

Chapter 5 : The Ledge

'Will there be many beer tents up there?' asked Margaux.

Alun shrugged and gazed skywards, 'At a hang-gliding competition!?'

'I only ask,' she continued, 'In case you intend to get drunk and fall over the cliff edge.'

'Yes,' added my wife. 'Prior knowledge will allow us to alert the authorities. Like that, they'll be able to prepare the stretchers in advance.'

At this, Margaux shook her head sadly, 'After such a fall, there'd be little left to stretch. We'd need *Stitchers*.'

My wife nodded, 'The advantage is that we'd be able to squeeze all the bits in the cardboard box the TV came in. That'd spare the *Stitchers* the trouble *and* save money.'

'Rapidly biodegradable too. And that's good news for the environment,' smiled Margaux. 'A single box to transport, only one hole to dig and a single bunch of plastic flowers a year.'

'Better still, we could have the flowers engraved on the headstone,' added my wife. 'And so, avoid travel-induced atmospheric pollution altogether.'

'Good thinking,' smiled Margaux.

'Thanks,' nodded my wife, 'but the crematorium employees will have to get a move on. No stopping on the way home for a few beers, like these three would do. They wouldn't want the cardboard to disintegrate "en-route", in the back of the van, would they?'

'True. And have gory bits and pieces rolling about and dirtying the van floor,' said Margaux. 'Mind you, if it wasn't going to smell so much, we could simply leave the bits and pieces dangling up there on the cliff face for the birds, Tibetan-style. Now that would be one hundred per cent environmentally friendly.'

'Oh, by the way, Alun,' she continued with a frown.

'Now what?'

'There's a little mystery we girls would like your assistance in solving.'

'I wasn't there at the time...' I said quickly.

'Me neither,' added Mike.

'As I was saying. A mystery has arisen that we mere females are at a loss to solve.'

By experience, we knew that this sort of opening dialogue inevitably preceded some unpleasantness for us. We thus stiffened our sinews, pumped adrenaline into the right areas, and prepared for the onslaught.

'We all agree, don't we, that you three went to the shop and purchased two TVs? And then you wasted more funds on a tennis racket which you then smashed to pieces,' smiled Margaux with all the charm of a puff adder about to strike.

We remained silent, which was harder for me to do than for the others. I bit my lip, in fact.

'Although you bought two TV sets, yet in the cellar, we noticed three cardboard boxes...' She let this sink in as we struggled to look innocent.

'We noticed that, and thought it a little odd,' said my wife. 'didn't we, Margaux?'

'We did.'

'Three boxes...' muttered my wife. 'But only two TV sets.'

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'Hum...' muttered Alun, realising that once more, we had let the euphoria of complex problem-solving get the better of us.

'Now,' mused Margaux, resting her chin on her cupped palms, 'we wondered if you could help us solve this mystery.'

The three of us struggled to stop our eyes from popping out of their sockets while our brains raced.

Then Mike laughed, and Alun and I winced.

'Oh, that's easily enough explained,' he smiled.

'Oh, God!' I whispered under my breath.

'Sorry?' said my wife.

'Nothing.'

'So, Mike?'

'Well, the thing was a dud, wasn't it.'

'A dud?' frowned Margaux.

'Exactly.'

We relaxed as we saw Mike's manoeuvre.

'Yep,' said Alun. 'A dud. Dud as a Dodo in fact.'

'Ah!' said Margaux turning to my wife. 'A dud TV.'

'That's it,' said Mike. 'Lucky I was here too. The thing would have flared up and burnt the whole place down.'

Alun shot me a glance. We would have to act fast, or Mike would rush around in circles and contradict himself.

'Perhaps that's going a little far, Mike,' I interrupted.

'Yes,' agreed Alun. 'There was only a little smoke.'

But Mike had gone into adlib mode, 'I dashed across the room and made a dive for the plug just in time and then...'

'They've got the idea, Mike,' I said, squeezing his arm extremely hard. 'So. To cut a long story short, we took the thing back and got a replacement.'

Margaux laughed one of her less pleasant laughs, 'But I always enjoy long stories. When they're told by Mike, that is.'

'Me too,' added my wife, 'He's a born storyteller.'

'No, he isn't,' cried Alun.

'That's not very kind,' frowned Mike.

'No, but true. Anyway, we took it back and got a new one. Eh Voila l'histoire.'

My wife pulled a face and nodded, 'I see. And they didn't want the box back then?'

It was my time to do a bit of adlib, 'Well, in fact, Mike was in such a state that he almost went berserk in the shop.'

'Really, Mike?'

'Yes. We had to restrain him; one would hardly have recognised him.'

'No,' agreed Alun, 'he made such a scene that the manager was called, and they gave us a new one straight away.'

'They were too anxious to keep Mike quiet. People were staring...' I added.

'You shouldn't allow yourself to get so worked up about things like that, Mike,' smiled Margaux.

'That's what we told him,' I said.

'I didn't know what I was doing,' agreed Mike.

'He looked dangerous,' said Alun.

'Menacing,' I added.

My wife smiled, 'Well, that's got that sorted out then. But you'll have to admit it was a coincidence.'

'A coincidence?' we frowned a collective frown.

'Yes,' she continued, 'When we dropped off the old portable TV at the tip, we saw one exactly like the new one. But oddly, it had two big holes through the screen.'

Margaux nodded, 'It looked brand new, didn't it?'

'Yes, brand new,' agreed the Sis-in-L.

Mike came to the rescue again, 'I suppose the shop wanted it got rid of before any customers spotted it.'

'They clearly take their work seriously,' said Margaux.

Mike shrugged, 'Guys who sell dud TVs are invariably pretty nippy about getting compromising evidence off the premises.'

'Because of police investigations, I suppose,' suggested my wife.

'That's what I'd do anyway,' frowned Mike.

'Would you?'

'Probably.'

'But then, you wouldn't sell dud TVs anyway, would you Mike?' said my wife.

'You bet.' Agreed, Mike, not realising that he was being led towards an awful trap.

I could see that the direction taken by the debate was likely to end up by him compromising the whole show, so I stepped in. 'So now that we've got that sorted out, if you don't want to take us up to the plateau, we can take a Taxi.'

'Or we could take that cable car thing.' suggested Mike.

Margaux sighed, 'So, are there going to be any beer tents up there or not?'

Alun sighed, 'You forget that this is a sporting event, not a village fete.'

'Oh?' smiled Margaux, 'Are sailing regattas sporting events too?'

Mike had only been half-listening, which was admittedly a lot for him. Even so, he decided to have his say. 'Of course sailing is a sport. Not like this

hang-gliding stuff.' He sighed and shook his head. 'All these guys have to do is to jump off the cliff and then float down. They don't even have to hold on. They're attached by ropes. That's not a real sport.'

Now, it's important to note that for years, Alun's sport had been hang-gliding. He had what Margaux termed an "unhealthy appetite" for throwing himself off cliffs or hills. But, like all enthusiasts, he said the danger was negligible. Margaux challenged this point of view. She said hospitals were full of people who had proved the opposite to be the case. On such occasions, Alun would sulk.

One day Mike had a go and crashed Alun's glider, damaging it beyond repair.

Then, when Margaux declared that funds were insufficient to replace it, Mike suggested taking up windsurfing instead.

Margaux applauded this idea. From her point of view, if one fell off a windsurfer, one could keep afloat until someone came and picked you up. However, if one fell off a hang glider, she said, staying afloat was more complicated. Furthermore, any picking up had to be done with a shovel.

So it was that Alun became a windsurfing enthusiast and abandoned Hang-gliding.

'So,' continued Margaux, 'why do they have beer tents at the regattas you have participated in? If sailing's a sport, that is.'

'They only have small tents,' I said.

My wife sighed, 'small tents with lots of beer.'

'I bet there were dozens at that regatta you did with Mike last year,' added Margaux.

We exchanged glances as the painful memory of that episode came back to us.

'We didn't notice,' I said.

'No,' agreed Alun, 'we were in a hurry to get over to France.'

'So, you lost after all. I wondered why you didn't brag about it as usual,' she said.

'Oh no,' smiled Mike. 'We won all right, didn't we, Alun?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes.'

'And you didn't stay to celebrate? Odd that.'

'We were in a hurry to get home. That's all.'

The girls frowned and obviously smelt a rat.

The fact is that Mike had used unconventional tactics, which means he cheated. This is the first reason for our precipitated departure. The second was that we sunk the judge's boat and were being pursued by several angry and distressingly rough looking sailors. We had kept these details from the Girls until now. The episode having been one of the less glorious moments of our recent activities.

'In any case,' said the exasperated Alun, quickly changing the subject, 'we are going up there to watch the sport. We won't have time to notice if there are drinks tents or not. We'll be concentrating on the hang-gliding and the other stuff.'

'Oh! The other stuff. So, you're going to ogle at the girls too, are you?' smiled Margaux.

'Shut up. I doubt if there'll be any females at all at such an altitude,' said Alun.

'No,' I shook my head, 'It's bad for their blood circulation. That gives them hallucinations, and they often need to be restrained. Anyway, there certainly won't be any drinks tents up there.'

At this moment, the next-door neighbour stepped round. 'Yes, there will,' he smiled. 'Don't worry. They'll

be plenty to drink up there. Always is. More than enough.'

'Thanks, Hans,' sneered Alun.

'Well, at least we got that point cleared up,' smiled my wife.

'Oh! That's a nice new TV you've got there.' said Hans.

I swiftly changed the subject before the girls got back onto the topic of cardboard boxes.

'In any case, we'll be coming back down on foot,' I announced. 'Hans showed us where the old postman's track is.'

'So, in that case, you won't need to take any money or bank cards, will you,' said Margaux. 'As you won't be drinking or taking the shuttle down.'

'Especially after the expense of having to replace two TV sets, which you smashed to bits during your drunken antics.'

'We were not drunk, and those were not antics.'

'You can have ten euros pocket money each. Take it or leave it.'

Alun sighed and spread his hand in a typically French gesture. Hans had clearly been down this same path because he shrugged and pulled a sympathising face.

We made a good show of resistance but did not press the issue unduly. We knew that Mike rarely moved without a well-filled money-belt hidden under his shirt.

This would supply us with more than we needed.

'As we won't be able to drink all day,' Alun smiled, 'I'll put a couple of bottles of champagne in the fridge for this evening, shall I?'

'A couple means two, Alun.' said my wife, 'Not four.'

As we approached the fridge with the treasure, the Sis-in-L was struggling with a plastic bottle. This clearly held a clearly vital kitchen product that she needed urgently.

'Damn these foreign things,' she said. 'Alun, have a look, will you. What does "No" mean?'

'That's English,' I said helpfully.

'But why is it written on this knob thing.'

'That's a nozzle, not a knob,' said Mike.

'Let me see,' said Alun, and she handed over the bottle.

'Ah!' he laughed, 'I see.'

'Ah?'

'It's written in Estonian dialect,' he said.

'In what!'

'South Estonian dialect, in fact,' he added. As you probably know, the Estonian "O" is silent, so "NO" is pronounced "Ne", like in French.'

'Why "ne" and not "enn"?' asked Mike.

'Because its Estonian dialect, of course.'

'What on earth does it mean then?' she asked.

'It means "marche" in French, or "On", of course. if I'm right somewhere, we'll find the symbols like a couple inverted "F"s,' he drew this in the air. 'That's pronounced "Ouf", because there are two of them.'

'And what if there's only one?' asked Mike shaking his head with disbelief.

'There are *always* two in Estonian dialects, like a "W".' he paused. 'What's more, these two symbols are always followed by an "O". However, as I said, in South Estonian dialect, the "O" is not pronounced. In other words, it is silent.'

'And what does it mean, clever?' asked Mike.

Sighing, I stepped forward and took the bottle from him. I handed it to the Sis-in-L, turning it the other way around so that the nozzle pointed away from her. 'Read again.'

'Ah!' she blushed, 'On?'

'Yes. And OFF.'

'Well, now isn't that a surprise,' scoffed Mike. 'Trust Alun to waste our time making up bilge like that.'

'It's your fault, Mike,' grumbled Alun. 'You act on me like a Bilge pump.'

'Oh, shut up, Alun.'

Margaux had been listening from the adjoining room. She leant over in her armchair and popped her head around the door. Then, smiling encouragingly at the woman, she laughed, 'After a while, you'll get used to Alun. I admit that It does take a little time, but afterwards...'

Here my wife butted in, 'Then you'll learn not to bother to listen at all.'

'Which is for most of the time,' ended Margaux.

'Here, here.' added Mike. 'I still can't believe that rubbish about Oyster migration...'

'About what!' cried my wife.

'Oh!' smiled Alun, 'Didn't you know about that.'

'They don't want to know,' cried Mike, 'do you?'

'Interesting data like that might very well come in useful someday,' smiled Margaux exchanging glances with my wife, 'But it can wait.'

We did not know at the time that the Girls had already received favourable press reviews for their first volume of our adventures. So, "Monsieur le publisher" was enthusiastic about a follow-up. He was

quietly confident that the income derived would nicely cover the reroofing of his holiday home in Brittany.

The following morning The Sis-In-L drove us up to the Sainte-Hilaire du Touvet plateau and left us to fend for ourselves.

The strips of flower-filled pastures bordering the cliff had been mown and transformed into parking spaces.

Today, their alpine tranquillity was gone.

What is more, they were aflutter with garish red-and-white-striped visitor-channelling ribbons.

Ignoring the indicator arrows, we ducked under the ribbons and headed towards an interesting looking marquee tent. From its direction, sounds of rather unprofessional singing were emanating.

'A local, "would-be",' smiled Alun, 'shall we have a jeer or two.' He paused then continued, 'My grandad always said, "A jeer and a beer keeps a man in good cheer".'

Mike sighed, 'What absolute tripe. I bet he never said anything of the sort.'

'You may be right, Mike,' nodded Alun.

'You're probably getting mixed up with that citation from Kant,' I suggested.

'Is that the man that school Kanteens are named after?' he asked.

I frowned, 'Kant have been. He was long dead before that time. Kant-teens were, as everyone knows, young disciples of his ideas.'

'iDears!' he frowned. 'I didn't realise that Apple was already around in those days?'

'Shut up you two,' snorted Mike. 'Let's go and see what's going on.'

What was going on was an amateur singing competition.

We slipped in without paying, lounged at the back of the tent. We listened wide-eyed from this vantage point as the local talent demonstrated how to ruin a good song.

It's true that several participants did hit the right notes from time to time, which was refreshing. Also, some of the lyrics of the English songs were recognisable, which was also a novelty.

However, this sort of novelty soon wears off. So we slipped under a flap marked "No Exit" and found that there was one.

'I wonder why they marked that?' frowned Mike. He then tripped on a guy-wire and fell sprawling on a bale of straw.

'That's why,' laughed Alun.

'Thank heavens we didn't pay to get in,' I sighed.

'Exactly. It would have given quite the wrong impression to the organiser,' agreed Alun.

We next made our way to the take-off field.

Here we spent some time watching the competitors preparing their gear. Alun stood with hands on hips, scoffing and criticising them while supplying us with technical details we didn't want to hear.

Once ready, the pilots dashed down the grassy slope, disappeared over the cliff edge, and that was that...

Well, a little of this goes a long way.

Even Alun, who had been keen on the sport, declared that the whole affair was a wash-out from this vantage point.

We then wandered about the stalls and stopped to watch a stallholder displaying the merits of a revolutionary potato peeler.

The man had an unnaturally strong English accent.

However, he used the latter with considerable finesse to captivate and entice females into his sticky web.

'Were I not absolutely against peeling spuds,' admitted Alun, 'I might be tempted....'

'Have you completely lost your head, Alun,' I cried. 'The Girls would have us peeling for the rest of our lives.'

'That guy can certainly peel, though,' added Mike. 'I wonder where the Con is?'

The man cracked a little joke about giving away a whole potato, free, with each peeler purchased. This sent a little titter going around the assembled crowd.

'A pro,' nodded Alun.

The man went on to sell a dozen and then seemed to be closing down for lunch.

We sidled off and, after a bit of searching, found a shady spot to rest. Odd as it may seem, this shade just happened to be inside a large beer tent...

'I suppose we might as well have a drink now we're here,' smiled Alun, spreading his hand in a gesture of submission to the quirks of fate.

We thus emptied our pockets and discovered that we had just enough.

'Anyway, you've got your money belt, Mike,' said Alun. 'Just in case.'

'Shush!' whispered Mike, 'someone might overhear, and I'd get attacked. Thanks to you, I'll probably end up with my throat cut.'

'No one can hear, and anyway, no one understands English up here.' I shook my head.

'I heard,' said a voice from behind us in English, 'and I understand.'

We spun around and discovered the stallholder grinning at us over his glass of beer.

'I might even attack him with this,' He brandished one of his peelers. 'I can assure you; these things are deadly dangerous.'

We laughed together.

The man explained that he spent most summers in France, doing the rounds of the markets and shows.

'I work my way down the Atlantic coast in the old van. Then along the Mediterranean and finally back up to Normandy, via Lyon, Dijon and Paris.'

'A rather solitary life,' said Alun.

'No.' he shook his head and sipped his beer. 'There are three of us. We take turns with the stall. Each of us has his own goods to sell.'

'Ah!'

'Like that, we're rarely present when the people come back to complain about the stuff they've bought.'

We nodded understanding.

'French women are pretty hot when it comes to complaining,' he smiled, 'but their husbands tend to complain more with their fists.'

We nodded again.

'So, we spend as short a time as possible in any given spot.'

Mike had been frowning, 'So you are knowingly palming off faulty goods on unsuspecting customers...'

We all turned to look at him aghast.

'Mike!' exclaimed Alun, 'That's the whole idea behind market stallholders.'

'Exactly.' I added, 'It's the principle of the thing. The accepted practice in all Latin countries.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'Don't you see, Mike? Without this basic foundation, the entire way of life, south of the channel, would collapse.'

'All pleasure and fun would be drained from everyday life,' I added.

'Suicide rates would soar, marriages would fail, birth rates would plummet, and the entire planet would suffer irreversible damage,' concluded Alun.

'Ridiculous!' gasped Mike. 'You might as well say that Con-Men are the salt of the earth.'

'Perhaps not the salt,' I smiled, 'but they certainly spice things up a little.'

The man laughed, 'Exactly. We spice up life,' he said, warming to the debate, 'We are an indispensable element of modern life.'

'Hear, hear!' cried Alun.

'We provide the modest market-going public with entertainment, and we do so for an extremely reasonable price. Less in fact than a ticket to the cinema and far less than a music festival.' He nodded a decisively defiant nod. 'And on top of it, they get a memento to carry home with them.'

'What a lot of rubbish!' exclaimed Mike.

'You don't seem to realise that without men like us, life would hardly be worth living,' said the stallholder.

'This is an odious ode to dishonesty,' growled Mike.

The stallholder shook his head sadly, 'You don't realise how hard it is to keep one's head above water in this job?'

'I bet people like you'd manage just as well underwater,' retorted Mike. 'You'd start selling patent seaweed fertility-potions to Neptune or his mermaids.'

The man pondered this for an instant, 'seaweed fertility potions? Hum... There might be something in that for next year. Thanks.'

Mike blew out his cheeks in exasperation, and the man went on.

'This is a very uncertain job.'

'You mean the bit about getting beaten up by irate husbands?' sniffed Mike.

'Well, yes and no. What I mean is that we're never sure what we're going to get landed with.'

'You mean the duration of prison terms?' said Mike.

'Ha, ha. Well, Last year, I ended up with five thousand crimson towels to sell. The trouble with those was that they fell to bits after the first wash. The year before that, it was an out-of-date toy that no street wise kid would be seen dead with. Luckily for me, the parents didn't know that.

Mind you, this year's lot is much worse than usual. Tools which turn out to be too dangerous for the supermarkets to keep.'

'Dangerous!' cried Mike. 'Potato peelers?'

'And why do you think I'm wearing these ridiculous pink rubber gloves?'

'Because you have your hands in basins full of bobbing Suds all day,' said Mike.

'Maybe he has one of those peculiar things about rubber,' suggested Alun.

'Or pink cloths,' I added.

'No. Look.'

At this, he peeled off his gloves and exhibited bandage swathed hands.

We all leant forward.

'This lot of peelers are murderous. As dangerous as hell, in fact,' he nodded. 'The guy who unloaded the stuff on me knew very well that they were, too.'

Mike almost choked with laughter, 'The con-man conned. Ha, ha.'

'And that's why you don't hang around,' suggested Alun.

'Damn right. It took me two weeks practising to find out how to avoid scalping my palms. But I've paid for the stuff, and it took me a month before I started to make a decent profit.'

'So, the Atlantic coast was your training ground?' I suggested.

'Yep.'

'So now you're keeping the nation's hospitals on their toes,' I smiled. 'Helping to keep them in fighting fettle, in fact?'

'I suppose you're right.'

'Making dishonest money too,' sniffed Mike.

'I can't see the difference between a normal euro and a dishonest one.' he said, 'neither can my bank manager.'

'So even Con-men have bank managers?' cried Mike.

I stepped in before things got worse. 'Let's have another round. We'll have something to eat too. Join us?'

'My pleasure. Especially if you're paying.'

'Mike is. You've got... Well, you know what I mean, around your waist.'

'Yes, of course I have, you idiot.'

So, we ordered sausages, chips and beer all around.

When it was placed before us, we turned to Mike.

'Ok. Ok, I know. Just a mo.' with this, he thrust his hand inside his trousers.

A group of women were standing close beside us and gasped with horror on seeing Mike's hand disappear and root about in the dark depths of his trousers.

He fumbled about for some time while the women gaped wide-eyed.

'Got it,' he cried, pulling up.

The women turned abruptly and moved quickly away into the surrounding crowd, muttering exclamations.

'What's up with them?' asked Mike.

'They thought you were going to show them your little willy.'

'What!' he exclaimed.

'You know. Your little "what's-its-name" '

'Oh, for God's sake Alun. I know what a willy is.'

'Thank heavens for that.'

'Why on earth did they think I was going to show them that?'

'They're French,' I said. 'French women are like that.'

'They might have got the wrong end of the stick?' I suggested.

'Very funny,' snorted Mike. He extracted a little wad of notes, peeled one off, and handed it to the bartender.

'What's this?' the man said, turning the flimsy paper over. 'This ain't French.'

Mike took it back, 'Oh, sorry. That's Romanian money. Fifty Lei.' Mike turned quickly to Alun. 'No, Alun. None of your dirty jokes, please.'

'Pity. I had rather a juicy one.'

'I guessed that. Your mind is like a pool of stagnant water.'

'That's what makes me such good company,' smiled Alun.

Mike made an impatient noise and flipped through his wad of notes. Then he looked up at us with an appealing look. 'I got a few dollars, but the rest is Rumanian.'

'Oh, God,' cried Alun, quickly filling his mouth with unpaid-for chips.

'Are you pulling my leg?' said the burly barman, leaning over at us.

'You foreigners are all the same. Especially you immigrants.'

'We are not immigrants,' cried Mike. 'Our papers are perfectly in order.'

'They all say that,' he sniffed, making a move to come around our side of the counter.

But our new Con-man acquaintance came to our rescue. 'I'll pay John. Don't get worked-up, or it'll spoil your complexion.'

The barman made a snorting noise.

'I'll get it for you from the kitty box as soon as we're finished.'

'Who do you take me for..' he shook his head, 'an innocent?'

'Look,' said the stallholder, rummaging in his inside pocket, 'If you can't trust a fellow market worker, I'll leave you this as an insurance.'

He handed over a well-used banknote, 'That's Chinese money. A hundred Yen. That's worth fifty euros. Twice what we owe you.'

I started, but he swiftly kicked me before I could mention that one hundred Yen was worth less than a euro.'

Alun leant over and looked at the note, 'I'll give you thirty euros for it.' he said.

However, the barman snatched it back while the stallholder nodded an appreciative nod in Aluns' direction.

'Nothing doing,' said the barman, 'anyhow, you said you hadn't any cash.'

Alun pulled a face, 'dash it! I forgot.'

'Bloody eastern-bloc immigrants...' sniffed the man as he moved off to serve another customer.

'You idiot, Mike,' cried Alun.

'I was sure I had some Francs left,' he started to refold the notes together.

'Now that would have been very useful,' snorted Alun, 'seeing they haven't been using Euros for the last fifteen years.'

'I meant Euros, you fool. It just slipped out.'

'Well, don't let it slip out for the moment. Here come those women, with the police in tow.'

Mike assumed this was one more of Aluns' stupid jokes. So, he started fumbling about in his trousers again to put the wad of notes back in the money belt.'

'There! What did I tell you,' cried one of the women. 'He's still playing with himself. And in public, it's absolutely disgusting.'

The barman stepped over as the police arrived. 'He's Romanian. Tried to palm me off with dodgy money. Probably illegal anyway.'

'The proceeds of drug trafficking, no doubt,' said one of the other women. 'And leave that thing alone. Playing with yourself in public. Really.'

'I am not playing with myself.' Objected Mike.

'Looks like it from here,' said the biggest of the two policemen. 'Hands off.'

'I am putting my money in my money belt if you really want to know.'

'Oh! I see. Hiding the compromising articles, are you? Come on. Let's see.'

Alun smiled, 'I thought these ladies were against him displaying his compromising articles.'

The two policemen suppressed laughs with some difficulty.

'Really!' exclaimed the woman-in-chief.

Mike extracted the wad and handed it over.

'A lot of money here? Two hundred euro notes, loads of them. There must be a small fortune here.'

'They're Lei. Romanian currency,' sighed Mike, 'You divide by ten or something to get the value in Euros.'

'Ten?'

'Or something like that.'

'You've got about a hundred euros worth in your hand,' he continued. 'Not much more.'

'Hum.' The policeman handed the wad back.'

'So, you're a group of wandering Romanians, are you? Musicians, perhaps?'

'Itinerant Minstrels,' added the second policeman.

Alun was finding this amusing. He put an arm around my shoulder and the other around our new friend, 'We three are English. This other man told us he was from Scotland. But then again, we have no definite proof of that.'

'Shut up, you idiot,' snarled Mike, fumbling in his inside pocket, 'Here.'

He handed his passport to the big policeman, who nodded and handed it back, 'These friends of yours?'

'I often wonder,' sighed Mike.

'Ok, you lot. Keep out of trouble. We'll not be far off.'

Then the smaller policeman turned to the stallerholder, 'My wife bought one of your peelers this morning. I suppose it's a con as usual.'

'I hope so,' replied the man. 'I always do my utmost to avoid disappointing my customers. Quality is my middle name.'

'And we're supposed to believe that?' snorted the big policeman.

'No more than usual.'

'Well, anyway, we know where to find you if you've sold her a dud.'

The man pulled himself up with indignation, 'the likelihood of her finding anything wanting in a product / sell is extremely low.' He placed a widely spread hand on his heart, just to show how serious he was.

'Yeh, yea. You guys are all the same.'

'Ah no!' he said, 'On that point, you are entirely wrong. Sadly, a few of our numbers are honest. We do our best to oust them, but some slip through the net.'

'Very amusing,' Laughed the big policemen.

Turning to the bartender, he nodded, 'Make sure this guy pays up. As slippery as eels....' And off they trudged to solve some other problem.

The group of women also took their leave and were swallowed up by the crowd.

'Those Yen come in useful from time to time,' said the stallholder.

'Especially with your special exchange rate..' I added.

'I got landed with those by a sneaky Chinese hotel owner in Bordeaux last year. He bought a hundred and fifty towels from me.'

'The crimson ones?' I asked.

He nodded with a smile.

'And,' suggested Alun, 'he only had Yen on him at the time.'

The man sighed, 'The bloke conned me, good and proper.'

Mike broke into laughter at this, 'Oh, I love it. You guys are so clever you're so pleased with your own con that you don't see the other one coming. Brilliant.'

The man shrugged, 'Oh well, I've broken even now, but that bloke must still be cursing me.'

'Maybe he got a bit of a laugh out of it too,' suggested Alun.

The stallholder smiled and drained his glass. 'Well, lads. It's time I was leaving.'

'Back to work?' I asked.

'Hell No. I'm getting out of here before that constable's wife phones her hubby from the hospital. My pal will take over the stall this afternoon.'

'And,' laughed Alun, 'He won't have a clue as to where you've disappeared to with your suitcase full of faulty goods.'

'The procedure is well oiled. Years of practice make perfect...' he smiled.

At this, he waved to the bartender and shouted, 'I'll bring the money over in a few tics.' He then leant closer, 'Drink up, lads. I wouldn't hang around here if I were you.' He winked and slipped off through the crowd to fill his suitcase and disappear to the next market town.'

We decided it was time to leave too. So, as soon as the barman's back was turned, we picked up as much of the contraband food as we could, and slipped away.

The ancient postman's track is hidden behind a building at the edge of the tiny village.

As we left the plateau, Alun looked back. 'A pity, really. We could have come down on one of those trial tandem flights. That would have been good fun.'

'We'd have to have found a Romanian pilot, as Mike has plenty of their currency left.'

'Shut up. Anyway, if you had, Margaux would have skinned you.'

'She wouldn't have known.'

We stopped short and gazed incredulously at Alun.

'Are you feeling all right, Alun? Margaux always finds out,' I said.

Alun pondered this, 'Hum. Yes, I didn't think of that.'

The track started off pleasantly. It wound down through prairies carpeted with alpine flowers. Not a single stinging nettle whipped the calves as we passed.

It then entered a small stand of stunted, wind-tortured pine trees and then decided to get more serious.

It dipped down, slanting across the cliff face and giving incredible views across the valley floor far below. On the far side of the valley, the Belledonne mountains soared to snow powdered summits, blazing in the afternoon sun.

The track started to resemble more the bed of a mountain torrent than a footpath. It jumped down in steps from one weather smoothed bolder to another.

After half an hour of this, we came smack up against the edge of the cable car track. This climbed at an impressive angle of about seventy degrees to the village above.

Beside the well-oiled iron tracks, we found a flight of steps apparently carved out of the rock. It was flanked by a rusted iron railing on one side and by the cliff face on the other.

Every ten metres or so, the way was barred by another railing. The purpose of these odd additions to the stairway became apparent as soon as we started down. The slope was so steep that a fall would roll one down several hundred granite steps then over the lip of the rocks below.

At the bottom of this scary staircase, the path dived under the cable car tracks and into the forest on the far side.

Here we paused and scanned the undergrowth for the overgrown fork in the track. This should lead us up to the waterfall and the Hermits Bath-tub.

Hans had said that there was a stiff climb, and on this point, he had not been exaggerating.

After a quarter of an hour of this, Alun stopped, 'At this rate, we'll never get up and back in time.'

'In time for what,' cried Mike. 'Don't tell me that this is too much of a climb for you?'

Neither of us cared to say that it was, so we went struggling on behind Mike.

'Come on, come on. We haven't got all day, you two.'

Mike was a bit "too-much" sometimes. Especially when forgot he was no longer twenty-five years old.

Anyway, we eventually came out of the forest at the very edge of an almost vertical cliff face.

I'll pause here to specify that Alun and I were covered with perspiration, not the cliff.

The cliff had not had to exert itself in any way. It just stood there chuckling to itself.

'That's what I call a climb,' smiled Mike. 'Makes life worth living.'

Alun grumbled something under his breath. Although I didn't hear what this was, I heartedly agreed with it.

We found ourselves on a flat ledge, some two metres wide. This followed the cliff and disappeared around a bend some hundred metres along.

To start with, the view below was obscured by the forest which came right up to the ledge. However, fifty metres along, the trees abruptly dropped away to reveal that the cliff fell vertically some two hundred metres. Far below, the tips of the pine trees pointed up at us, waving slowly in the breeze.

Keeping as far away from the edge as possible, we followed the ledge along to the bend. Here, we discovered the difficulty Hans had mentioned.

A tortured pine had somehow managed to find room and food for its roots in a series of fissures in the ledge floor and the cliff face. Its ageless trunk had grown pressed against the cliff face. A hundred years on, only forty centimetres of the track remained. To pass this obstacle, one had to clutch onto the old stubs of branches and ease oneself around.

Mike, oblivious to any danger, went straight around without an instant's hesitation.

'Plenty of room,' he called back. 'Come on, there's absolutely no risk.'

Alun and I exchanged glances, 'What if...' I started.

'There are no "ifs". Come on. God in heaven! The track's almost as wide as the Champs-Élysée Avenue. You could get an elephant through here.'

'The Champs-Élysée hasn't a kilometre of emptiness below it.'

'No, but it's got twenty kilometres of emptiness above it...'

There was no answer to this, so we shook hands solemnly and cast our lives into the arms of luck.

'See?' smiled Mike as we breathed again on the other side. 'Easy.'

'I wouldn't like to try that in a storm,' said Alun.'

'Yes. I guess that would make it a bit more fun,' said Mike, 'especially if the trunk got slippery. Do-able though... Probably.'

We turned to discover the waterfall some fifty metres further down the ledge.

It fell in a graceful arc from the plateau, four hundred metres above, crashing into a wide basin.

The basin had been hollowed out by millions of years of assault by the water and the rocks and gravel carried down by it.

The ledge widened at this point to some four metres or so, beyond which it disappeared altogether.

My head turned as I tried to follow the torrent of water back up to its source, so I grabbed the rock wall for support.

'Impressive, eh?' smiled Mike. 'Worth the detour.'

A few metres further along, we discovered an overhang forming a deep low cave.

'This must be the old hermit's place,' I said. 'Nice and dry.'

'Yep. Let's have a look at the basin. We haven't got all day,' said Alun, 'And I can hear that champagne calling.'

'Me too,' I nodded. 'But I hear some beer calling a little louder.'

'Come on, you drunken fools,' called Mike, striding off as if along the main road rather than on a perilous ledge, suspended hundreds of metres above the pines.

As we approached, the roar of the water became deafening. Even though a light breeze carried the spray away from us, we were soon wet.

From close to, the spectacle was almost frightening. We were overawed by the violence of the thousands of tons of water crashing into the basin.

'That'd blast your guts right out of you if you fell under that,' nodded Mike.

'I'll stay here and watch you demonstrate then,' frowned Alun. 'I had a shower the year before last.'

'I haven't the guts to do it myself,' I laughed.

But Mike was already striding off.

'Hey, Mike! Be careful. That rock looks devilishly slippery.'

He turned and shook his head sadly, 'Are you two frightened of a bit of adventure?'

'Yes,' I shouted back.

He shrugged and stood right on the lip of the pool, looking down into its boiling depths. He slid his foot back and forth to check the adherence of his boots, then turned, 'Come on, let's have a look at the end.'

'No.' we shouted back, 'we'll get soaked to the skin and blasted right of the cliff face.'

He shrugged and set off.

He first edged his way out, right to the extreme point where the boiling bowl overhung several hundreds of metres of emptiness.

Then he disappeared beyond the curtain of water.

Alun and I exchanged worried looks and waited for the scream.

However, no scream came, and a few moments later, Mike appeared from between the waterfall and the cliff.

He was drenched to the bone, 'Incredible! Absolutely amazing. From the other side, you can see right down to the valley floor. It must be a three hundred metre drop. Incredible! Come on and have a look.'

We gazed at the mass of falling water.

'Come on,' he called, 'You can get around behind the waterfall almost dry.'

'You don't look almost dry, Mike,' I said.

'No. I got in a bit closer to have a good look.'

'You mean you fell in,' suggested Alun.

'Come on,' said Mike avoiding replying.

We followed him timidly, feeling our way across the slippery cliff face and gripping for all our lives onto anything grippable.

The view was indeed impressive. So much so that we were back out of that place faster than we had gone in. But reasonably dry, compared to Mike.

'I'll be dried out in next to no time, in this sun,' he smiled happily. 'That was great.'

'No, it wasn't. It was pure madness.'

Mike made an impatient noise, 'No guts!'

We then turned to start on our way home.

However, as might have been expected, Mike slipped and stumbled on a rock.

'Hell!' he cried, 'My knee.'

He hobbled on a bit and stopped. 'Damn it! You'll have to help me.'

'You mean, carry you? All the way down?' cried Alun.

'And what about that tree? How on earth do we get around that?'

'Are you two completely brainless?' sighed Mike. 'We simply use a rope. You two hold one end each on opposite sides of the tree. I slide between the rope and the tree so that if I stumble...'

'We can let go and pick you up later,' smiled Alun.

'If I stumble, clever, you pull tight and hold me against the tree trunk.'

'Letting go would be more fun,' said Alun, 'for us.'

'Alun,' I said, 'could you just pop over and see if the old Hermit left his polypropylene rope?'

'Will do.'

'You guys are absolutely no use in an emergency,' sighed Mike. 'No use at all. We'll simply use the same trick as at the hotel in Bucharest. Come on, let's have your belts.'

Those who have followed our earlier adventures will remember that Mike almost killed himself in the same way before. This was when he decided to climb from our fifth story balcony onto the adjoining one, with only our interconnected belts as a security net.

We gaped at him, 'Not the old belt-trick again,' I cried.

'Anyway,' sighed Alun, 'even if we do get around that tree alive, we're not going to carry you all the way down.'

'And,' I said, 'it's far too dangerous. So we'll leave you here and send the rescue guys up to get you with the helicopter.'

Hearing these fated words, we all paused and exchanged looks. This brought back memories of the embarrassment we had felt when we had to be saved three times by lifeguards at Tregastel.

The Girls had never allowed us to forget that previous year's episode during our Brittany holidays.

'We'll manage,' frowned Mike with stolid resolution. 'That's absolutely necessary, I think.'

We agreed. Anything was better than being ragged for years to come.

'Well done. Stiff upper lip, eh,' said Alun.

So, we started on the painful hobbling trip back along the ledge.

At the same moment, a hang glider appeared from around the swell of the cliff and came in dangerously close to look at us.

He shouted some sort of greeting which we couldn't make out and pointed upwards, then down.

'That guy knows what he's doing,' nodded Alun waving back with a broad smile.

'I wonder what those signs mean,' mused Mike.

'No Idea.' frowned Alun, 'We didn't use signs in my days.'

'Except the ones people used when you shot over their heads a bit too close.'

'That didn't happen often?'

'No. Only each time you got that darned thing off the ground,' I said.

'That's unkind?'

'No. It's the truth.'

Mike knelt down to peer into the deep recesses of the Hermit's old residence. 'Nice place. Dry and out of the wind, rain, snow and sun. He chose the place well.'

'I bet he was the one who planted that stupid tree,' groaned Alun, taking out his phone. 'I'll call the Girls and let them know where we are.'

'So that they can prepare the stretchers?' I suggested.

After a bit of ringing, Margaux's voice said, 'Still alive then?'

Alun ignored this, 'If you look up at the cliff face, you'll see where we are. Mike will make his phone reflect the sunlight. See it.'

There was a pause.

My wife's voice floats up to us, 'Got you. Still a good way up then.'

'Yep, we're at the Old Hermits bathtub.'

'That's nice. How is he?'

'He's dead.'

'Oh well, these things happen,' said my wife. 'I'll tell the police, shall I.'

'Very funny.'

'By the way,' she added, 'Have you noticed how few sails there are now?'

'Yep. Noticed that.'

'Any idea why they should be?'

'A pause in the judging process, I suppose.'

'Is there an overhang or a cave up there?'

'Yes, in fact, there is. That's where the old Hermit lived.'

'That's a pity.'

'Why?'

'Because you'll be able to get out of the rain?'

'What rain?'

'There's a huge black rain cloud just coming over the mountain from behind you.'

'That's difficult to believe,' I scanned the clear blue sky and blazing sun.

'Is it?' At this, we clearly heard peals of laughter in the background.

'Well,' finished my wife, 'It might be wise to wait a few minutes before starting down.'

There was a short pause, 'Ah! Here it comes,' she said.

AND IT CAME.

Suddenly, and with an unexpected roar, a curtain of rain shut out the view.

We leapt back from the cliff edge and into the protection of the cave.

Then the wind came, plastering the torrents of rain against the cliff face.

We scrambled back under the rock just in time. The vast quantity of rain that had hit the cliff walls above came cascading onto the ledge.

We got on our hands and knees and worked our way as far back into the cave-like cleft as was possible. We then lay on our stomachs and gazed back out at the waterfall which had replaced the ledge.

'That Hermit knew what he was about in choosing this spot,' nodded Alun. 'Just the right depth and sloping down and outwards.'

'I wonder how he managed in winter,' I mused, 'what with snow and ice, I mean. That path must have been a real death trap.'

As we lay there watching the wall of water, Mike muttered to himself.

'What's up, Mike?' I asked.

'If this rain lasts, it'll soon be too dark to get down. I'm not going along that ledge in the dark. Not with my leg...'

'Ok, Mike,' I said, 'but you'll regret it,'

'Why?'

'Because once you're back down there, you're bound to want to have it back again.'

'What are you babbling about now?'

'Your leg. You'll want it back.'

'Yes,' agreed Alun, 'Hopping along after girls with crutches is bad form...'

'Exactly,' I said, 'It's not done.'

'Shut up.'

Suddenly, Mike cried out and rolled over on top of Alun.

'What on earth...' cried Alun from under Mike.

'There was something wriggling under me.' he said, vigorously brushing his trousers.

I smiled, 'Don't worry, Mike. That happens to the best of us. Especially when you've been playing with yourself all morning.'

'Nothing to be ashamed of,' said Alun reassuringly. 'It shows that there's still a little sap left in the old twigs.'

'Shut up. Look. There it is. A huge worm thing.'

The dusty cave floor moved, and a large fluorescent green lizard appeared. It shook itself, then, for some unknown reason, shot out across the rain-swept ledge and disappeared over the edge.

'Great Scott!' cried Alun. 'A Lemming Lizard. They're supposed to be extinct.'

'Heavens! That might have been the last survivor of the species,' I added, 'And Mike squashed it and frightened it out of its life.'

'And now it's gone forever...'

'What a catastrophe!'

'Mind you,' added Alun, 'Maybe it was just lying there, waiting for the right moment to display its inherited talents.'

'Strange though,' I said. 'That they still believe they're birds.'

'Yep.' agreed Alun, 'very odd. I suppose that's evolution for you... Evolution does strange things sometimes.'

Mike sighed, 'you're telling me! It beats me why evolution should have allowed genetic mutations to go as far as you two.'

'You don't seem to realise, Mike,' I said. 'We may have unwittingly stumbled on the remaining brick enabling the final unwinding of the riddle of life.'

'I'd have been surprised that you would stumble on anything in any other way,' scoffed Mike. 'Seeing that neither of you has any wits at all.'

'At last,' added Alun ignoring this, 'mankind will be able to clearly see the grand scheme of things.'

'The origin of life, neigh, of the human race itself.'

Mike snorted, 'You two may very well have descended directly from mad lizards, but I certainly didn't.'

'We'll be famous,' I cried.

'Oh, for God's sake,' sighed Mike.

'Famous and rich and celebrated,' added Alun.

Then suddenly, from over the edge of the ledge, the lizards head appear.

'Good God!' exclaimed Alun, 'they can fly.'

'This is a far greater discovery than I thought,' I cried with excitement.

'It will completely revolutionise the history of modern thinking. Think about it, Mike,' cried Alun.

'I'm speechless,' I sighed, 'at the magnitude of this discovery?'

'Do you know what I think?' said Alun.

'Think!' laughed Mike scornfully

'We may have stumbled on the lost breeding ledge of the flying Lemming Lizard.' continued Alun.

'If that's true,' I said, sitting up, 'this cliff face must be teeming with the little devils. What an incredible discovery.'

'Did you know,' asked Alun, 'That lemming lizards only mate once in four years. On leap-years, in fact.'

'They must breed like hell then,' I frowned.

'They do. And you can bet that the little devils hollowed out this place themselves, especially for the process.'

'Yes,' I nodded, 'I was wondering about the powerful jaws I noticed on that one.'

'Millions of years of gnawing and gnawing, until at last, they got it just right to assure the future of the species.' added Alun.

'Incredible! We'll become rich beyond our wildest dreams.'

'And world-renowned.' nodded Alun.

'Yes. That too.'

'At least that clears one point up.'

'And that is?' sighed Mike.

'Where the remains of the hermit went.'

'Grinded to dust by generations of little jaws.'

'Ground,' corrected Mike.

'It clears up another point too,' smiled Alun.

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'Yes,' sighed Mike again.

'It explains why people think that they throw themselves off cliffs.'

'Really?'

'It's Obvious. Because of the species only breeding on leap years.'

'Oh God!' breathed Mike.

As night gradually fell, the rain eased off and stopped. We scrambled out and stood looking down at the village lights far below.

'Drying off nicely, Mike?' I asked.

He made a rude sign, and Alun and I chuckled.

At this point in our profound thoughts, Alun's phone rang again. 'I suppose you'll be spending the night in your hotel,' said Margaux.

'Well, we might make a try at getting down, but Mike insists on us amputating his leg first,' replied Alun.

'Well, I'm pleased you are taking things in the right spirit,' she laughed.

Then my wife's voice floated up from the darkness, 'Sleep well, lads. Oh! By the way, the champagne you put in the fridge is lovely. Thanks.'

We heard more thanks echoed from beyond the mouthpiece.

The three of us sighed and sat down to wait for daybreak.

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