Life and Limb

Jamie Andrew

Chapter 1 - Beau Temps

It was Saturday, 23 January 1999, and as our bus pulled into the bustling French resort of Chamonix all eyes turned to the mountains. High above us, far above the steeply wooded walls of the Arve Valley, rose the impossible lofty spikes of the Chamonix Aiguilles, glowing white in their winter garb, each one a diamond, shining in an infinite blue sky.

We lugged our cumbersome bags off the coach and onto a waiting shuttle-bus. As the bus wound its way slowly up the valley our group talked excitedly about the snow conditions, what lifts would be open, and the off-piste possibilities. But I stared up at the mountains with a different thought in mind.

We were a large and fluid group of friends, mainly from Edinburgh or with links to Edinburgh, who had taken advantage of a budget airline's last-minute deal to snatch a week's snowboarding and skiing here in the French Alps. Our man on the scene, Miles Bright, had reported back good snow conditions and a week of perfect weather, and those that could get the time off work had grabbed the opportunity to fly out for a short holiday. There were over twenty of us, coming and going at different times during the week, staying in a chalet and a couple of apartments up in Argentière, a satellite resort to Chamonix a few miles further up the valley.

The seven of us arriving now were the vanguard of the group. We were actually supposed to be eight: myself, my girlfriend Anna Wyatt, Jamie Fisher, and five others, but Jamie had unfortunately been left behind at Liverpool Airport.

We were all booked onto the 6.00 a.m. flight from Liverpool to Geneva except Jamie who had left it too late and had had to get a ticket for the 6.00 p.m. flight. Nevertheless he joined us on the overnight drive to Liverpool, adamant that there was bound to be a cancellation on the earlier flight.

As it turned out there were quite a few passengers who didn't show up for the flight, so Jamie advanced to the check-in desk to claim his place, but the laconic girl behind the desk was not helpful. Yes, it did appear that there were some free seats, but she couldn't reallocate seats until boarding was closed in case passengers arrived at the last minute. Once boarding was closed she would know if there were any free seats. However, once boarding was closed it would be too late to check in. It wasn't possible. No sir, a manager wasn't available. No sir, there was nothing she could do.

Exasperated, blowing steam out of his ears, Jamie was condemned to pass the day at Liverpool Airport. This would mean arriving in Geneva well after the last bus to Chamonix, but with typical stoicism he assured the rest of us he'd somehow catch us up and graciously waved us goodbye as we filed through to the departure lounge.

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That afternoon, the remaining seven of us checked into the chalet, hired snowboards, bought food and met up with several later arrivals from our group, including Stu Fisher, Jamie's dad, who had also come out for a week's skiing. In high spirits we rounded off the day by cooking up a big meal in the chalet and cracking open more than a few bottles of wine to celebrate the beginning of the holiday.

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Sunday the 24th dawned another clear and sparkling day. A buzz of excitement charged round the chalet ensuring that nobody lay in bed too long and we were all soon munching jam baguettes and slurping bowlfuls of tea and coffee. I was beginning to wonder if perhaps Jamie hadn't made it to Chamonix the previous night but suddenly there was a crash of falling skis from the vestibule, the inner door banged open, and there he stood, in a typically dishevelled state, rucksack on his back, trademark grin splitting his face from ear to ear.

As usual with Jamie, there was some story to tell of misadventure and unlikely fortune, much embellished probably, since we'd left him at Liverpool Airport, the details of which I don't recall. He told his tale with relish and took his time for proper effect, but each time he looked up and glanced out the window I could see a light in his eyes that betrayed his impatience to get up into the mountains.

We dispensed with breakfast and, while the others prepared for a day on the slopes, Jamie and I talked about going climbing.

'It's too good a chance to miss!' extolled Jamie, 'The conditions look perfect and this high pressure is settled in for at least three more days. I'll bet Jules is already up there, on the Croz or the Frêney.'

Julian Cartwright was a friend of ours who was also over in Chamonix at the time.

'I should be able to hook up with him if you want to go snowboarding,' he added as an afterthought. Jamie would never pressurise anybody into doing anything. It always had to be your own choice. I didn't need much persuading though. He was right – it was too good a chance to miss.

'What if we do something that's quite quick?' I said, 'A day or two. Then we can spend the rest of the week boarding.'

'OK, what about the Droites North Face?'

Perhaps a little more than I'd intended, but attractive nevertheless. We'd discussed the North Face of Les Droites in the past and I knew that it was high on Jamie's hit list. I had certainly wanted to do it for ages.

'How long will it take?' I asked.

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'If we take the last 'frique up to the Grands Montets this afternoon we can bivvy in the 'frique station. It's less than a two-hour walk to the foot of the Droites and we should manage the route in a day and a half.'

'And what about the descent?'

'Quite easy. Down the south side of the mountain to the Couvercle Hut. We should get back to the valley by Wednesday lunchtime. Thursday at the latest.'

I considered Jamie's proposal for a moment. I was very tempted by the thought of taking a plum route like the North Face of Les Droites and Jamie's optimism was convincing.

'OK, yeah, let's do it,' I said, 'The Droites. Excellent. That gives us all day to get ready. I think the last 'frique goes about four.'

Jamie volunteered to sort the climbing gear out, buy fuel for the stove and food from town, and get a final weather forecast. I wanted to spend the morning snowboarding with Anna, knowing that she would be worried about us going up into the mountains, and I wanted to spend some time with her before leaving.

I gave Jamie my climbing gear then Anna and I got our things together, grabbed our snowboards, and with a few of the others headed for the pistes.

Argentière bustled with brightly coloured people, clumping up and down the snowy streets, each person with skis or a snowboard slung over their shoulder. Against the backdrop of picturesque, snow-laden chalets and icy peaks, tanned faces all around smiled from behind mirrored sunglasses, sometimes reflecting the mountains in their lenses. Snatches of conversations in German, French and Italian filled the air and I couldn't imagine a place more the antithesis of Edinburgh in dreary January. This kind of winter break was just what I needed to lift myself out of the seasonal dumps that so often herald the beginning of a new year in Scotland – an injection of action and sunshine to kick start the season.

However I was unable to relax that morning and as we rode a shuttle-bus up to the little village of Le Tour, and caught a cable car high up into the fields of snow at the head of the valley, a knot of tension was growing in my stomach. It wasn't that I was particularly worried about the difficulty of the route – it was well within our capabilities. Nor was I unduly concerned about the hazards we would encounter en route, or about the thought of the cold and discomfort we would have to endure during the climb. This feeling was a fusion of all the small niggling doubts and worries that ran through my mind – a general feeling of unease and anticipation. It was as if an electric charge of apprehension was building inside me, like my gut was a capacitor, storing up anxiety. I knew the feeling well for I suffered it before every major route I attempted and knew that it wouldn't go away until the moment I first swung my ice axe at the foot of the climb. Then the electricity would discharge and all that nervous energy would flow out and drive me up the mountain. Until then, however, I would be stuck with this growing sense of angst.

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I hoped to point out the peak of Les Droites to Anna from the cable car, but it is a retiring peak and remained hidden behind the massive bulk of L'Aiguille Verte, and the closer Aiguille du Chardonnet. However, we could see the summit of the Grands Montets Téléférique where Jamie and I planned to spend the coming night. We could also see the ugly snout of the Argentière Glacier, spewing its vast jumble of séracs and blocks of ice out into the Arve Valley. It would be higher up this glacier, from its calmer upper reaches, that we would begin our climb tomorrow.

Anna turned away from this panorama to face the more amenable ski slopes below us, not relishing the prospect of my imminent departure. The cable car pulled into the station with a clank of metal on metal and we stepped out onto the sunlit piste.

The next couple of hours were spent enjoying some excellent snowboarding. The lovely long runs gave us ample opportunity to practice our technique, carving our turns through beautiful powdery snow. Neither of us were particularly experienced snowboarders but nor were most of our friends and we all had great fun racing down the slopes, sometimes in control, often not, wiping out regularly in the soft snow, and laughing at each other as we struggled to extricate ourselves from snowdrifts.

Not for the first time in my life, I found myself wishing that I didn't feel so driven to go and climb the mountains. I wished that it was enough to simply be amongst them, admiring their beauty from the safety of the piste. It would be very pleasant to forget about the climb and spend the week swooping through the snow in the daytime and partying with my friends in the bars and cafés in the evenings. However, there was a hunger inside me that just wouldn't be satisfied with such sanitised entertainment. I felt I had to experience the raw grandeur of the mountains close up, to be involved personally. By their very existence the mountains seemed to be throwing down a gauntlet and I was compelled to take up that gauntlet, to pit myself against nature's wildest invention. In taking up that challenge I somehow found fulfilment. I felt more real. I needed to climb in order to feel alive.

The time came to go. In front of the cable car station Anna and I made our goodbyes.

'Will you be careful?' she pleaded.

'Don't you worry,' I reassured her, 'I'll be back before you know it.'

'Will you wear your sunglasses?'

'Yes.'

'And watch out for avalanches?'

'Yes.'

'And will you remember to drink lots of water?'

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I knew that she was worried about me and was trying somehow to help me stay safe by warning me of all the dangers she could think of.

'Don't worry. Everything will be fine.'

'Do you promise?'

'I promise. I'll see you soon, OK?'

OK. See you soon. Love you.'

'I love you too.'

We kissed, then I hopped into a cable car and waved from the window as it carried me off down the hill.

Back in the valley I found Jamie at the chalet, busying himself with the lightweight petrol stove, sending jets of sooty yellow flame licking towards the kitchen ceiling.

'All right, Fish-face?' I greeted him. 'Are you sure it's a good idea, playing with that in here?'

'I'm just making sure it works alright,' he protested. 'It'd be a disaster if we got up there and found that our stove wasn't working.'

'I suppose so, but perhaps now you know it works you could put it away before you burn the place down.'

Jamie put the stove away, then we had a hurried lunch before getting on with the packing. We agreed that it would be wise to go on the heavy side. Alpine climbers often cut down on weight to the bare minimum in order to be able to travel fast. By sacrificing items like sleeping bags, spare clothes and stove, one can climb super light and super fast, accomplishing one's objective in a day and avoiding a night spent on the mountain. This approach is all very well in the summer but we estimated that due to the length of our intended route, with the short amount of daylight available, and the very low temperature, we would be unlikely to complete the climb and make the descent in a day. We would therefore need gear to survive the Alpine winter night. You don't take chances in the Alps in winter.

Apart from all our climbing equipment, ropes, slings, karabiners, ice screws, ice axes and crampons, we each packed a sleeping bag, a bivvy bag, a sleeping mat, a mug, a water bottle and a spoon. We also took the stove and one pan, Jamie's penknife and food for three days.

I wanted to be sure that I wasn't going to get cold so I took plenty of clothes. I wore one pair of socks, thermal long johns, fleece trousers, two thermal tops, a fleece pullover, a fleece jacket and my mountaineering boots. I packed my down jacket, Goretex overtrousers and jacket, mittens, spare mittens and a balaclava. Jamie took a similar amount of clothing. No chances.

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'Did you get the forecast?' I asked as we packed.

'Yeah, it's pretty good. High pressure's settled. Clear again tomorrow and on Tuesday morning. Possibly some snow on Tuesday afternoon, then clear again on Wednesday.'

'Sounds good. Not much snow on Tuesday, I hope?'

'No, just a light band. We should be on the way down by then anyway.'

Time was catching up with us and we were soon rushing about madly to get everything together before the last téléférique at a quarter past four. I'd hoped to spend some time sharpening the ice tools but instead threw the file into my sack to do it later on. Hastily I scribbled a note to Anna on a scrap of paper. I drew a picture of a smiling stick man brandishing axes and crampons and below it wrote, 'See you soon xxxx'. I left the note on her pillow.

We left the chalet, pulling the door behind us, and tore up the road to the Grands Montets Téléférique station. Fortunately it was only a few hundred yards from where we were staying and we arrived there breathless with a couple of minutes to spare.

Soon we were being lifted gracefully skyward in a large glass-walled cabin, empty apart from ourselves. The silent motion of this giant elevator was eerie as the snow-covered buildings below us sank out of sight. Jamie gazed quietly out of the cabin window and I turned my mind to the climb ahead of us.

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The North Face of Les Droites. At exactly 4,000 metres Les Droites is not one of the highest mountains in the great massif of the Haute Savoie. Nor, when viewed from the south, is it one of the more impressive. On that side Les Droites presents a short and undistinguished face, rising from above the Mer de Glace, and the higher Talèfre Glacier, to a lofty serrated summit blade. It is on its north side, however, that the mountain comes into its own. A great chain of mountains – L'Aiguille Verte, L'Aiguille du Jardin, Les Droites, Les Courtes, L'Aiguille du Triolet and Mont Dolent – form a vast barrier of rock and ice, 10 kilometres long and 1,000 metres high, which walls in the enormous snaking Argentière Glacier on its south side. Each mountain has an impressive and forbidding north face, dropping sheer from the airy ridge to the banked edge of the glacier, but none is more impressive or more difficult to climb than the North Face of Les Droites.

By 1952, the face had been climbed by flanking lines on both sides, but the great challenge of the North Face remained. The face was finally conquered in September 1955 by Philippe Corneau and Maurice Davaille, who took six days to produce one of the best and most difficult mixed routes in the Alps. Modern techniques and improved equipment have reduced the normal time for an ascent to two days. The

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first true winter ascent of the climb was made in January 1975 by a British pair and this was the feat we hoped to emulate.

In actual fact the climb is well suited to a winter ascent. The mixed rock and ice climbing higher up the face is aided by the presence of a good build-up of winter ice, and during recent warm summers the lower ice field has often melted considerably, rendering the route unclimbable throughout the summer season.

Jamie and I were hoping that with plenty of well-consolidated snow and ice, and with a settled spell of fine weather, we would find the ideal conditions for an ascent of this famous climb.

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Forests of ice-encrusted trees swept by beneath us, their branches twinkling in the afternoon sun. Then there were no more trees, only snow and rocks, and we came to the midway Lognan Station. We changed into another cabin and continued our ascent. Now there was only inhospitable terrain beneath us, jagged rocky ridges and icy gullies falling away out of sight down the mountainside. My ears were beginning to pop as we gained altitude and I swallowed several times to clear them.

We began to slow down as we approached a large tunnel in a rock buttress ahead of us – the site of the top station. The cabin swung gently as it eased into the station and came to a halt. The doors slid open and we got out.

The top station of the Grands Montets Téléférique, at an altitude of 3,250 metres, is almost entirely built into the mountain, on a little rock peak which projects from the great ridge that falls from L'Aiguille Verte down to the Arve Valley. We stepped out onto a large steel terrace and drank in the view.

Across to the north and east, towering over the northern side of the Argentière Glacier, stood the elegant peaks of L'Aiguille du Chardonnet, L'Aiguille d'Argentière, and standing sentry at the head of the glacier, the pyramid of Mont Dolent. The mighty Aiguille Verte, and its smaller monolithic partner Les Drus, swallowed up most of our view to the south, but across to the south-west we could see the greatest glacier in the area, the Mer de Glace. Rising above the Mer de Glace were the crazy, shattered pinnacles of the Aiguilles des Grands Charmoz and the Aiguille du Grépon. Behind them, the solitary spike of L'Aiguille du Midi, and far away in the distance was the bulky white dome of Mont Blanc. To the west and north-west, across on the other side of the Arve Valley, the smaller but jagged Aiguilles Rouges thrust their fingers skyward. All around us the most magnificent peaks of the French Alps glittered and shone in the lazy afternoon sunlight.

A few skiers were still lingering on the terrace before making the last run of the day and we watched them descending the steps from the terrace down to the snowy platform from where the run begins. One by one they clicked on their skis, adjusted their goggles, and schussed off, quickly disappearing out of sight. I imagined the wonderful, rushing pleasure of that descent, arcing down the wide Argentière Glacier, then through pine and fir trees, eventually to arrive, head-spinning and

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breathless, back at the village. Back to a warm chalet, friendly faces, a cosy bar. The knot of anxiety in my stomach tightened and a shiver ran down my spine.

Jamie, happily shouting out the names of all the peaks in view, seemed immune from such thoughts and I said nothing. Les Droites, and our route across the glacier to it were still hidden behind L'Aiguille Verte and so Jamie suggested climbing up the ridge above us to a spot that looked like it might offer a sneaky view. We dumped our sacks on the terrace and grabbed our axes.

On the snowy platform we met two men from the ski-patrol who were setting off on a final sweep down the hill. Swarthy, fit-looking guys, with weather-beaten faces, they stopped to ask us of our plans. In broken French we replied that we intended to climb Le Face Nord des Droites.

'Ah oui, bon.' they replied. 'And you know there is forecast some snow on Tuesday?'

'Yes, we know.'

'D'accord. Bon chance!' they wished us. They skied off and we started plodding up the broad snowy ridge.

Unaccustomed to the thin air, I found myself panting heavily as I toiled up the slope on Jamie's heels, and despite the low temperature and the weakness of the evening sun, I soon built up quite a sweat. Fortunately we only had to climb a couple of hundred metres before we arrived at a large platform on the ridge. From the edge of this platform we found we could peer out across the cheerless north face of the Verte and get a sidelong glimpse of Les Droites. Looking, as we were from this vantage, directly across the face we intended to climb, we were unable to pick out much detail. The lower ice field was entirely hidden by a projecting buttress of the Verte but we could see a series of icy grooves higher up which looked fairly continuous and reassured us that the route was probably in condition. The face looked cold and uninviting.

Below us we could see most of tomorrow's approach route, down to the Argentière Glacier, then continuing up the glacier, below the north face of the Verte, to the foot of Les Droites. We took note of the position of some possible false trails in the descent to the glacier, then sat on some rocks and watched the sun sink behind the Aiguilles Rouges.

Warm, flame-red light bathed the surrounding peaks, and they looked like they might thaw with the last rays of the day, but the alpenglow soon faded and we were left alone on the mountainside as the blue chill of night descended.

Quickly we got to our feet and stomped back down the hill to get some dinner and make preparations for the morning.

Jamie got the stove going on a picnic table on the terrace and while he prepared us a large meal of pasta, vegetables, tinned fish and tomato sauce, I got on with sharpening up the ice gear. I suspected we would be encountering some pretty hard

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ice and wanted all the equipment to be in top order – sharp enough to remove an appendix, as Jamie put it. Besides, I always found there was something therapeutic at such times in engrossing myself in a task of close focus, occupying my troubled mind with simple concentration.

By now the darkness was total, save for the beams of our head torches, and the soft twinkle of lights far away in the valley below. The temperature was dropping sharply and when Jamie had done his stuff, we wolfed down the meal, probably our last hot food for a while, then had a final brew before packing up shop.

I discovered that the main door into the station was still unlocked so we moved inside to avoid a night out in the open. Whilst laying our mats out on the wooden floor and repacking the sacks for the morning we heard the faint sound of a television floating up from somewhere in the building.

On investigation we realised we were sharing our home for the night with two téléférique engineers. Every night during the winter season, two engineers have to sleep up there in case the winding machinery is frozen up in the morning. The guys were friendly and didn't mind us sleeping in their building. We chatted to them in their cosy little bothy for a bit and they kindly gave us some water to fill our bottles, saving us from having to melt snow with the stove. Then they wished us well with our climb and Jamie and I returned to our floor to turn in for the night.

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