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# Pointblank

*A Saga of Mal the Axebreaker*

MAL DUFF

In 1262 Malcolm the Axebreaker, a Viking berserker, was unexpectedly captured at the battle of Largs. Surprised by the King of Scots, the Viking invasion was routed, with the longboats only able to escape by the sacrifice of the foremost berserkers who fought a ferocious rearguard action. Malcolm was eventually overpowered and delivered in chains to his captor, McDuff the Earl of Fife. He was spared death only because of his exceptional ability with the axe, a talent much understood in those far-off days. Over the years he was accepted into the clan, until one glorious day the Earl granted him freedom to marry. Thus started the family line traced through history. From father to son an ability with an axe was handed down until, nearly 700 years later, a boy was born who, named Malcolm in honour of his famed ancestor, became the holder of the ancient title 'Mal the Axebreaker'. As this lad grew up he became, not a tree-feller like many of his forebears, but, surprisingly, an ice-climber.

In 1983 a beautiful long-legged tow-haired woman (who will now fade from the story as she has – alas – no further part to play in it) bought, as a Christmas present for Mal, a copy of *Cold Climbs*, a book much prized at the time. Thus the scene was set.

This book was quickly recognized by British climbers to contain not only beautiful photographs, but pictures of a very revealing nature. Please turn now to page 62 of *Cold Climbs*. A wonderful shot of climbers on the crux pitch of Point Five Gully. Now let your imagination drift. Ah yes, what a fantastic groove just to the right of the gully. A line of purity and obvious difficulty. A wild, unclimbed challenge.

Mal was hooked. That line was his. All winter he pounded the Ben, guiding clients and checking conditions, until in mid-February he could wait no longer. A Saturday dawned fair, and, starting early, he left with a conscripted partner (for reference: a lad known only as Wally, easily spotted, as he was probably the only man in Britain who sported seven earrings. Of these, five were made from fox's teeth, whilst two others were removed from an unfortunate seal).

Well, they climbed a wee groove from the toe of the buttress, but the awesome slab pitch above leered blankly and scared them into a rightward scuttle. Climbing Left Edge Route (5) they departed, depressed.

Two weeks later, fired by those ancient Nordic berserker genes, Mal was once again ready to do battle. Jon Tinker, one of Mal's guides, was sworn to secrecy and shown the picture. He was in!

They were paranoid – surely every other climber in Britain would be converging on Ben Nevis, a queue would form to attempt this magic line. Rivals

from the London outposts, showing great stamina and driving all night, were the most difficult to fight off. Normally they struck decisively and with total surprise. Mal and Jon resolved to wake at 4am. This plan was revised at 1am when they were evicted from the Clachaig Inn, a favoured hostelry. However, they were fired up and, although not communicating in anything more than monosyllabic grunts, were to be found cruising into the Ben car park (lights and engine muted to avoid waking any rivals) at 4.30am.

Just as dawn broke one could observe that they had reached the foot of the buttress and were roping up. To their total surprise the few climbers who had been overtaken seemed totally oblivious of the prize that was about to be snatched from under their noses.

Following the groove previously climbed was fun. They found it hard enough to get the required level of concentration going, and steady enough for confidence and nerve. Thus they assembled below the daunting slab and corners.

The next section was awful to contemplate. A thin trickle, a mere illusion of ice was the way, and up this Jon did climb. After 25m, barred by a roof, he manufactured a hanging stance. It was not the best!! Mal was encouraged to ascend and, after a bitter struggle, he did so. His task now was to make the link into the chimney crack. Tiny pockets in the underlying slab were searched out. These held reserves of ice and could be picked and hooked, allowing progress to be made. Each move was planned, calculated and the likely outcome assessed. The mental energy output was vast and unsustainable. Mal moved further from Jon and no runners appeared. With blazing crampons and monumental axework, a further 3m were overcome. He reached the chimney. It was 15 to 22cm wide! By now both partners knew that the route was too hard – above and beyond the current world of climbing.

However, mysterious happenings abound throughout our world, and on that day they were blessed with invincibility. Thor spoke, axes thudded and Mal moved on.

After 30m the powers started draining, flowing away, each loss a lightning bolt of uncertainty. A vital peg was fumbled and dropped. The previous unwavering certainty was a dream from a previous existence. This was now a fight to the death – a gladiatorial mental struggle with only one participant. Only a matter of faith, combined with abject rejection of the waiting death-fall, allowed Mal to cling, wraith-like, to the blank upper slab.

At 3pm he reached a stance. Five hours to cover 55m! Jon, cramped and cold after a belaying session beyond the call of duty, arrived eventually at the stance in a flurry of adrenalin. Of course our two berserkers are now exhausted. After a moment we can observe Mal once more climbing into the groove above. The force has returned and, although the difficulties are still great, they are overcome swiftly.

It has not been mentioned that a storm has been mounting all day, spindrift cascades from the plateau above and night is falling.

The next view, a brief one, is at the summit. Ice-encrusted grins, stiff clothes: they embrace and move into the night.

Back at the Clachaig, comrades and womenfolk drink and wonder. At

10pm the doors sway open, relief floods the company! Flagons of foaming ale are consumed and the world is a fine place to inhabit. On the first move of an easy route the next day, Mal's axe shatters!

We now move forward in time, to early January 1985. Mal is reading the *SMC Journal* and is obviously displeased. The New Routes Editor has mentioned that the traverse taken into and out of Point Five Gully, 45m up the crux pitch of Pointblank (6), spoils the purity of this route. Our Nordic adventurer, his ego pricked, memories of the awesome, overpowering nature of the climbing fading from his mind, can only agree. So the scene is set.

Part 2: Winter 1985. Mal and Jon lay their plans, but conditions are unfavourable.

Part 3: Winter 1986. Mal and Jon lay their plans, but conditions are unfavourable.

Part 4: Winter 1987. Mal and Jon lay their plans, conditions are looking favourable! Mal is climbing well, new routes flow from his glowing axes, until one fateful day he is wounded, taken to hospital and rendered out of action for the rest of the season. Jon conscripts Colin McLean, a Cairngorm specialist. One Saturday they leave, to 'straighten out Pointblank'. Mal vents his rising frustration by climbing the Pap of Glencoe on crutches.

But wait: All Is Not Going Well. Colin has climbed to the hanging stance; shaken, he brings up Jon, a peg pulls out and they fall. The original '84 peg, still clipped, twists and bends, but holds. The next view – a brief one – shows them abseiling gingerly to the toe of the buttress. Mal is secretly delighted.

Part 5: Winter 1988. Jon is climbing on K2, Mal has recovered from his knee operation and conscripts Rick Nowack from USA into the story. Rick is justly famous for the bravest act ever witnessed, that of climbing Elliotts Downfall (5), a steep icicle, stark naked.

Mal resolves to lead every pitch. He has bought 75m ropes, so that the hanging stance can be eliminated. He Thors like a bird.

After four hours, by cutting nicks in the sheet of rime ice cladding the roof (the ice is too thin and delicate to accept axes) and using sticky gloves, he manages to climb through the barring roofs by a ramp and wall, thereby straightening out the pitch.

Our next view, a brief one, shows Mal in front of a word-processor. The last words on the screen are shown in slow motion and enlarged. so POINTBLANK (6) WAS NOT AS WE THOUGHT AFTER OUR FIRST ASCENT TEN YEARS AHEAD OF ITS TIME.