but he did it! He climbed, not with grace or apparent skill, but in a style that from beneath resembled Charlie Chaplin, ragged and tattered moving with the competence of a mother penguin trying to reach her chick in a hurry. He used no front points, but his ankles bent at an alarming angle beneath his tattered breeches and he waddled upwards facing directly in with his feet Chaplin style, splayed out on either side scrabbling and scratching at the icy surface. Now and then he paused and there was a flurry of arms and North Wall hammers, his head shook and his hair flew in the breeze, a few moments of suspense and he waddled on again leaving an ice-screw planted like an egg in his wake.

Two pitches, and the hours crawled by like years. We were all roped together now with me coming up last. The temperature dropped and the wind freshened. Trog's lack of fitness began to tell on him and the ice grew even steeper. He retreated once but Guy was right beneath him shouting words of encouragement and he climbed back and started again. It was a slow business, four on a rope. I smoked a Gitane and watched the cloud build up and then sweep down over the Col du Plan isolating us from the rest of the world. Rock falls rumbled through the mist from unseen peaks.

I was on my third Gitane when he reached the rock and found a belay. The others followed and joined him on the ice-stance beneath the rock wall, I had remained a pitch below because of lack of room on the previous stance. The cloud began to swirl and the wind plucked at the ropes. The lads began frantically to enlarge the stance and I was instantly battered by ice-chunks whirring down from 150'. I had begun to feel very sorry for myself when a large piece of ice evaded my protecting helmet and forearm, struck the steel-hard ice in front of me and ricocheted with amazing force into my face hitting my forehead between goggles and helmet. I slumped down on my step swinging and cowering from the ice screw, a picture of abject misery.

Suddenly the attack stopped and they were pulling at the rope, I wiped my forehead and was astonished (and perhaps a little disappointed) not to find any blood. How would they know how miserably heroic I had been down there by myself all afternoon without any blood to show? Wearily I removed the screw and began to climb. The snow started to fall.

Front pointing must be the most paranoic experience yet devised by man for himself. I was slow but careful, accompanied now by the quiet but insistent song of hail on my helmet. With bursting calves I reached the lads. "Its up to you now Noddy", "Your lead Nod". With assistance and before I had time to recover my breath, my crampons were removed, slings and crabs were draped round me from all directions. I took two ice-screws and stepped up onto the rock. The start was a steep, short slab, split by a crack. At 10' there was an ice-screw already in place in the ice that choked the back of the crack. I tied it off, stood in a sling and climbed past to reach a snow ramp leading up left to a steeper wider crack with a wall on its right. The crack led to easy ground but it was desperately smooth and too wide to jam. Fighting, I gained inches, then a couple of feet, but I began slowly but inevitably to fall out. I slithered back down, just managing to retain my balance at the bottom. The snow blew in my face and distantly I heard the first rumble of thunder. I climbed into the crack again but this time with the string of my hammer and an ice-peg in my teeth. By jamming feet and body I was able to free both hands, I placed the screw as high as possible, it turned only a few times before it grounded on a rock beyond the ice smear but I grabbed it and flung myself up to a higher wedging place. The screw moved as I changed position, so I pulled, and it came out in my hand. I placed it again, above my head, and repeated the process. Easier ground followed and now as the wind blew the clouds aside I could see the summit buildings of the teleferique station. We had less than 300' to go but we had lost a lot of time and the bad weather made progress slower. I made better speed over some easy rocks but was suddenly stopped short by another sheet of steep ice. A vague couloir came up from the left, steepened at the top and ran smooth to the steep rock wall above, a wall that was split by a wide juicy crack with all manner of gear hanging from it. There was no way of reaching that crack by rock, it was another job for Trog on the ice. I sheltered from the wind behind a snow cornice until the lads arrived, taking the opportunity to put my cagoule on over my wet sweater. Having admitted that the rock pitch that I had climbed on ice-screws was "steady", Trog resignedly replaced his crampons and set off once more in the lead. The afternoon wore into evening as I followed, finding it a tricky pitch with a 30' horizontal traverse right at the top where one was pushed out of balance by the smooth rock wall. Once again I performed the dangerous ballet of removing crampons whilst standing in ice-steps, but time was pressing so I set off immediately.

The crack was a good one with sharp edges and ample hand holds though there was a scarcity of footholds most of the way, but it slanted at about 60° to the right and could be climbed by laying away to the right. Half-way, a hard move was avoided by using an insecure piton complete with both sling and crab (evidence of a previous epic?). It was a good pitch of IV this oblique crack, the final move, an awkward mantleshelf being the hardest, the old problem of trying to attain a standing position when the wall above leans out and is hold-less, and the foot-ledge inadequate. However I found a belay here and waited whilst Trog brought Guy up the ice. As soon as he was established and in a position to bring up Trevor, Trog followed me, though he arrived very tired and cold. Now the wind affected us both, my nose was streaming with cold and the snow blew in cruel gusts around us. I set off again following the rising traverse line over large perched blocks until it levelled out and I traversed on, stepping now down and round a corner to find a Stubai channel sticking out of a horizontal block that I had to surmount. I gained the block and entered a groove, bewildered at not being able to see easier ground. On the right was a very steep ice couloir that merged into rocks that were even steeper but just as smooth as the ice. On the left the rock walls overhung. My groove was the only line, but what confounded me was that only 20' up the groove I came to a full stop with my hand against a granite roof that barred all further progress. The groove was perhaps more of an open chimney and I found that to

the right of the roof it continued upwards, the new chimney starting abruptly from the level of the roof of the first one but some feet to the right. The move round the roof to gain the chimney on the right looked V.S. but why weren't there any pegs as there had been below - if this was the right route? Wind gusted up the couloir and brought fresh stinging showers of ice particles that penetrated ears and nostrils and caused me to choke, though I tried to breathe through clenched teeth. Then without having seen it, my hand snagged on a peg on the left wall. It was a terrible peg, protruding as it did for the most of its length into space and it had bent over a sinister curve with its head tucked back to the rock as if covering from the storm. And then I found another peg two feet to the left - a sound one in a horizontal crack. I clipped in quickly, thankful that at last I must have found the final pitch described in the guide, the leftward traverse above overhanging rock. I should be at the top in minutes, I thought, though progress beyond the pegs looked desperately hard in the snow-blinding half-light. I stood in slings and the wind pushed me about. Snow began to build up between my cagoule hood and my cheeks and the nylon flapped and roared in my ears, and then I was aware of other sounds - faint cries scattering up, to be gusted away from me like confetti and a beggars' wedding.

A squall blew itself out, there was a lull and I heard now distinctly louder and more intense shouts. I grabbed my peg and hunched up in the slings, convinced that someone had fallen from the slanting crack. I waited for the snatch and saw the bodies from the Drus again - but nothing happened. Then again the cries, faint but unmistakable, "Noddy, come back - come down". "Not bloody likely", I thought, "unless someone had fallen off", for I was sure now that I could be at the top in half an hour.

And then a closer voice, strange and strangled came through the wind "Robin", it bellowed hoarse and odd, "We are going to bivouac!" It was the use of my real name that really upset me and indicated how serious the situation must be below for the others. Nobody had called me Robin seriously for as long as I could remember then. I didn't answer, needing time to understand this.

"ROBINNN", It bellowed, and demanded to be answered, its tone frightened me. Hurriedly I regained the chimney leaving my rope through the good peg for protection. I descended and traversed back to where Trog shivered in the full blast of the wind on the little ledge at the end of the slanting crack.

Rapidly he told me of the decision. Whilst I had been climbing, concerned only with the rock and the elements, they had realized that it would be impossible for all four of us to escape before night. The storm was increasing and the darkness was falling prematurely. We could not survive without all our bivouac equipment and some of that was in Trevor and Guy's sacs who were still at the base of the crack 60' beneath and to our left. Trevor and Guy having realised their unenviable position at the end of a slow rope with their clothes freezing around them, had spotted a place where a huge boulder had fallen and lodged above several smaller ones thus providing some scant shelter from the direct blast of the wind. But this was over 100' beneath us and beyond that last steep ice section that Trog had led. I didn't fancy going down that and up again tomorrow. It seemed a ludicrous idea, "Let them bivouac and we'll carry on" ..."No", cut in Trog "The gear is evenly distributed for weight, not use. They have got the stove and food but we have the bags and climbing gear. We can survive without food, but they won't without gear and warmth.." We had to be all together to create the bivouac.

In a minute flat he instructed me on how to protect him, which pitons to leave, which of the three ropes that I was attached to I was to unclip, when to give tension and

so on. I was amazed that this frozen, shivering rats' mind could still race through all the necessary procedure. I was numb with cold and apprehension and had misgivings about retreat and bivouacs, but I took his rope and with a nod he set off to reverse the grade IV slanting crack.

Meanwhile, beneath us, Guy and Trev had been busy. They had rigged an abseil on a single rope from two pegs. As Trog warily worked his way back down the crack, Guy began the retreat down the steep ice field. Presently he arrived at a rocky outcrop some 20' above the 'cave' entrance. Here he was faced with a dilemma, whether to attempt the vertical rock step with the risk of a slip and a mighty pendule into the ice couloir to his right, or to traverse into the couloir, pass below the rock and climb back up to the cave. His decision was simple enough. He jumped straight off the rocks and landed with a crash in the hole below! But he did not reappear. Trevor's voice screamed after him. Ages seemed to pass and it was now too dark for me to see the cave, never mind an injured Guy. I had hardly noticed the tentacles of night close around us, for, until Trev screamed out, I was intent on watching Trog's progress at much closer quarters. It was not so much darkness but an absence of light brought about by the swirling misty clouds. Presently Guy came back to life and shouted for Trevor to follow (whether or not he hurt himself in that desperate jump he never said - but it was a long time before he answered). Trog arrived at the foot of the crack. My turn. Whatever Trog had told me about the ropes I had no idea, but instinct and practice came to my aid as I methodically prepared. I began the retreat with Trog protecting me from beneath, leaving the blue and white rope fixed across the length of the pitch. With a prussik on the fixed rope and my own rope running through a variety of runners the descent was not too difficult. Trevor gained the cave as I arrived at Trog's stance and he in turn made the descent in safety as complete darkness fell. I transferred my prussik to the abseil rope and replaced my crampons. With a final check I stepped off into the darkening void. They helped me down the last few feet with torch light and directions but I had lost sense of time and priorities and was a little upset not to find a brew ready! They seemed to have been there so long whilst I had skated about in the darkness. However, there was work to be done. Our 'cave' was really only a slanting roof without a bottom, what bottom there was sloped alarmingly down and northwards as though it was trying to 'chute us out into the night. The rocks were glazed with ice. We blocked up the bottom as much as possible and Guy and Trog settled down side by side into their sleeping bags and duvets. Trev established himself and I took the precaution of removing my soaking breeches and changing into a dry pair of long johns and overtrousers from my sac. Wet clothes, boots, and all came inside the bag. We made tea and ate a little bread and chocolate and then waited for the sleep of exhaustion to come. It was a bad night, sitting mostly on Trevors' knee.

There was no dawn, just an infinitely slow lessening of the darkness. Snow showers gusted over us at frequent intervals and drifted into our plastic bags. Tattered clouds moved in and out and around the cliffs like silent fish nosing for food in the rock crannies. Our world was a confusion of snow, rocks and ice, in no way could it be called beautiful or majestic, it was like the first primeval dawn, the earth had neither form nor order and the clouds now having attached themselves to the rock hung like strips of pallid flesh off the raw bones of the mountain.

Trevor, always the driving force, was grunting about moving, but we compromised and set 0900 hours as the deadline. Perhaps the storm would blow itself out. It didn't. Trog and I prepared ourselves after we had made tea into which we put the remaining jam. If there was any food I don't remember it.

Trog and I were to start climbing whilst Guy and Trev packed up the gear. Trog prussiked up the abseil rope with difficulty and re-gained his crampons which for some reason he had not worn to descend the ice last night. I followed more easily in my crampons using only chest prussik.

The diagonal crack was in a bad state and even with a fixed rope and a prussik I had trouble, for the crack was choked with snow. I gained the mantleshelf at the end of my stomach in 4" of snow and lay there for some time. Trevor yelled at me from the cave and eventually I stood up.. Readjusting the belay, I dropped a moac that had been securing the fixed rope. I saved the crab but the runner went 3'000' between my feet. It made me irrationally sad for a climbing friend had given me that for my 21st birthday and it had been well used since then. Trog came up and joined me, the ledge was cramped and we stood around in some confusion. I dropped another runner (same friend, same birthday) and then trying to save the rest of the gear - I dropped a glove. Runners you can buy, or be given, but fingers you can't. But it would do no good standing about thinking of Herzog so I set off over the easy traverse section. Snow lay deep on everything and the route was difficult to recognise. I had to shovel away snow to find the stubai channel that I had found the day before in the block, and then it just fell out in my hand. I placed a leeper and the channel back beside it. I had to wait here for the others to follow the first pitch so I paced up and down the ledge 4' wide and 2 yards long, singing THAT SONG: "I've got ten fine toes to twinkle in the sand ..."

At the end of a chorus at the right-hand end of the ledge I glanced up and high above to the right of where I had retreated from last night I could see a sling! So it does go into that right-hand chimney!

Soon the lads arrived and I set off with renewed enthusiasm. I climbed back to my last highest point at the two pegs beneath the roof, leaned out, and looked at the chimney in dismay. The chimney was blocked at the bottom by a thick accumulation of snow and beneath that, inches of ice. Hanging from my left hand I chopped away the base of the ice to reveal enough ledge to stand on. I placed an ice screw as well as possible, committed and swung out on it. It held, and I was able to gain the ledge.

I cut steps up the back of the chimney until I came to another identical problem, another roof and another exit on the right. Only this time there was a useful peg. I went out on the peg to find a tape dangling within reach. A quick snatch and it seemed okay, so I pulled up again and found myself on better ground with good finger cracks and a ramp running up left to a large ledge. Perhaps this was the top.. The ramp required clearing of ice before I could progress, the ice split satisfyingly and great chunks went whizzing down past the lads. It proved precarious and exposed in the wind but not really difficult and soon I found myself on a broad snow shelf, the snow having formed a huge hogs back between myself on the ledge, and an over-hanging wall some yards back. Between the wall and the snow it was sheltered from the wind and there was a belay on a large rusted channel.. I cut steps over the hog's back and reached the channel. I placed two more pegs for safety and arranged the belay with great care. That one pitch under those conditions had been of extreme difficulty and had taken nearly three hours. I was not underestimating my companions when I anticipated that any one of them could fall off it! I took the rope in, but was a little depressed at not being able to see any exit from this eyrie, everthing behind me seemed to overhang for miles. Trog came on and I gave him tight rope. At least it was warmer in the shelter of this wall and my clothes were drying a little. (The snow that had fallen steadily all morning had turned to rain and hail about the time that I started cutting ice off the ramp.)

I was just beginning to feel more confident when I was simultaneously blinded, deafened and frightened beyond my experience, by a flash of lightening and thunderclap so close that I thought the whole rock overhang had fallen on me. The flash was not a jagged streak such as one might see from the ground or from a distance, but a sickly yellow light that illuminated the whole width of my vision almost as if we were "inside" the flash. I threw all my metal gear as far away from me as possible and strained to get as far away from by belay pegs as possible. I have never been more frightened than I was in those few minutes that followed. It was like having been strapped into the electric chair and having had the first shock fail, awaiting the second and certainly lethal one. The individual strands of my beard began to stand out and wave like the arms of a hungry sea-anemone. But the rope came in faster and Trogs' face appeared over the edge of the snow. "Muchess plenty flashen bangen!" I commented using his own obscure brand of pottery German. "Muchess plenty - hard", he replied with regard to the climb, then more seriously "That was - hard Nod".

As soon as Guy reached us, I set off again taking the only possible line, a long traverse to the right along the broad snow ledge around the corner from the belay and back above the top of the last pitch. I could hear Trevor cursing Guy for not having left all the slings in place but of course I needed as many as possible and Trev had to come up as best he could.

On my left, the snow steepened into ice in a chimney that again ended in an overhang. I moved up to the overhang and found a full-weight runner round a chockstone, clipped in and rested. The way was undoubtedly to the right, across a vertical wall of no more than two or three metres, then around the corner into the unknown again. Though the wall offered no visible hand holds, at half-height it offered a 4' footledge with a serrated edge then ran the full length of the wall. I set off along the ledge entirely in balance with palms flat against the wall above. One metre, two metres. I shuffled along feeling very insecure, I reached the far end of the wall with my right hand, it was smooth and holdless. The wind gusted and caught the bulk of the sac on my back, I swayed and teetered, right hand playing a desperate staccato up and down the blind keyboard of the right edge. I pressed closer against the rock, but knew it was no good, the unpredictable wind made this relatively simple manoeuvre an outright gamble. Without handholds I could be blown off as soon as I tried to gain the corner ledge. I retreated.

Trevor appeared below and said he could see a peg around the corner. I HAD to get there somehow. I slipped down the chimney a few feet and began to hand traverse. The edge was good at first but then I realized that in my haste I had not allowed for the crack that formed the footledge being jammed with ice at the far end. Halfway the hand holds ran out but I forced myself along onto my elbows and continued with forearms flat on the ice ledge and fingers rammed into the contraction crack between ice and rock. I reached the end entirely on arm strength with feet flailing at the verglassed wall beneath. I looked down, it was incredibly exposed, directly above the 100' of the last pitch which rose out of the 70° ice mantleshelf. I made the effort to mantleshelf, but nothing happened. I tried again - but there was no strength left. I couldn't do it.

Quite calmly I knew I would fall off soon. I couldn't go up, down or back. But my rope now ran tautly up the chimney, past me to the chockstone runner slightly above my level. I grabbed the rope with my left hand and jumped for the live rope between me and Trog. I caught both successfully and swung back with a thump, into the chimney.

I got my breath back, climbed back to the runner and viewed the problem with contempt. I gave myself the 'hard word' and smacked at the ice with my axe. To my surprise it smashed and gave way, disappearing into a deep crack where I thought it had been solid ice lying on a flat ledge. I squatted and launched forward, left hand, foot, and knee, in the crack. The ice cracked, buckled and tumbled into the crack as I slowly inched along chopping it with the axe using my right leg flat against the lower wall for balance and support. I reached the end pretending I was the Monteavers train on rack and pinion, and executed a very intricate balance movement to stand up on the wind blasted corner. I reached the peg on the far face, but what a peg! The only fault in the wall was that formed by a flake seemingly only glued to the wall and only the thickness of a dinner plate.

The peg was placed vertically downwards into this perhaps only 1/4 inch and above the flake it bent down and round like a British Rail plastic spoon in hot coffee so that the eye almost touched the rock beneath the point of entry. At shoulder level the top of the wall was barred by a vertical ice-wall but to the right it fell back into a steep ice groove. Four feet diagonally up to the right I could see the end of a channel half-hidden by ice.

The situation was now insanely exposed and it took me a long time to reach that next peg. I cut holds in the ice above being unable to place a screw, and eventually stood on the crazy plastic spoon. I grasped for the peg above in a paroxysm of fear from lack of security, to find that its eye was blocked by ice that had run down and frozen over it! Dementedly I cut it out and clipped in before I became completely raving mad. The ice groove now fell back slightly but it was difficult to get established as I was still out of balance and was forced to try to place an ice screw whilst holding myself into the confining walls with my elbows. Trevor reappeared on the hog's back below to see what was keeping me and to announce that the sky was clearing. Furious flurries of abrasive ice-particles still flew in my face from the wind that still rushed up and down my groove, and the colour of the sky was of little importance to me at that time, but I was encouraged a little. I put away the screw and made maniacal hand jams between ice and rock, pulled myself into the groove proper and was back in the game with a chance. A few more feet and there was a snow covered ramp leading off left. It led to the top. Ice flew in great chunks. There was no mercy now, a shaft of sunlight crossed the face, I smiled at it savagely and smashed some more ice into a thousand flying fragments. Another shaft of sunlight and I pressed on faster, balancing up the ramp to Nirvana.

In a few minutes I pulled out from the top of the North face into beautiful virgin mound of snow, the sky all around turned a brilliant wind swept blue, the storm was clearing, the sun sparkled on the white crystals and glinted on the great structure of the teleferique station not 500 metres away. There was such openness and space and colour, I really got high for a minute, my mind was singing 'Jerusalem' and hearing the Messiah simultaneously. I could paint like Raphael, write a thousand poems of love and roll in the snow for sheer sensual delight. So I sat on a fawn coloured rock that was drying in the sun and took the rope in.

It was another 24 hours before we reached the campsite back in Chamonix for it had taken us 7 hours to climb that last 300' of rock in the storm and reach the station and the last 'ferique had gone down. Even next morning the wind was so strong that it had crossed the cables of the 'ferique. It was 1500 hours before the wind dropped and they uncrossed the cables for us to descend and then we had to walk from the Plan des Aiguilles because we hadn't got enough money to go all the way!

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