By John Hawkins

The alarm sounded and I awoke from a shallow dreamless sleep. Anticipation at what the day would bring had kept me awake with thoughts swirling in my head. An anxiousness hung inside me.

It was almost a year since I had been there on that mountain, that spur. Then I had been innocent to the ways of the mountains, their nature, their character. Then I had fear, fear of the unknown, now respect. Six months of winter courtship with the Alps had thought me that, and now I was to return. This time we would climb my nemisis.

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We would have 2 days and it was 04:30 as I wiped the sleep from my eyes in Basel. This flat had become familiar to me as a stop over on the way to the mountains and its occupant Bruce wandered in to tell me my alarm was 5 minutes fast.

Well endowed with scottish attributes and with a very sexy voice, I’m reliably told, he is a dedicated mountaineer and of considerable talent. We had climbed together a number times but this would be our first „big“ route.

Some minutes later we were speeding out of the city and onto the already busy motorway south. The 300 kilometers to Argentiere were soon behind us and we stepped aboard an early cable car to the Grand Montets. At 08:30 the air was already warming up and an hour later we donned rock shoes and put the first couple of easy rock pitches behind us.

Four other parties had the same plans and the usual jostling for position and determining who are the stronger climbers took place on the following pitches. A french guide and his client were making good progress in „big boots“ and made the right route choices. The guide commented to us that it was nice to be climbing with other people around as he was fed up being on his own on routes. Anyone familiar with Chamonix will recognise that this is rarely the case so I wonder where he’s been hiding.

The rock is generally British 4b/c but has 5 pitches in the 5a/b region. An early bird Swiss pair were in trouble on a long corner so we took over, trailed their rope and tied it off. Quality grainte and sustained climbing continued unabated until the final 10m off-width before the snow. This hideous crack was something to take the rucksacks off for and Bruce jammed and laybacked his way up to the stance above. Clipping my pack to a rope, the haul loop broke and only a quick snatch for a main strap averted the pitiful vision of it hurtling 600m to the glacier below.

It was a releif to step into plastics again and dig out the crampons and axes. With lighter rucksacks we moved on much more happily, passing small gendarmes and climbing snowy and icy grooves to the base of the steep upper ice castle. The pitch around the large Gendarme fell to me and my memories of a storm at this point a year previous returned. I was happy now though on the thin ice with brightness in the sky.

A large breche provides the traditional bivy site but it was early and we moved on. The strenuous loose and time consuming couloir of the prevoius year was full of neve and was a pleasure climb. The occasional thin section could be overcome by hooking rock with axes and 80m above we reached another bivy. Memories flooded back but this time we were going higher.

Sixty degree neve led to the base of steep rock. Two hundred meters above the breche we faced the traverse pitch. Decisions would have to be made. It was 19:00 and night was on its way. We stood on a small snow ledge, conveniently body sized. A meter away some flat rock could accomodate another. The guide and client were a pitch below us and most others at the breche. Everyones thoughts were of food and sleep. Bruce climbed further in the vain hope of a better spot for the night but returned fruitless. We would be happy with our lot and stay there.

It’s funny how exposed places always increase the likelyhood of dropping something: probably down to Murphy, I’m sure, but taking no chances we tied every last bit of gear to a sling. The water boiled and soon dinner was served: soup, couscous, and fish, tea and chocolate. Down jackets and bivybags and the super luxury of a rucksack and rope for sleeping mats helped us pass the night with some degree of semi comfort.

The alarm sounded and we awoke to the reality of life. Thick cumulus rolled past our noses and the blood red sky of the night before seemed to have deceived us. Clearances came and went and Bruces first steps on the sharp end broke the 5am silence of the mountain. A traverse of 80m preceeded delightful steep neve to an overhanging step of stacked blocks. I belayed Bruce up and the hollow growl of falling rock was followed by a stream of cursing, „Attention“ et „Pierre“. The torso sized block careered down the couloir within meters of the guide. Sensibly following words of warning from Bruce they had belayed to the side. A traverse once again

followed, 40m, 60m or was it 100m. The route description didn't help. Numerous crux chimneys sretched upwards and we took our chances.

The low broken cloud of the morning was gradually dispersing and sunlight reflected off the sourrounding mountains. The ridge above was basked in a warm glow of orange but we had a hundred meters before being able to revel in its warmth. What a 100m they were. The initial 50 passed with ease, good neve up to 80degrees. Rock reappeared above. Bruce took on the lead and pulled into the first chimney. Some poor gear and a loose flake didn't inspire but he pulled through to clip a good peg. Thin ice in a slabby groove requires a certain delicacy. Cool calculated moves saw him reach better conditions for a few meters but then it steepened. The only option was to move right into a second groove system. Axes on rock ledges and breakfast bowl sized lumps of frozen snow on the rock provided the key to the way forward. Most of the snow lumps remained attached and 10m above his last wire, good neve made it's return. Above, an overhanging chimney loomed. Masterful climbing, a belay and I climbed to Bruce trainling a rope behind. The guide had been psyched out and had no desire to climb the pitch. The chimney was now mine.

A number of confused minutes and various attemps were followed by some strenuous moves to find myself with back against one side and crampons on an ice smear on the other. A wedged ice tool provided enough to gain a wide bridge on ice smears followed by more dry tooling, flake hooking and frozen snow blob trusting to a peg. Yet more akward steep moves gained an icy groove and easier climbing out onto the ridge..... Bruce followed and tied off the guides rope. We moved on.

Traversing 300m in a huge sweeping upward arc above the imposing 1000m of the Droites N face gained the final ridge to the summit. One last set of rock teeth barred our way to the final snow ridge. It was approaching 16:00. A strenuous pitch and only 20m remained to the snow. Bruce moved off and reached the ridge. Eighty vertical meters on easy snow was a welcome relief and we munched chocolate on the summit. The route was behind us, it was 17:00 and all we had to do was get off.

Two hours of deep snow, several abseils in melting ice couloirs and a glacier plod put 1000m between us and the summit. A further hour saw us reach the Couvercle hut. Another hour later, in the rapidly failing light, the Mer du Glace appeared to stretch forever into the distance. An hour to the crevassed zone and then the difficulty. In daylight the ladder up the rock to the Montenvers is less than easy to find but in the darkness it proved a nightmare. Vague crampon tracks in the ice appeared and disappeared and after an hour of futile searching in the

blackness we resorted to climbing the moraine indiscriminatly. Then there it was, the path..... Ladders and broad paths to the Montenvers and the descent to the Valley began well after midnight.

It was to be a long night as only after some judicious hitching could we depart the Chamonix valley just before 3am and the first light of dawn was touching the clear sky as we pulled into Basel. How does one then work on Monday morning? Well naturally this type of behavoiur requires a certain, slightly flexible type of job. I was happy as I stepped into my little Fiat for the 2.5 hour drive to Mannheim.