

MEET ON THE LEDGE

A fiasco in three parts by Fred Reynolds

Part One: The Great Escape

"This is not going to work," said Louise. "Christ, I hope not," said Penny. She looked pale. "The tyrolean seems a much better bet. I don't know what Angela can be thinking of. Where is she, anyway?"

"She's looking for anchors for this 'continuous loop of rope' she's been going on about," Chris informed us. "She's very keen."

"You'll have to tell her, Fred. Put anyone in that and it'll go straight to the bottom," said Louise.

She was right. We couldn't possibly contemplate taking to the water as things were. The Old Man of Stoer might only be twenty five feet away from the mainland but in Angela's inflatable it would be twenty five feet of unmitigated peril-on-the-sea. Angela waved cheerily at us from the rock platform opposite the Old Man. We waved back and turned again to the boat. There was almost a conspiratorial air about our little group, huddled closely together.

"Angela, you'd better come over," I called. "We have a problem." She arrived looking concerned. "This is the best it will do and it's not really good enough," I explained. "I think perhaps the tyrolean..."

Angela flung herself across the sagging dinghy and applied mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. There was a brief valedictory flourish and the dinghy began a rapid and dramatic demise. Angela stood back, horrified, as her twenty year old dinghy ended its days with a subdued raspberry. Penny and Louise, in at the death, pointed to a one inch diameter hole in the dinghy's side.

"A puncture! God, what a shame," they chorused. Sabotage, I thought, silently ecstatic. To have died on my birthday would have been beyond the pale.

Part Two: The Adventure

The team set about constructing a network of anchors for the tyrolean. Penny would swim across with the rope, and she paced up and down, identifying suitable departure and landing points. The best place for the tyrolean was over the narrowest part of the channel, but here the sea was at its most intimidating, smashing against the rocks. Further to the right, where the channel was wider and partly protected from the breakers, a safer crossing looked possible. Despite the longer swim, it was the wiser option.

Penny plunged in, wearing a tightly knotted Tesco carrier bag around her waist for extra buoyancy. Halfway across she suddenly went under. Fearing she'd been caught by some lurking oarweed, we held our collective breath and hoped Penny was doing the same. She recovered quickly, as did the culpable Val, who was lying face down. She'd been concentrating on paying out the rope carefully, and had been laid low by a patch of bladderwrack on the rocks.

It wasn't long before the tyrolean was in place and I was announcing, with more determination than I felt, that I was ready to go across. With Chris firing away on the Olympus, I clipped in, swung my legs up and over the rope and set off backwards. Numerous jokes had been made about the tyrolean going down with a fully racked climber attached, so all the gear was coming across in haul sacks. Lightweight, I would sink more slowly, thus allowing more time for a rescue. This was what my friends said but how could they know? Had they practised?

Pursued by the belief that my life was in the hands of untried amateurs, I shot across the tyrolean like a monkey across a pole. I fixed the safety rope as a shuttle, and the first sack was



The author announced she was ready to go across...

soon coming across with a change of clothes for the shivering Penny. The rest of the team came across in a superb display of technical expertise and whilst they secured everything for the return, I scrambled round to the Old Man's seaward face. If the tide was low enough, we could approach round the back and avoid the 5a entry pitch; fair enough on a route given Hard Severe. We wanted to maximise on our chances of a fast, problem-free ascent.

I returned with the good news that the way was clear, and the team was on a roll. In our minds, the tyrolean was the greatest hurdle and it was now behind us. We skidded round on the weed-covered rock confident of summit success. Adopting an orderly queue system, the three sets of climbing teams were soon storming up the stack. It all passed without incident until I began the fourth pitch (and our third), described as an easy exit pitch to the top. I found myself bridged across an unnervingly steep groove.

"This is a bit stiff for a ungraded pitch," I called back, miffed at this glitch in our progress. I moved up a bit higher and stepped onto an enormous ledge that virtually ran the breadth of the face. Perhaps this was the easy ground the guidebook

described. A quick reconnoitre along this ledge told me all I wanted to know. I was certainly on easy ground, but there was no way I could get off it, not without climbing harder than I cared to and very much harder than Hard Severe.

Penny took out the guidebook and read through the description. It didn't make sense. Everything matched up to our present high point but nothing after. Retreat was too disappointing to contemplate and I quickly dismissed the idea. Carrying on meant tackling difficult rock, and so I tracked back and forth across the ledge, deciding which of two nasty-looking possibilities I disliked the least. On the left, the steep groove from which I'd just emerged reared into an overhang, although a traverse left on merely bulging rock held the promise of ultimately easier ground on the arête. Across to the right lay a ramp which cut back across the face; it sprouted two rusty, flaking pegs at its base, presumably to make the steep entry moves more palatable. Once on the ramp, I would probably be committed to continuing with only the pegs for protection.

Left seemed best, but a little foray onto the impending rock quickly sent me scuttling back to my ledge. These moves needed more conviction than I could muster. Feeling increasingly inadequate, I returned to a subdued and serious-faced Penny. Only minutes before, she'd been brim full of the adventure of it all and grinning from ear to ear. Louise had joined her on a guano-covered fulmar's ledge and the two were sitting squashed together at one end; the fulmar's egg sat self-consciously at the other. I knew their impassive expressions hid boredom.

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"So what's the score, Fred?" asked a hunched-up Louise, carefully avoiding any tone of criticism and, just as carefully, wiping green slime from her left rockboot.

"Well, there's no exit," I mournfully replied, "nothing that isn't hard, anyway. We must have gone off-route but I really don't know how."

As Penny re-read the route description, I glanced across at the mainland. Silhouetted against the sky in an almost unbroken line, the tourists stared back at me, waiting. We hadn't moved for ages. Surely they must have switched off their camcorders by now.

I began to feel quite indignant towards the crowd on the clifftop. Having a personal fiasco recorded for posterity was embarrassment of the highest order, and there seemed bugger all I could do about it. My despondency increased when Penny offered revealing information from the guidebook that she'd been studying assiduously, flicking the pages to and fro.

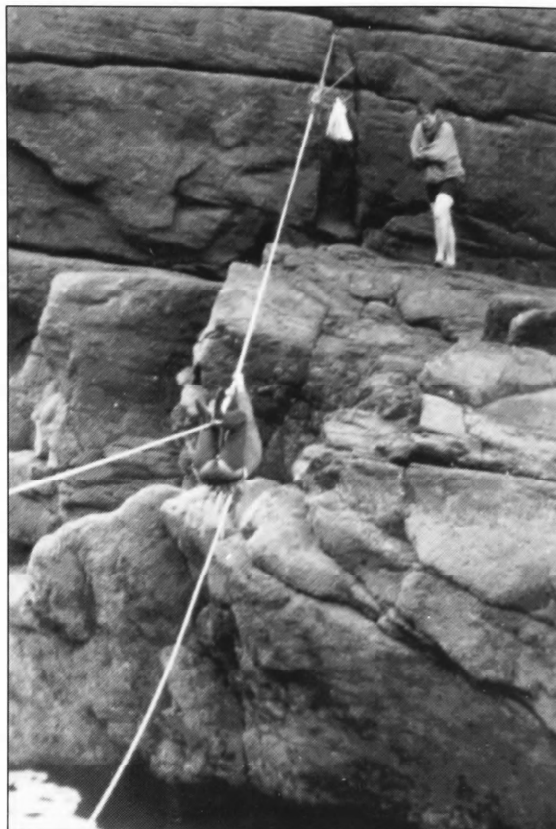
"Yeah, I've got it. I know where we are. This an E1, and the ramp over there is an E2."

"Great," I groaned, and looked down the cliff, completely backed up with climbers.

Every ledge worthy of the name had someone on it. Actors trapped on a stage and with a sell-out audience to boot. Dear God.

Penny joined me on the ledge, took one look at my face and said nothing. She traversed across to the ramp, and called back to say that it might go with some judicious pulling on the pegs. Meanwhile, her moving had resulted in an unblocking of climbers further down the line and (unknown to the two of us) others were making their plans to resolve the situation. Angela had come up from the back where she had been champing at the bit, unable to understand that there was a problem "just with a Hard Severe" (well, we'd all got that problem). As the recognised Climber Most Likely To Succeed she was given the task of putting a rope on top. Louise would follow. As Penny and I prepared to tackle the ramp, Louise shouted up to tell us of the new plan and offered to take up a rope for us. Such was the measure of our confidence that we all but snatched her hand off. Penny agreed to give the ramp her best shot whilst we waited.

Belayed to two good Friends, I worked myself into a positive mood, ready to encourage. Penny was soon "ooh-aahing" with apprehension on the awkward moves at the start of the ramp. Her voice then acquired an altogether more anxious tone. She was obviously as stressed as the pegs she had just clipped. "Just watch me. This is awful," she gasped, trying to spread her weight economically between the two crumbling metal stumps. "I'm watching you. Go on." "No you're bloody not. You're looking at Angela and I'm about to die!" shrieked Penny, desperately wishing she was two stone lighter. "I need all your attention and your left knee NOW!" she rampaged.



...to join the shivering Penny.

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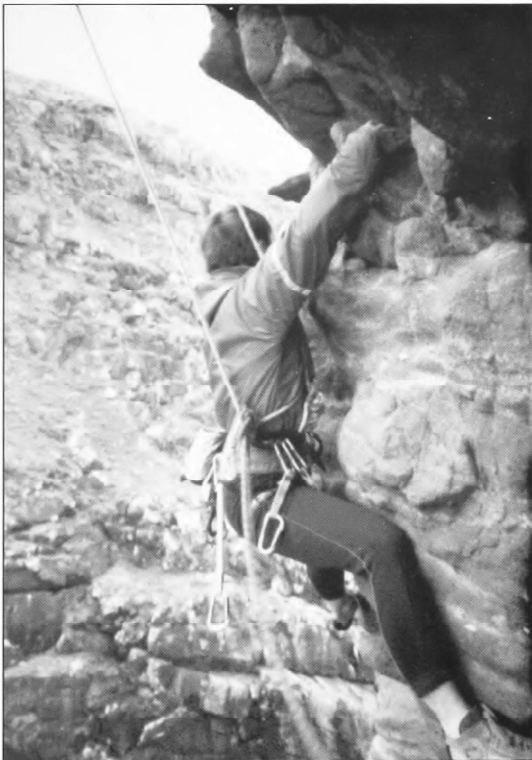
Guilty as well as inadequate, I swivelled around to provide the extra foothold and Penny gratefully stepped down. The greyness around her gills told me she had experienced quite enough of the ramp, thank you, so that was the end of that. Short of throwing in the towel completely, our only course of action was to tag onto the new lead pair. I had watched Angela carefully work her way left underneath the overhang, pause a couple of times on the bulging rock, then swing out of sight. It had looked hard.

Removing the gear from the scene of our failed operations, we trundled back to the other end of the ledge and peered down at Louise.

"You'll definitely have to take one of our ropes," I said, "we can't get up the ramp."

Louise was soon bridging up the groove, but stopped when she saw that the ropes weren't going in. Despite several shouts from the three of us, nothing moved and Louise's shoulders slumped in resignation. "I can tell this is not going to be my day," she said, and made the first move across the traverse. At this point the ropes rapidly shot in.

"Ooh, unhelpful," I murmured. The ropes were now directly above and behind her and tight as hawsers. Further progress leftwards was out of the question; she would have to go straight up, over the most bulging rock. After muttering something about petards, Louise began a series of energetic manoeuvres which involved hoisting herself up on her arms as far as possible (not far - negative ape factor), and then exhorting a totally unresponsive Angela to "Pull!" Penny and I glanced at one another. Louise's voice sounded uncharacteristically thin and weak, but perhaps it was just the extra strain on her diaphragm. Wise not to comment, we telepathised to one another. We added our voices to the request for upward mobility but, sadly, it was not to be had. I was amazed Louise kept it up so long.



... the ropes shot in... tight as hawsers...

Feeling more relaxed as the limelight had been off me for a while, I thought that the situation might benefit from the injection of a little light banter.

"You know, she's just not pulling when you're pushing. Poor timing in your team, I'd say. You just need to synchronise your efforts," I suggested.

Oh dear. It was Louise's turn to mislay her sense of humour and not be in a rush to find it, and she responded with a withering glance. I shrank back on my ledge and Penny quietly advised me to shut up unless I could say something useful. There was an awkward silence; Penny and I stared at the mainland rather than keep staring at the yo-yoing Louise. I wondered about creating a diversion for the crowd and was just about to suggest the same when Ms. Dickie slowly pendulumed across our view, looking distinctly tight about the jaw. In fact, face set in concrete would not be overstating it. She'd had to let go, of course, and now hung disconsolately in front of us about five feet out from the rock, turning slowly. Any tourists who hadn't already switched their camcorders back on now did so.

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We probably could have grabbed Louise's legs with a bit of lateral initiative but I doubted we could have got her in and onto the ledge, not with Angela in such an intransigent frame of mind. In any case, that would only increase the number of people stuck on the ledge to three. It was obvious; Louise would have to prusik. Nothing was said, but the air hung with inevitability. Nothing happened so I decided on a prompt. As Louise came round on one her circuits, I said brightly, "What a bonus! Looks like you'll have to prusik."

No answer but then, as her back was towards me, I assumed she was merely being polite. I waited until we were face to face once more and tried again. "Come on, Louise, you need your prusiks." "I haven't got any," came the reply after a long pause and a triple toe-loop.

"What do you mean, you haven't got any?" I spluttered incredulously. "What have you done with those I gave you this morning?"

"I think Chris has got them," Louise replied. Hanging onto her composure by the well-known ploy of under-reacting, her tone of voice suggested that it was no more inconvenient than forgetting to bring paper hankies.

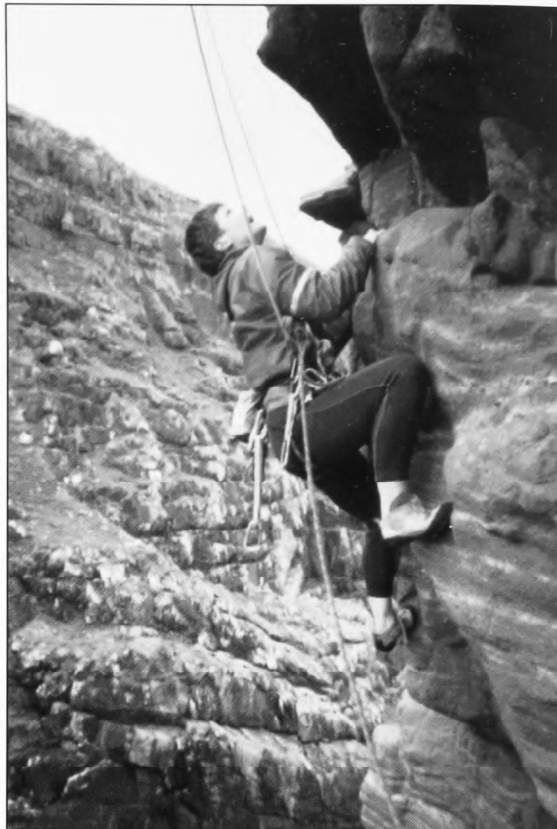
"Oh, right," I said, faintly.

Louise's climbing crisis was taking place in front of two of the most compulsive raconteurs in the Pinnacle Club, and she knew it. We all knew it. The next few moments were spent absorbing the ramifications of this state of affairs. Then, call it what you will, altruism, camaraderie in the face of adversity, female bonding, but the Hand of Friendship was finally extended and it held two prusik loops.

"Here, you can borrow mine," said Penny, "I'm sure Fred and I can manage with a pair between us if we need to."

Penny and I now became helpful, patronisingly helpful. The unfortunate Louise was subjected to a welter of information about prusik knots and their use, interspersed with little bouts of disagreement between Penny and myself over technical application. Amazingly enough, out of the veritable cat's cradle of 5mm cord that inevitably resulted, Louise constructed something that worked, and she soon legged it out of sight, no doubt thankful to be away from the awesome twosome.

Redundant once more, Penny and I reconsidered our situation. Continuing upwards meant climbing on the single rope being trailed by Louise. We could run into the same difficulties as she had trying to go left, and end up having to prusik over the same ground. The rope was going in, and fast. We had to make a decision.



...exhorting Angela to "Pull!"